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Why do parties break down?

Between 1958 and 1993, Venezuela's two major parties, Democratic Action (AD) and the Independent Political Electoral Organizing Committee (COPEI), together drew an average of 78 percent of the vote in national elections. But by 1998, a mere 3 percent of Venezuelans cast their ballots for these parties. After Bolivia transitioned to democracy in 1980, the three parties that dominated politics – the rightist Nationalist and Democratic Action (ADN), centrist Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), and center-left Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) – together received an average of 67 percent of the vote. But in 2002, ADN attracted only 3 percent of the votes, and neither it nor the MIR even fielded a presidential candidate in the 2005 election.

The dramatic and sudden declines in the staying power of established political parties – parties with an extended history of being competitive for national office – is one of the most puzzling features of Latin American democratic politics since the Third Wave of democratization. Between 1978 and 2007, one-quarter of the region's established parties broke down, meaning that they suddenly became uncompetitive for national executive office. These breakdowns entailed an average drop of nearly 80 percent in the share of the party's vote from one election to the next. Parties that had only recently been major competitors were relegated to an average vote share of merely 6 percent. Yet these very parties, some more than a century old, had survived economic booms and busts, authoritarian repression, guerrilla insurgencies, and revolutionary movements.

Why, then, have many broken down in recent decades? Traditional theories of party politics fall flat in explaining party breakdown. Scholars of political parties expect party systems to form around enduring social cleavages or the political struggles that surround their emergence. Proponents of spatial models of party competition expect parties to consistently match voter preferences. Neither tradition can explain why established parties break down suddenly and decisively.

Scholars of comparative politics often attribute party breakdowns instead to poor performance by incumbent parties.[1] Corruption scandals or poor economic stewardship, they argue, cause voters to reject the incumbent party en masse, leading the party to break down.[2] But bad performance is far more widespread than party breakdown, and established parties have survived some major economic crises. In the 1980s in Peru, for instance, President Alan García's economic policies led to some of the worst hyperinflation in world history, peaking in 1989 at 12,378 percent. Still, at the end of García's term, his Popular American Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) party received nearly a quarter of the votes and fell just 10 percentage points shy of the winner. Bad performance is undoubtedly important, but it is not the whole story.

Other scholars suggest that institutional or structural changes such as electoral reforms, decentralization, and economic upheaval fatally weakened Latin America's established parties. No doubt many of these factors posed serious challenges for parties in the region. But they should have affected all the parties more or less equally. Why, instead, do we often see one established party collapse even as other established parties in that country survive? Studies that focus on macro-level explanations have been unable to explain the differences in party fortunes both across and within countries. The problem is that like much scholarship on parties in the region, they view Latin American politics in terms of groups and coalitions.

Party breakdown, however, is fundamentally about the attitudes and choices of voters. It is individual voters who decide to reject an established party they themselves had only recently supported. In fact, party breakdowns are preceded by declines in partisan attachments.[3] In the early 1980s, many Latin American voters identified with these established parties, and many had inherited these attachments from their parents. During much of the 1990s, however, voters in many Latin American countries appeared to detach from these parties. In 1986, 58 percent of Argentines professed identifying with that country's two

[1] Morgan (2011) and Seawright (2012) are notable exceptions that focus on party-system collapse.

[2] These explanations feature particularly in studies of Peru and Venezuela (see Buxton 2001; Coppedge 2005; Dietz and Myers 2007; Hawkins 2010; Hellinger 2003; Hillman 1994; Kenney 2004; Lynch 1999; Molina 2002; Molina and Pérez Baralt 1998; Naim 2001), but also elsewhere in the region (Barr 2005). Some scholars posit, along similar lines, that mass media and growing anti-system discourse – often referred to in Spanish as *antipolítica* – made voters aware of and increasingly unhappy about the shortcomings of established political parties (Dietz and Myers 2007; Levine 2002; Mainwaring 2006; Mayorga 1995; Mocca 2004; Tanaka 1998, 2006). Anti-system rhetoric has also been linked to other cases of party decline (Bardi 1996). But politicians and political parties can be unpopular without causing established parties to break down. The U.S. political parties are very unpopular (Miller and Listhaug 1990), for instance, yet their candidates continue to win elections.

