

## Introduction

### *The Recasting of the Latin American Right*

André Borges, Gabriel Vommaro, and Ryan Lloyd

These are propitious times for right-wing ideas and political forces in the Western world. Latin America is no exception. After years of leftist dominance throughout the “pink tide,” we are witnessing a resurgence of the right in Latin America.

In Argentina, the Peronist candidate was defeated by a center-right coalition led by the Republican Proposal (PRO) in the 2015 presidential election. In Brazil, the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 put an end to thirteen years of PT government. The caretaker Temer government (2016–2018) was followed by the election of radical-right populist Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. The political right also obtained victories in presidential elections in Peru (2016), Uruguay (2019), and Ecuador (2021), defeating leftist incumbents. In Chile, the traditional right has been gradually losing ground to the emerging far right, a trend that culminated with the surprising performance of radical populist José Antonio Kast in the 2021 presidential elections. Although these recent electoral shifts do not seem to indicate a generalized rightward turn in Latin America’s party systems, the political right can now offer a more diverse supply of options.

New right-wing alternatives include moderate, neoliberal center-right parties (e.g., PRO in Argentina), personalist electoral vehicles led by radical populists (Bolsonaro’s Liberal Party), and conservative parties created by charismatic leaders that have gradually developed an identity of their own (e.g., the *Centro Democrático* in Colombia). In sum, right-wing forces have become competitive once again, and their discourses and programs have gained strength and visibility in the public sphere.

On the demand side, there has recently been an increase in voters who identify with the right (Lupu et al., 2021). In a context of accelerating secularization, resilient conservative nuclei are mobilizing against normative changes in gender, as well as sexual and reproductive rights and are offering their support to

right-wing leaders (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020). Political polarization provides a favorable context for the growth of radical right-wing discourses. Seminal books on the right in Latin America have explained the right's historical difficulties with creating stable organizations (Gibson, 1996; Middlebrook, 2000) and coming to power through electoral means (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014b). Nowadays, however, the landscape seems to have changed.

This book seeks to analyze the resurgence of the political right in Latin American countries, mapping the distinct strategies utilized by right-wing actors and the eventual outcomes of these strategies. While Latin America's post-2000 left has been widely studied (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011b; Weyland et al., 2010), we still know little about right-wing political actors and organizations during and after that time period.

Historically, right-wing elites in many Latin American countries have preferred to invest in nonpartisan forms of political action, including state corporatism, nonpartisan clientelistic networks, and even support for military coups (Cannon, 2016; Gibson, 1996). This general trend of conservative party underdevelopment has persisted and even deepened after democratic transitions (Cannon, 2016; Eaton, 2014; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014a; Roberts, 2014). Successful cases of conservative party-building are rare (Levitsky et al., 2016a). Most of the right-wing parties that have successfully become consolidated were created by dictatorships and benefited from important resources – party brands, clientelistic networks, and sources of funding – that were inherited from the authoritarian era (Loxton, 2021). Even so, some of the conservative parties born in authoritarian contexts have collapsed, such as the Alianza Democrática Nacionalista (ADN) in Bolivia. A few conservative parties without authoritarian roots have also been able to gain footholds, including the PRO in Argentina and *Centro Democrático* in Colombia.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the substantial variation in the relative strength and predominant mode of organization among the political right, social and economic changes implemented by leftist presidents throughout the region have posed similar challenges for right-wing political actors. Although voters in unequal societies do not always demand redistributive policies, both radical and center-left governments in Latin America have deliberately mobilized voters around the issue of redistribution. Because these strategies succeeded in many countries in the region – at least in the short term – the political right found itself in a position of relative electoral weakness. Right-wing actors and parties have traditionally supported the preservation of existing social hierarchies (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014a), but redistributive social policies have allowed left-wing parties to establish stronger roots in society by building and/or solidifying programmatic (or clientelistic) linkages with poor voters. In some instances, large-scale redistribution was associated with the politicization of class and/or ethnic cleavages, thereby allowing leftist

<sup>1</sup> These two parties are analyzed in Chapters 2 and 8, respectively.

## Introduction

3

leaders to consistently mobilize substantial electoral majorities (Faguet, 2019; Handlin, 2013; Heath, 2009).

In cases where leftist-populist presidents succeeded in gradually eroding institutional constraints on executive authority and using state power to intimidate and weaken opposition actors, the political right faced even greater hurdles if they were to pose a feasible governing alternative to leftist incumbents (Gamboa, 2017; Levitsky and Loxton, 2013). In these settings, the need to fight against competitive authoritarian (or overtly dictatorial) regimes added to the challenge of adapting to social and political changes brought about by leftist governments.

