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REVIEW ESSAY

Democracy and Parties in Latin America

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Ackerman, Edwin. *Origins of the Mass Party: Dispossession and the Party-form in Mexico and Bolivia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. ix, 197 pp.; hardcover US$97.

Domínguez Virgen, J. Carlos, and Alejandro Monsiváis Carrillo, eds. *Democracias en vilo: la incertidumbre política en América Latina*. Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2020. Illustrations, graphs, tables, bibliography. 389 pp.; paperback US$30.95.

Hiskey, Jonathan T., and Mason W. Mosely. *Life in the Political Machine: Dominant-Party Enclaves and the Citizens They Produce*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Illustrations, index, bibliography, xi 269 pp.; hardcover US$98.

Melendez, Carlos. 2022. *The Post-partisans: Anti-partisans, Anti-establishment Identifiers, and Apartisans in Latin America*. Cambridge Elements. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press. Bibliography, annex. 75 pp., published online; paperback US$22.

Van Dyck, Brandon. 2021. *Democracy against Parties: The Divergent Fates of Latin America's New Left Contenders*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021. Bibliography, index. 288 pp.; hardcover $55.

What is wrong with democracy in Latin America? After the wave of democratic transitions in the 1980s, initial concerns focused on the potential for the return of military regimes. This did not happen. However, satisfaction with and support for democracy has eroded, along with confidence and trust in political institutions in general and political parties in particular. How serious are these trends? What has gone wrong—and what might be done to reverse the damage?

The authors of the books reviewed in this essay contribute in various ways to addressing these questions. While there is no magic bullet offered in a policy sense, each offers important insights into the relative role played by parties in these processes of decline and the structural underpinnings of party construction.

The most general approach to these questions is laid out in *Democracias en vilo: la incertidumbre política en América Latina*, edited by J. Carlos Domínguez Virgen and Alejandro Monsiváis Carrillo. Two chapters in this impressive survey focus on the inability of a weak state to deliver on policy outcomes (see the chapter by Alberto Olvera and the chapter by Armando Roman Zozaya on Mexico). Another chapter highlights the particular dangers posed by investments in megaprojects, which create risks that voters will see democracy as "only serving to protect and favor the interests of a few powerful groups" (Domínguez, 122).

Yet roughly half the chapters examine in a detailed way the effects of political parties that seem "immune to the influence of the citizenry" (Olvera, 21). Laura Wills Otero addresses the paradox in Colombia that "in spite of the enormous discontent which exists in the citizenry with traditional politics and its institutions . . . electoral power is won principally by the traditional parties" (168, 180). The answer appears to lie in the organizational strength of the traditional parties compared to the lack of organizational structures in the new parties. The result is parties that are "above all electoral machines with little ability to resolve problems" (168); they do not represent. Sofia Donoso argues that the "discontent with parties [in Chile] . . . left a vacuum to fill," which in turn explains the growth of social movements that are "ever more frequent and massive" (158, 141). Yet as in Colombia, massive dissatisfaction with parties did not cause the traditional parties to fade away, at least until the 2017 change in Chile's electoral system.

Martin Tanaka, covering the case of Peru, discusses the alternative paradox of relative policy stability and success in the face of virtually inexistent parties. As he puts it, the presence of "parties without politicians, politicians without parties" (255), has almost accidentally left policy-making in the hands of a technocratic elite regardless of who wins elections. As parties scramble to fill elected positions without real activists, they recruit politicians without loyalty to parties. Parties have no real organization, no ideological profile, and no ability—or time—to propose alternative policy plans. Instead, politicians default to the bureaucrats to actually carry out economic policy. Yet despite Peru's relative success in economic terms, political discontent has not diminished. Parties remain unable to attract durable political support.

Meanwhile, the chapter by Monsiváis Carillo finds that even "organizationally strong and programmatically defined parties do not contribute to diminish political discontent," defined as a combination of lack of respect for the political system and lack of confidence in democratic institutions (72, 56). Democratic quality as measured by expert surveys does not matter either. Rather it is the popularity of the president that best cushions deficient democracies from the effects of low institutionalization of parties.

While each of these contributions seems persuasive for their particular case, these divergent conclusions leave the reader wondering whether or not party organization matters more broadly. Evidently, party organization does not relieve the problem of discontent, either with democracies or with parties themselves. But it can stabilize the party system even in conditions of relatively high discontent—albeit perhaps with a concomitant rise in protest and non-partisan forms of political participation. None of the chapters really tackles the question of whether *discontent* matters, other than as a signal of popular disapproval. So what? Monsiváis Carrillo provides perhaps the most troubling answer to this question: Discontent does not track with democratic quality or democratic survival (63). Discontent can diminish when the president is popular, even when the president is eroding liberal democratic institutions, or perhaps especially then. What is less clear is whether high levels of discontent precede and enable presidents to erode democratic institutions. This is an important omission.