[3] Throughout this book, I use the terms *partisanship*, *partisan attachments*, and *party identification* interchangeably to refer to an individual's self-identification with a political party.

established parties, the Peronist party (PJ) and the Radical Civic Union (UCR) (Catterberg 1989: 63). By 2003, that number had dwindled to 16 percent.[4] In Venezuela, a 1981 survey found that more than half of the respondents identified with AD or COPEI, but only 12 percent still did so in 1998.[5] Importantly, this erosion of voters' attachments to established political parties began before the economic declines to which their eventual fates are attributed. Something more than anti-incumbency was at work. We need to know why voters' attachments to the parties erode and why, and when, that erosion leads them to abandon their party at the polls.

This book offers the first general explanation of party breakdown in Latin America. It provides one answer to Key's (1955) famous question, "What characteristics of an electorate or what conditions permit sharp and decisive changes in the power structure from time to time?" (18). During the 1980s and 1990s, politicians across Latin America implemented policies that were inconsistent with the traditional positions of their party, provoked internal party conflicts, and formed strange-bedfellow alliances with traditional rivals. These actions blurred voters' perceptions of parties' *brands* – the kinds of voters the parties represent – eroding voters' attachments to them. Without the assured support of a partisan base, parties became more susceptible to voters' short-term retrospective evaluations. Voters who now had no party attachments deserted incumbent parties when they performed poorly. What looked like erratic voters suddenly abandoning the established parties they used to support was actually the result of a process of brand dilution.

My analysis shows that when party brands blur and when the differences between party alternatives become meaningless, even those party identities that once seemed unbending will wither. When diluted party brands are combined with poor performance by established parties, these parties break down. These findings hold across Latin America and around the world, whether we look at aggregate trends in public opinion or study individual attitudes.

Party breakdowns ultimately wreak havoc on party systems and on the political process. Parties that break down are unlikely to revive; instead, they fragment the party system. New parties emerge as instant electoral vehicles for prominent personalities. Fragmentation makes it easier for political outsiders to win elections and weaken democratic institutions. And it makes it difficult for voters to hold parties and politicians accountable, as there is little credible information about what fledgling parties will do once they are elected. We need to understand why parties break down.

[4] These figures are based on an August 2003 survey of 404 adult residents of Greater Buenos Aires conducted by Carlos Fara and Associates.

[5] Author's calculations based on national surveys conducted by Gallup in January 1981 and Datos in November 1998.

Why study party breakdown in Latin America?

Most research on parties focuses on countries where they are stable. But as democracy spreads around the globe, we need to understand how parties work when they are more fragile. Unlike the new democracies in Africa or Eastern Europe, Latin America's are mostly "interrupted democracies" (Lupu and Stokes 2010).[6] When these countries returned to democracy, political parties that had contested prior elections also returned. These parties were already well established, with long, albeit interrupted, histories of mobilizing voters and building party attachments (see Dix 1992; Taylor-Robinson 2001).[7]

Political elites in Latin America nevertheless confront problems like those faced by leaders in other developing democracies. Uncertainties abound in these developing systems, regarding the consolidation of the regime, the susceptibility to international shocks, and the stability of institutions (Lupu and Riedl 2013). Political and economic crises are more frequent and often come with strong international pressures for reform (Haggard and Kaufman 1992; Loayza et al. 2007; Svolik 2008). So although Latin American parties resemble those of advanced democracies, their leaders confront the kinds of dilemmas that are common to developing democracies.

This combination of established parties and prevalent crises makes Latin American democracies useful cases in which to study the interaction of elite behavior with mass partisanship. In the new democracies of Africa and Eastern Europe, it may be difficult to observe an effect of elite behavior on partisanship given that party attachments are fairly limited and voters often know little about the parties (Brader and Tucker 2008a; Mozaffar and Scarrit 2005). In advanced democracies, parties rarely shift their behavior significantly and mass partisanship changes slowly (Bartels 2000; Baumer and Gold 1995; Green et al. 2005; Green and Schickler 2009). Latin America's intermediate level of party development gives us a rare window into the mechanisms that keep parties afloat in established democracies and that keep them fluid in newer ones. Studying how mass partisanship changes in these volatile settings can reveal general lessons about how voters form and change their attitudes. In many Latin American countries, radical elite shifts affected voter attitudes within a short time, with dramatic consequences for established parties.