However, even as the left turn posed substantial challenges for right-wing forces, it also created opportunities. In countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, economic stagnation, corruption scandals, and rising levels of crime have eroded support for incumbent leftist governments and fostered anti-incumbent sentiments in the region (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). The post-2000 generation of right-wing parties and leaders has taken advantage of these trends by mobilizing voters' discontent with the left's performance in government. Progressive changes made by the political left (or at least associated with it) have also been used by new right-wing actors as they seek to politicize previously dormant cultural issues (Corrales, 2020; Zanotti and Roberts, 2021). This book analyzes the renovation of the political right during and after the left turn in case-study chapters focusing on Argentina (Chapter 2), Chile (Chapters 5 and 8), and Brazil (Chapter 10).

In other instances, left-wing parties remained weak as right-wing parties faced rather different challenges. For instance, in Colombia, where there was no left turn prior to the election of Gustavo Petro in 2022, traditional conservative parties experienced a gradual decline as party fragmentation substantially increased during the 1990s and 2000s (Dargent and Muñoz, 2011). In the case of Peru, the election of a leftist outsider in 2011 did not substantially change the political landscape. The main challenge faced by right-wing forces was not the strengthening of the left, but rather the fluidity of Peru's postcollapse party system (Levitsky, 2018). We discuss the emergence of new right-wing parties in Peru and Colombia in Chapters 3 and 4. Finally, we discuss the peculiar challenges faced by the political right in the context of autocratization by looking at the case of Venezuela in Chapter 6.

What strategies did the political right use in the post-2000 period? This book seeks to understand the processes and outcomes of right-wing resurgence, focusing on both the supply and the demand of conservative alternatives. Looking at the supply side, the first part of the book investigates the nature and outcomes of the processes of conservative party-building, adaptation, and rebranding in recent years. In particular, given the historical weakness of the partisan right and the obstacles to party-building in Latin America (Levitsky et al., 2016a), how can one explain the electoral strength and resilience of new conservative forces in the region?

The second part of the book looks at the interaction between the supply and demand of conservative alternatives by focusing on the impact of the left turn on the adaptation and renovation of the political right. Specifically, we assess how socioeconomic and cultural changes associated with the left turn fostered concomitant shifts in the attitudes and political identities of mass electorates, and/or facilitated the politicization of new issues, thereby creating opportunities for the renovation of the political right.

A more general question pervading the entire volume concerns the variation in the programmatic and organizational profiles of the new right-wing alternatives that have emerged in the last decades. In particular, we seek to analyze and compare the development of distinct types of right-wing political alternatives in the post-2000 period.

We first argue that successful right-wing parties have compensated for weak organizational structures by mobilizing voters along salient political cleavages and crafting distinctive party platforms and political identities. To obtain electoral success and political relevance, the political right has accrued ideational resources by either making a place for itself in existing conflicts, or by producing new cleavages. In Chapter 1 of this volume, Borges and Lloyd focus on the older generations of right-wing parties created before the left turn of the 2000s in order to explain the variation in the electoral fates of the partisan right. They find that conservative parties that have organized themselves along two major noneconomic cleavages in Latin America – the authoritarian–democratic and secular–religious divides – have systematically performed better in national legislative elections and shown greater resilience against the challenges of the left turn.

As for the right-wing parties that were created more recently during the post-2000 period, the comparative evidence presented throughout the book suggests that they have remained underdeveloped in organization and routinization (Randall and Svåsand, 2002), thereby maintaining the historical pattern of organizational weakness among the Latin American right. However, while these new right-wing parties have often depended on the charisma and personal attributes of party leaders, they have also been surprisingly successful on the ideational dimension. In other words, the weakness of formal organizations and decision-making rules has not always prevented the right from successfully developing distinctive programmatic identities and cultivating mass partisan attachments (Kestler et al., 2019; Randall and Svåsand, 2002). The development of the *Fuerza Popular* party around the legacies of *Fujimorismo* in Peru, as discussed by Meléndez in Chapter 4, exemplifies the uneven institutionalization of the political right in recent years. Although the party organization has remained feeble, *Fuerza Popular* succeeded in developing a mass partisan following and a strong party brand.

Different generations of parties have employed different strategies to build distinct programmatic identities and institutionalize right-wing parties along the ideational dimension. Conservative parties born during the third wave of

## *Introduction*

5

democratization tended to moderate their positions on the cultural agenda – in line with the secularization process underway in the region – and hit upon certain other issues as bases for attracting voters and followers (e.g., security and anticorruption). Recently, however, following the left turn of the early 2000s, the partisan right has pivoted to use a cultural agenda to mobilize conservative groups and sectors that are resistant to changes in family structures and sexual and gender rights. In this sense, they resemble the traditional right-wing parties born before the third wave of democratization.