The second work analyzed in this review locates the source of undemocratic attitudes and patterns of behavior in the pernicious effects of overly strong political parties that stifle competition. The dark side of successful party building, according to Hiskey and Moseley's *Life in the Political Machine*, occurs when parties implement undemocratic practices to reinforce and entrench their original competitive advantages and as a result establish dominant party enclaves that warp the local political culture in highly undemocratic ways. These local authoritarian enclaves in turn can undermine support for democracy at the national level.

The book is based on a comparison of dominant party enclaves in Argentina (under the Rodríguez Sáa family) and Mexico (under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI). The authors point out—correctly—that variations in democratic quality are often as significant *within* countries as between them, and therefore that our focus on national-level variation misses a valuable opportunity to examine comparatively the effects of competition on political culture in the context of a single set of democratic institutions. It highlights, usefully, not only subnational

politics (an important topic in its own right) but also, and equally usefully, the relevance of informal political institutions for culture and practice.

The authors define authoritarian enclaves as "a prolonged period of rule by a single party (or individual) achieved by legally questionable means," and operationalize it as the lack of alternation in power, rather than the margin of victory. Based on this criterion, they identify dominant party enclaves in Mexico and Argentina and compare the attitudes and behaviors of citizens living in these enclaves to those of citizens living in "competitive" regions of the same countries, using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). They also examine the specific cases of the Estado de Mexico and San Luis, Argentina.

What they find is compelling. Both attitudes and behaviors differ in non-competitive regions in ways that not only sustain undemocratic enclaves, but may also undermine democratic culture at the national level. For example, personal experiences of corruption are more common in undemocratic enclaves, but acceptance of corruption as a normal part of politics is also more common, such that the perception of corruption is lower in regions where its prevalence is higher. Paradoxically, the experience of alternation can actually worsen perceptions of corruption even as its prevalence drops, in part due to greater transparency but also in part due to less acceptance of corruption as the norm.

Similarly, citizens of dominant party enclaves were more tolerant of a predominant role for the executive, less tolerant of inclusive participation, and less supportive of democracy in general. The effect of actual performance on vote choice was weaker, and participation by opponents of the dominant party was weaker, further supporting the continuation of the regime.

Many of these conclusions, however, depend on the operationalization of the variable as "alternation in power." The authors choose it as an "efficient marker for the presence of some degree of uncertainty over electoral outcomes and competition between parties" (82), arguing in addition that it is in closer elections in these enclaves where the worst tendencies of dominant party systems emerge (53). They are certainly correct in both respects. Yet there are several problems attendant on this operationalization.

The first of these is that alternation does not always undermine undemocratic practices. That it does so in Mexico may be related to the fact that the party benefiting most from alternation away from the PRI was the relatively democratic National Action Party (PAN), which at least in principle argued against many of the clientelistic practices of the PRI. In the specific case of the Estado de Mexico, alternation did finally occur in 2023, but the party that took over from the PRI was Morena (the Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional), a party inheriting many of the undemocratic traits of the PRI and which seems to numerous observers to be attempting to replicate the PRI's model of dominance at the national level.

Second, competition can create uncertainty without alternation. It is at least arguable, for example, that uncertainty at the national level first emerged in the contested presidential election of 1988, when Cárdenas challenged the PRI and nearly won. It was only after that election that the PRI began to concede gubernatorial elections (to the PAN) and approve electoral reforms that eventually led to alternation in power at the national level.

Third, and most importantly, we really have no sense of just how sticky these undemocratic attitudes in authoritarian enclaves are. On the one hand, most of the 'competitive' zones contrasted to authoritarian enclaves by the authors had been authoritarian enclaves themselves just a few years earlier; in fact, their analysis of the effect of "years since transition" finds that it has no significant impact, suggesting that the effects of alternation are nearly immediate (131). On the other hand, they refer several times to studies of the United States which suggest that, "the authoritarian nature of subnational politics in the South throughout much of the country's history . . . has contributed what even today stands as a distinct political culture" (117). Perhaps the replacement of the Democratic Solid South by the Republican Solid South has perpetuated this culture (see point one above, regarding Morena). Certainly the enthusiasm with which much of the Mexican voting public has

welcomed Morena, even with its aspirations to perpetuate its current electoral dominance by means both fair and foul, suggests that not all of these undemocratic attitudes have withered away.

The authors' theory does not necessarily indict organizationally strong parties. Their analysis of *why* dominant parties are dominant suggests that it is at least as much the party's ability to (mis) appropriate state resources as the party's own organizational characteristics which underly long-standing dominance. Cut off from these resources by alternation, these parties do not always fare well. In the case of the Estado de Mexico, for example, the PRI won 15 districts (out of 41) in combination with its allies in the midterm elections of 2021, *with* a PRI governor. It won just one in 2024, with a governor from Morena—only a year after the first alternation in over 90 years. Aside from the question of when exactly uncertainty became the rule in the Estado de Mexico (despite no alternation in the governorship), these results suggest that the PRI had less strictly *party* strength in the state than it appeared to have.