[6] This is not to suggest that new democracies in Africa or Eastern Europe emerged as a *tabula rasa* as emerging parties clearly built upon legacies and prior civil-society organizations (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Wittenberg 2006). But in Latin America, the parties that emerged during the Third Wave were often the same ones that had contested prior elections. The exceptions in post-Soviet democracies are communist successor parties, which maintained their organizations from the Soviet era. Like many Latin American parties, they too faced trade-offs between maintaining existing platforms or changing their policy positions (Grzymala-Busse 2002).

[7] Of course, there are exceptions in the region, like Brazil and Ecuador.

Explaining party breakdown

Studies of party breakdown in Latin America focus on system-wide collapses in which all established parties break down simultaneously (e.g., Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012; Tanaka 2006). These cases are particularly dramatic and consequential, but also exceedingly rare. Recent Latin American history includes only one or two cases.[8] Limiting our studies to these cases makes our inferences overdetermined. If we instead study why individual parties break down, we can draw on a larger pool of cases to make stronger inferences. This book represents the first comparative analysis of breakdown at the level of individual parties.[9]

I define *party breakdown* as a massive electoral defeat for an established party in a single election cycle.[10] These parties have been competitive in national contests over several election cycles, making them likely future competitors. When they break down, they cease to be competitive for a significant period of time, often permanently. Party breakdowns are thus dramatic and sudden events. They are not the steady ebbing of support, a gradual decline that is conceptually less puzzling and typically accompanies the emergence of new parties. Instead, party breakdowns fragment the party system. These dramatic reversals of electoral fortune are nearly impossible to overcome; only wholesale reorientation or reinvention could allow the party to reemerge several election cycles later.

Parties regularly come and go in the new democracies outside Latin America (see, e.g., Kreuzer and Pettai 2003). As voters learn about the parties and elites increasingly form strategic coalitions, some parties become electorally irrelevant and disappear (Tavits 2005; Tavits and Annus 2006). But this "shaking out" of the party system (Bernhard and Karakoç 2011: 3) cannot account for the breakdown of Latin America's more established parties.

Neither do classical theories of party politics offer much traction in explaining these cases. Cleavage-based theories expect parties and party systems to change when the politically salient social cleavage shifts. In Western Europe, for instance, the class-based cleavages around which party systems had organized in the early twentieth century appeared, in the 1970s, to be giving way to new, postindustrial cleavages that forced parties to reorganize (Dalton et al. 1984; Flanagan and Dalton 1984). Historical moments of party breakdown and realignment in the United States are often also associated with the increasing salience of noneconomic issues, such as slavery (Aldrich 1995;

[8] Although scholars agree on the simultaneous breakdown of the two traditional Venezuelan parties in 1998, there is some debate about whether the three major Peruvian parties collapsed simultaneously in 1990 (Seawright 2012; Tanaka 1998).

[9] This does not mean that interparty dynamics are unimportant; indeed, I will argue that convergence among two established parties plays an important role in individual party breakdown.

[10] Chapter 3 provides further details about how I identify established parties and cases of breakdown using election results.

Sundquist 1983).[11] Theories such as these are helpful in explaining long-term trends of party decline and evolution, but they are difficult to apply to rapid shifts in a party's electoral fortunes. The slow shifting of social cleavages is unlikely to explain the sudden breakdown of a party.[12]

Other aspects of the electoral environment, however, may change more quickly. Established parties – organizations that have remained competitive over decades – have adapted to existing environments (Cox 1997). So major changes could threaten their survival. Reforming institutional arrangements, such as the rules governing elections, could have dramatic effects on parties that had adapted specifically to the old arrangement (Benton 2001; Centellas 2009; Kenney 2004; Muñoz Pogossian 2008; Tuesta Soldevilla 1996).[13] They could also ease the entry of competitor parties that threaten established ones (Van Cott 2005). Or decentralizing political or fiscal authority – reforms that swept the developing world in the 1990s – could undermine national parties by strengthening local politicians.[14]