Throughout the book, we argue that policy and value shifts in Latin American societies, which are often (but not necessarily) associated with left-wing agendas, have fostered cultural backlash. Cultural changes in contemporary Western societies have displaced the traditional values of some voters, particularly those who are older, male, or less educated, thus generating resentment and a polarization of attitudes (Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Ignazi, 1992; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). While Latin America did not experience the post-materialist turn that triggered cultural backlash in Western Europe, there is evidence that progressive cultural changes in issues such as LGBT rights have indeed polarized mass publics. The politicization of religious identities, following the rapid expansion of evangelical churches all over the region, is a major determinant of cultural backlash in Latin America. On average, evangelicals attend religious services more often than Catholics and hold substantially more conservative views on issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and gender roles as compared to both Catholic and secular voters (Corrales, 2020; McAdams and Lance, 2013; Villazón, 2014).

Rather than simply adapting to changes in the attitudes of mass electorates, conservative political actors have actively sought to politicize cultural issues. As Borges and Vidigal show in Chapter 6, the expansion of LGBT rights in many Latin American countries has created a major opportunity for emerging conservative forces. When policy changes like the legalization of same-sex marriage have occurred while a leftist president was in office, party-system polarization has increased and right-wing parties have become more ideologically extreme. In contrast, where progressive policy changes occurred under a centrist or a right-wing government, polarization among parties did not increase. These results suggest that right-wing challengers behave strategically: When the expansion of LGBT rights is associated with a left-wing government, they can more easily appeal to conservative voters by building a polarizing Manichean narrative that depicts the left as atheistic and immoral, and themselves as defenders of traditional and religious values. In such a context, it becomes electorally rewarding to adopt more ideologically extreme platforms instead of targeting moderate voters.

While gender, reproductive, and LGBT rights have been at the center of the conservative reaction against progressive change in Latin America, there are also instances in which race has become increasingly politicized. Some countries in Latin America – Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, and

Uruguay – have taken several steps in promoting social policies based on race. These policy changes have been met with resistance from conservative forces that oppose a more inclusive, less discriminatory society. These voters tend to perceive public policies that promote racial equality as a threat to the status quo and a challenge to social cohesion (Vidigal 2022). Although we are aware of these trends, have had limited electoral appeal, by and large playing a less relevant role in the emergence of new conservative alternatives in Latin America compared to other, noneconomic issues addressed by several of the book chapters.

It is also worth mentioning that nativist discourses and the related anti-immigration agendas that constitute the cornerstone of the electoral strategies of the radical right in Western Europe have been less relevant for emerging far-right alternatives in Latin America. While radical populists have succeeded in politicizing immigration in specific circumstances (e.g., J. A. Kast during Chile's 2021 presidential race), this seems to be the exception rather than the rule.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, successful right-wing parties in the post-2000 period tended to adopt more conservative positions on LGBT rights, abortion, and traditional gender roles than their predecessors. In some instances, this conservative wave has involved the emergence of radical right candidates and parties that have sought to mobilize voters who resent progressive change.

In the following section, we explain how we will define the political right throughout the book. We also present a typology of right-wing parties and movements that is intended to capture the diversity of the post-2000 Latin American right, both in ideological and organizational terms. The second section looks at the demand side, analyzing changes and continuities in the attitudes of Latin American electorates. The third section analyzes the supply side, mapping the programmatic features that distinguish the post-2000 political right from right-wing parties created in previous eras. Finally, we present the plan of the book and summarize the main findings of the project.

#### DEFINING LEFT AND RIGHT AND ACCOUNTING FOR VARIATION IN THE SUPPLY OF RIGHT-WING ALTERNATIVES

In his seminal work on social class and conservative parties in Argentina, Gibson (1996) proposed a sociological definition of the political right. He argued that conservative parties are by definition elite parties because their core constituencies – the groups that play a key role in shaping the party's policy profile and funding its activities – come from the upper strata of society. Since the economic elite usually represents a small minority of the population, these parties need to obtain the support of voters outside of their core constituency to become electorally competitive.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Kestler (2022) and Zanotti's Chapter 7 in this volume.



## Introduction

7

This sociological definition of the political right has been criticized because conservative parties may at times draw their core constituencies from the middle class, making it problematic to assume that the upper classes necessarily form the core constituency of the right (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014a: 8). Despite these limitations, Gibson's (1996) framework remains useful because it accounts for the organizational challenges faced by the political right, especially in highly unequal societies in which the median voter is typically poorer and less educated than the average middle-class citizen.