Parties might also confront new social environments, especially in the economically volatile developing world. The debt crisis that swept Latin America in the 1980s, for instance, dramatically altered the socioeconomic environment for politicians. Default and economic stagnation meant high unemployment and shrinking government budgets. For parties that relied on state resources to fund patronage machines, these changes could pose serious obstacles.[15]

Those parties that can adapt effectively will survive these institutional or social changes, whereas those too rigid to evolve may disappear. If party organizations are too institutionalized, if they privilege entrenched groups, or if their activist base is too extreme, they may fail to accommodate changing voter preferences.[16] In the Latin American context, those that relied most heavily on

[11] Similar arguments are rarely made about cases in Latin America, although some authors do argue that economic development weakened parties by weakening class-based cleavages (e.g., Myers 1998; Tanaka 1998).

[12] New cleavages have not emerged in Latin America. Ethnicity has become more politically salient in a handful of cases (Yashar 2005), but ethnic polarization remains low and ethnic parties have succeeded by mobilizing broad and inclusive constituencies (Madrid 2008, 2012). Moreover, ethnic parties succeeded only after established parties began to decline (Van Cott 2005). The predominant political cleavage in the region continues to be class (Kitschelt et al. 2010; Lupu and Stokes 2009).

[13] Changes to the electoral rules in Italy and Japan are often credited with transforming the party systems in those countries in the 1990s (Cox et al. 1999; D'Alimonte 2003; Morlino 1996; Reed and Scheiner 2003).

[14] See Grindle (2000); Morgan (2011); Penfold-Becerra (2009).

[15] With regard to Latin American parties, see Benton (2001); Cameron (1994); Greene (2007); Morgan (2011); Roberts (2003); Schmidt (1996). For similar arguments applied to Italy, see Golden (2004).

[16] These arguments are primarily made with reference to the Venezuelan parties (see Coppedge 1994, 2001, 2005; Crisp 1996; Crisp and Levine 1998; McCoy 1999; Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012), although they occasionally also appear in studies focusing on other parties in the

patronage might have found it particularly hard to mobilize support without access to state resources (Burgess 1999; Levitsky and Way 1998; Morgan 2011). Alternatively, those that relied on clientelism might have been able to cushion themselves against the forces of electoral decline (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Levitsky 2003).

The crises and reforms of the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America undoubtedly did challenge established parties (Roberts 2015).[17] But politics is always dynamic;[18] these same parties had adapted to dramatic social and institutional changes in the past. They had survived economic depressions, military dictatorships, even major revolutions. Indeed, established parties across the region – even some of those considered most institutionalized – did adapt to new and changing contexts. Some reneged on campaign promises and completely reversed their historic policy positions (Campello 2014; Stokes 2001), often forcing entrenched labor groups to go along with painful economic reforms (Murillo 2001). Others implemented more flexible internal procedures, severed links to certain interest groups, or adopted open primary elections, all in an effort to address changing public expectations.

Clientelism helped many Latin American parties maintain local bases of support over decades. But parties that relied on patronage to drum up voter support also based their decades of electoral appeals on far more.[19] Established parties, in fact, generated deep-seated loyalties that went far beyond quid pro quo exchange. In much of the region, supporters went to war for these parties or faced imprisonment and torture when they were banned by military regimes. In fact, clientelist parties often target voters who already identify with the party (Stokes et al. 2013). And patterns of partisanship across Latin America suggest clientelism is not the basis for most voters' attachments to parties (Lupu 2015a).[20] Ultimately, though, this is an open empirical question

region (Burgess 1999; Greene 2007). This idea that organizational rigidity prevents parties from adapting builds directly on studies of leftist party moderation in Europe (Ishiyama 1995; Kitschelt 1994; Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Sánchez-Cuenca 2004; but see Grzymala-Busse 2002).

[17] Indeed, I will argue that the new socioeconomic environment generated divergent incentives for different party actors and led in some cases to intraparty conflicts.

[18] As Aldrich (2006: 557) notes, "political parties are shaped as institutions by political actors, often in the same timeframe and by the actions of the same figures who are shaping legislation or other political outcomes. They are, that is, unusually 'endogenous' institutions, and we therefore must keep in mind that the party institutions (or at least organizations) can be changed with greater rapidity and ease than virtually any other political organization."