The conception and ideal of equality are the central issues separating left from right. Building on this central assumption, taken from Bobbio (1996), Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014b) define the right as a political position characterized by the belief that social inequalities are natural and outside the purview of the state. In contrast, they define the left as a political position distinguished by the idea that the main inequalities between people are socially constructed and should therefore be counteracted by active state involvement.

One potential drawback of Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser's definition is that it may lead one to infer that the political right is synonymous with a blanket rejection of social policy. There are nevertheless examples of conservative parties that have responded more ambivalently to major increases in the social role of the state, with the Tories in the postwar UK being the most well-known case.

Given these limitations, we advocate for an alternative definition that, while maintaining a focus on redistribution, emphasizes the differences between left and right on the notion of social justice. As Kerstenetzky (2006) argues, neoliberal thinking adopts a "thin," market-based conception of social justice, according to which social policies are justified when they are designed to address market failures and/or when they provide individuals with insurance for maintaining their living standards in the face of aging, sickness, or any other condition negatively affecting one's ability to earn income in the market. This conception of social policy rejects inequality as a major justification for state intervention. Moreover, the "thin" approach to social justice gives priority to economic efficiency and economic freedom to the detriment of the goal of creating a less unequal society. Based on the classification of social policy regimes proposed by Kerstenetzky (2006), it is possible to argue that the political left, by contrast, is strongly associated with a "thick" conception of justice. In this latter case, justice is based primarily on the goals of promoting political liberty and economic equality.

The above definition lays bare the core of the left–right divide. Even when the right and the left agree on the need for a strong role for the state in the provision of social policies, they will diverge regarding the ultimate goal of state intervention. Thus, this definition undoubtedly provides a "last instance" of differentiation. The right will always "ultimately" advocate for the defense market freedoms against redistribution. Conversely, the left will "ultimately" seek redistribution even if it implies restricting economic rights or sacrificing economic efficiency.

While we claim that the conception of social justice is the key difference between left and right, the sociological and ideological definitions are complementary rather than mutually exclusive in our view. That is, ideological differences between left and right often reflect the fundamental dilemma faced by conservative political forces. Although moderating economic appeals might allow right-wing parties to obtain substantial electoral gains, doing so also entails a risk of losing support from influential upper-class groups. As Giraudy (2015) demonstrates in her comparative analysis of conservative parties in Chile and Argentina, the strong ties of the partisan right to business groups seriously constrain economic moderation strategies. As a general rule, right-wing parties in Latin America have been much more likely to defend the status quo and existing social hierarchies than left-of-center parties because of the strong connections that exist between the political right and prominent members of the upper classes, such as large landowners, bankers, finance capitalists, and descendants of aristocratic families (Bowen, 2014; Cannon, 2016; Roberts, 2014).

In sum, the political right differs from other political positions mainly due to its adoption of a thin, market-based conception of social justice. In terms of the social bases of the right, while we agree with Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) that not all right-wing parties draw their core constituencies from the upper class, we contend that this is a trait shared by these parties more often than not and that this likely reinforces their adherence to a limited conception of social justice.

While right-wing parties in Latin America (as elsewhere) share commonalities with their adoption of a thin conception of social justice, there is substantial variation in terms of the programmatic strategies and types of organizations utilized by right-wing actors. Moreover, as we argue throughout the book, the post-2000 Latin American right has emphasized cultural, not economic issues. Finally, the renovation of the right in the region has witnessed the emergence of radical leaders and parties, as opposed to the previously existing mainstream right-wing parties. Right-wing radicals accept the basic tenets of procedural democracy, but, unlike mainstream conservatives, they oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy, especially political pluralism and the protection of minority rights. Radical right-wing parties are also characterized by ideological rigidity and extremism. For instance, while conservatives could be considered, right-wing radicals are nationalist (Mudde, 2007).

In view of the diversity of the supply of conservative alternatives, we propose a typology that looks at the dimensions of moderation (versus radicalism) and organizational investment. Regarding the first dimension, there are instances in which emerging conservative forces have adopted radical discourses and agendas; in other cases, however, the political right sought moderation. The rise of populist radical right (PRR) alternatives in Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay exemplifies the former trend, whereas the PRO in Argentina, as analyzed by Gabriel Vommaro in Chapter 2, clearly represents the latter. There has also been



## Introduction

9

substantial variation in terms of right-wing actors' capacity and willingness to build party organizations and cultivate partisan loyalties. While in some cases, the resurgence of the right was based on a partisan strategy that eventually led to party-building, in other cases, charismatic leaders have relied on personalistic electoral vehicles, being either unable or unwilling to build distinctive party brands or cultivate mass partisan attachments.

By combining these two dimensions, we propose four distinct categories for analyzing the Latin American right. The partisan moderate right includes instances in which right-wing actors have succeeded in building strong party organizations and/or brands while simultaneously adopting a more flexible and centrist ideological profile in an attempt to attract the median voter. The case of PRO in Argentina, analyzed in Chapter 2, fits this category very well. Radical right alternatives, for their part, characterize themselves by their anti-system profile and ideological rigidity, usually expressed through the primacy of ultraconservative views on cultural issues. The case of Brazil exemplifies the personalist radical right: the *bolsonarista* movement was organized as a loose electoral coalition around a populist leader and personalistic electoral vehicles. Finally, the ultraconservative partisan right is comprised of new right-wing forces that have combined ideological extremism with significant investments in the construction of party organizations and brands. The *Centro Democrático* in Colombia fits this latter category. While the party first emerged around the leadership of right-wing president Álvaro Uribe, it succeeded in developing a clear programmatic identity that emphasizes a hardline approach to security issues.

Although *Fuerza Popular* in Peru is similar to *Centro Democrático*, in that it succeeded in building a strong party brand by emphasizing “*mano dura*” policies to fight crime, it does not fit the radical right category very well. The *Fujimorista* party emerged initially as a radical, populist alternative, but over time became part of the political mainstream, which was reflected in the changing profiles of party sympathizers. Moreover, *Fuerza Popular* has been characterized by some ideological flexibility, adapting its programmatic identities to shifting competitive environments. In sum, *Fujimorismo* seems to be a borderline case, situated somewhere between the partisan moderate and ultraconservative partisan right categories.<sup>3</sup>

The last category in our typology includes cases of low organizational investment and ideological moderation. The electoralist right is characteristic of organizationally thin center-right electoral vehicles whose activities are mostly organized around the goals of running electoral campaigns and seeking votes. Because the electoralist right is mainly concerned with vote maximization and gaining access to office, it pursues pragmatic and ideologically flexible strategies that are inimical to ideological radicalism. In this sense, these parties

<sup>3</sup> The cases of *Fuerza Popular* and *Centro Democrático* are analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

deal with the crucial dilemma faced by the political right in unequal societies by downplaying the party's policy agendas and connections to the upper classes.

In some cases, these electoralist parties put together a loose coalition of office-seeking politicians (or local political machines) whereas, in others, they are built around charismatic leaders. The latter category is exemplified by CREO in Ecuador. The party was created mainly to sponsor the presidential project of businessman Guillermo Lasso, who was indeed elected in 2021. Despite the party's electoral success, it remains highly dependent on Lasso's personal leadership (Navia and Umpiérrez de Reguero, 2021). For their part, the office-seeking electoralist right includes parties that function mainly as political machines focused on the goal of obtaining access to government. While these parties cannot be classified as personalist in the sense that their survival is not dependent on a particular leader, they tend to be oriented toward the distribution of particularistic<sup>4</sup> goods and rely on thin organizational structures. The Brazilian Progressive Party (PP), which evolved from the pro-military PDS (Social Democratic Party), is an example of this latter category (Table I.1).

It is worth pointing out that these types constitute theoretical definitions whose empirical manifestations are always "impure." In other words, real-life cases usually have components of different partisan types at the same time, even if some predominate over others. Likewise, partisan types define party states, that is, they characterize parties at a given point in time, not for perpetuity.

Furthermore, the boundaries between the four different quadrants are not equally porous; it is easier to leave some quadrants than others. On the one hand, organizational investment requires early decisions by leaders, and these decisions strongly impact parties' trajectories (Cyr, 2017; Levitsky et al., 2016b), so it is difficult for a party with low organizational investment to transform into one with extensive organization. Likewise, a solidly organized party can better survive setbacks without losing those resources.

On the other hand, the programmatic strategy is more easily adaptable. A right-wing party that adopts an initial strategy of moderation can later move toward more radical positions if it perceives that this is more profitable in electoral terms, either because of changes in the median voter or because of the emergence of challengers who use a more radical discourse to contest the same constituency. However, programmatic strategies sustained over time build party brands (Lupu, 2016), generate voter loyalty, and attract a type of political personnel compatible with those positions, making it difficult to modify these strategies without incurring costs for both the party and its base.

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, our definition is similar to Kellam's (2015) concept of "particularistic parties" in presidential systems. She argues that these parties specialize in selling support to minority presidents in exchange for access to government jobs and resources. Unlike Kellam (2015), however, we do not agree that cultivating a reputation as providers of government patronage and pork implies that these parties are necessarily nonideological.