[19] As Coppedge (1998) notes, "clientelism and ideology are not necessarily mutually exclusive … Clientelism is merely a means to build and maintain a power base; ideology, where it exists, is what guides what that power is used for. Many parties are to some degree clientelistic, to some degree personalistic *and* to some degree ideological; these three qualities vary independently" (552, emphasis in original; see also Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007).

[20] Moreover, while clientelism may account for local election outcomes, it seems far less likely to explain the massive changes in the national electoral fortunes of established parties.

and the evidence in this book runs against the notion that clientelism maintains partisan attachments. Voter attachments with the PJ in Argentina declined in the 1990s even though the party ramped up its clientelistic efforts during this period (Levitsky 2003). And the region's clientelist parties do not appear to have been immune from breakdown.

The institutional reforms and social transformations of the period were also not uniform enough across the region to explain the varied fortunes of established parties in different countries (see Eaton and Dickovic 2004; Remmer 2008; Tulchin and Selee 2004).[21] Parties broke down in countries that did not decentralize at all (Argentina), whereas others survived despite changes to the electoral rules (Panama).[22]

Within countries, many of these changes should have affected all parties more or less equally. After all, it is countries that reform their electoral rules, and whole party systems that should be affected by decentralization. And yet it is individual parties that broke down. Arguments that focus on system-wide transformations have a hard time explaining why one established party collapses even when others in the same country live to fight another day. One could argue that system-level changes affected some parties more than others,[23] but these kinds of explanations would need to specify what made some parties more susceptible than others. An adequate explanation of party breakdown needs to grapple with the different outcomes both across and within countries.

Instead, the macro perspective is all too common in scholarship on Latin American party politics. Scholars typically study parties in the region in corporatist terms, with interest groups, party strategies, and elite coalitions taking center stage. Individual citizens at best play a secondary role in these accounts. And they rarely consider how voters form attitudes or make voting decisions.

After nearly three decades of democracy in the region, party scholars need to pay more attention to the growing body of knowledge about political attitudes and choices both within Latin America and beyond. We should heed Achen and Shively's (1995) exhortation that scholars doing aggregate-level research found their arguments in theoretically justifiable individual-level models. "Without that constraint," they note, "macrolevel research too easily slips into stud-

The difference between parties that survived and those that broke down was millions of votes, and even the region's most efficient political machines are unlikely to sway so many voters, particularly as clientelism also entails electoral costs (Weitz-Shapiro 2013).

[21] More generally, the empirical record linking electoral rules to party systems in Latin America is at best mixed (Morgenstern and Vázquez-D'Elía 2007).

[22] There is also little reason to think that decentralization necessarily undermines national leaders (Falleti 2005; Willis et al. 1999). In fact, after several Latin American countries decentralized, established national parties did extremely well in subnational elections (O'Neill 2006).

[23] For instance, one could argue that parties that historically relied more heavily on patronage were more likely to break down as a result of declining state resources. But many patronage-based parties in the region survived the neoliberal era, whereas those far less reliant on state resources broke down.

ies of the interrelationships of meaningless statistical aggregates. Only when both macrotheoretical propositions and statistical assumptions are rigorously inferred from the microlevel can we have faith in macrolevel studies" (25).

The received scholarship on party breakdown in Latin America misses a crucial part of the story: the decline in voters' attachments to these parties in the years prior to their collapse.[24] The fact that voters' attachments to established parties declined precipitously undoubtedly plays a role in their eventual breakdown. But we need to know something about how those attachments form and change over time. We need to know what kinds of factors shape mass partisanship and vote choice.

The decline of mass partisanship

Theories of party identification offer little guidance for explaining why mass partisanship might erode. Early theories viewed partisanship as a voter's enduring psychological attachment to a party, inherited like a religious affiliation and tending to persist over the life of an individual (Campbell et al. 1960; Miller 1976, 1991; Miller and Shanks 1996). A key insight of this conceptualization was the notion that partisanship is a type of social identity (Green et al. 2005; Greene 1999). Later authors offered a more rationalistic conceptualization in which voters evaluate parties over time to form a "running tally" and choose the party most likely to benefit them (Achen 1992; Fiorina 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Jackson 1975; Jennings and Markus 1984; Page and Jones 1979). From this perspective, partisanship is not an identity but rather a rational product of voter calculations.

Much of the debate between these contrasting perspectives – especially among comparativists – has focused largely on the empirical question of partisan stability over time (Bartle and Bellucci 2009; Budge et al. 1976). Evidence that partisanship is stable over time is taken to support the social-identity perspective (e.g., Green et al. 2005), that partisanship is an "unmoved mover." Conversely, evidence of partisan volatility is considered inconsistent with such theories (e.g., Thomassen 1976). The logic is that whereas voters' evaluations of party performance fluctuate from year to year, social identities form in childhood or adolescence – whether by socialization or learning – and stabilize thereafter.

Yet, the implication that partisanship must be stable if it is a social identity assumes that the objects of identity (i.e., parties) are themselves stable. The possibility that parties are themselves moving parts is rarely even noted, much less theorized or empirically tested.[25] This gap is no doubt partly the result of

[24] Morgan (2011) and Seawright (2012) are exceptions.

[25] For instance, in their model of party competition, Adams et al. (2005) usefully incorporate both partisanship and electoral concerns. But they treat partisanship as fixed and independent of

the overwhelming empirical focus of partisanship research on advanced democracies, the United States in particular. In these contexts, the same parties tend to persist and their reputations are slow to change (Baumer and Gold 1995). But in developing democracies, political parties are often new and may undergo dramatic transformations. In these contexts, the implications of existing theories of partisanship are not immediately apparent. What can they tell us about the decline of mass partisanship in developing democracies?[26]

We could simply dismiss these theories as inapplicable to developing contexts.[27] But there are good reasons not to do so. As in advanced democracies, new political parties in the developing world emerged and established themselves over time by building on existing political identities (e.g., Shabad and Slomczynski 1999; Valenzuela and Scully 1997; Wittenberg 2006). In Latin America, many political parties that had contested elections during prior periods of democracy returned to political prominence; it seems unlikely that deeply held party attachments from previous democratic periods would simply disappear when electoral competition is interrupted (Lupu and Stokes 2010). Moreover, patterns of partisanship across the region generally conform to the expectations of theories developed for the United States (Lupu 2015a). And when it comes to other political attitudes and behaviors, like vote choice, citizens in developing democracies behave a lot like their counterparts in advanced democracies (van der Brug et al. 2008).

Rather than dismiss prior theories altogether, researchers should consider how different contexts condition them. For the study of mass partisanship, new and developing democracies – where parties are nascent or partisan attachments weakened by authoritarian interludes – offer opportunities for

party positions. Similarly, Kitschelt (1994: 31) argues that partisans are "impervious to party strategy."

[26] The question of why partisanship erodes was taken up by some scholars of established democracies when, in the 1970s and 1980s, they observed aggregate declines in self-reported partisan attachments. A handful offered structural explanations that emphasized the spread of education, the emergence of mass media, or public financing of parties (Dalton 1984; Flanagan and Dalton 1984; Inglehart 1977; Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 2013; Ward 1993). Yet the implications of these arguments have found little empirical support (Albright 2009; Arzheimer 2006; Berglund et al. 2006; Huber et al. 2005; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2006; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). Even the observation of partisan erosion in these settings has been contested (Bartels 2000; Green et al. 2005; Hetherington 2001; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). In Latin America, too, there appears to be little reason to associate voter partisanship with less educated individuals, or those less likely to be exposed to mass media (Pérez-Liñán 2002; Seligson 2002). Indeed, in countries such as Brazil and Mexico, mass partisanship has increased with rising education and media penetration (Echegaray 2006; Medina Vidal et al. 2010; Samuels 2006).

[27] Even within research on partisanship in advanced democracies, scholars debate whether the concept of partisanship applies at all beyond the borders of the United States. Some scholars of Western Europe are particularly skeptical that partisanship can be meaningfully distinguished from vote choice in parliamentary systems (e.g., Bartle and Bellucci 2009; Budge et al. 1976; Johnston 2006; Thomassen 1976).