Nevertheless, *Life in the Political Machine* should warn us about the potential risks of lopsided forms of competition. There is a difference between strong parties and strong party systems. It may be tempting for parties with a clear organizational advantage to build on their electoral success by turning elected offices into sources of future electoral support. This is what the opposition party PRD did when it won control of Mexico City in 1997; nearly 30 years later, it remains under the control of a splinter party from the PRD, Morena, which took over major portions of the PRD's clientelistic networks. There is a reason why the two-alternation test was considered a more robust measure of democratic consolidation than a single alternation.

The alternative to strong parties, however, may be even worse. This is the theme of *The Post-Partisans* by Carlos Melendez. This work is primarily a methodological exploration of partisanship in Latin America, which experts agree has declined substantially even in democratic "stars" like Chile or Costa Rica. The contribution of Melendez's work is to suggest that not all non-partisans share the same orientation towards parties. He defines and describes three distinct types of voters who share the fact that they have no consistent positive orientation toward any party, but who have different attitudes toward the existing parties in the system. The "negative identifiers" are individuals who reject a specific party. "Anti-establishment political identity" translates into "loathing of the main political parties," that is, more than one of the parties usually from different ideological backgrounds (a negative identifier might, in contrast, hate only leftist parties). Finally, "apartisans" lack either a strong positive or negative orientation to specific parties (3–4).

Melendez defines partisans as those who consistently choose the same party (would definitely vote for) at the level of the Congress, governor, and mayor (excluding presidential elections as uniquely personalistic). Negative partisans, therefore, would definitely *not* vote for the same party at those levels. He then goes on to show that each of these three categories contains a significant share of voters, but differently according to country. Chile, for example, is described as "stable but uprooted" (15). The small percentage of positive partisans—among the lowest in Latin America—is compensated for by a much larger share of negative partisans who would "definitely not" vote for one of the two main political forces, and thus often ended up voting for the same party force not out of loyalty or affection but because they viewed the other side as worse. In Brazil, similarly, *anti-petismo* has come to define the structure of competition more than positive support for *bolsonarismo*.

Although his main concern is to demonstrate the empirical consistency of these categories, and their relevance for understanding the perplexing stability of some discredited or poorly socially rooted parties over time, Melendez does venture a few conclusions about how these categories might relate to party system stability. Anti-establishment partisans, for example, are "easy fuel for populists" while apartisans are a barrier to populism (21) More broadly, the presence of citizens who are apartisans seems to have few "relevant consequences to the stability of the party systems". (69) Instead, we should be looking at negative partisans and anti-establishment identifiers to understand electoral results.

Ultimately, however, he argues that "democracies need positive partisans to achieve their promises" (70). This is in part because negative partisans are often party switchers; where new alternatives

emerge regularly (as in Peru): "the anti-fujimorista and anti-aprista camp does not have a political owner" (28). More importantly, it is hard to represent a negative. Thus, "negative partisanship can be crucial in contesting authoritarianism and influencing electoral results, but by itself it is not a sufficient condition for building political parties" (63). In contrast, anti-establishment identities, because they are prone to populism, may be shaped into nascent partisanship by populist leaders (63).

There are some weaknesses in this formulation. Critically, of course, these theoretical hypotheses need more testing. Little attention is paid to the conditions that drive the *supply* of new parties (in Peru, for example, anti-fujimoristas vote for different parties as they emerge, while in Chile the pre-2017 binomial system worked against the regular emergence of new parties). Nor is the hypothesis about anti-establishment identifiers and populism tested apart from an attitudinal affinity with 'populist' attitudes. Yet Bolsonaro in Brazil undoubtedly also drew from negative partisans to assemble his winning coalition.

Of the three categories, perhaps the most additional attention could usefully be paid to the apartisan category. Melendez repeatedly notes that this group is, "politically indifferent," and probably "unable to position themselves in terms of the left-right continuum" (38). Yet, as a residual category (everyone who is neither a positive partisan, a negative partisan, or an anti-establishment identifier), this group contains not only those who answered "don't know"—the genuinely apathetic—but also those who answered inconsistently to the questions about voting for Congress, the governor, and the mayor. These may in fact be politically aware and genuinely independent voters. So how does this group behave? Do they abstain, or do they vote? Do they participate in civil society?

It is hard to cheer for apathy, and Melendez views these voters as "very unlikely to develop (positive or negative) partisanship" (63), but also sees this group as a potential bulwark against populism. This seems inconsistent if they are simply not participating in politics; abstention can be a form of passive acceptance of a populist status quo. Following up with the actual political behavior of this group could clarify their role, and whether they are available for party building under the right circumstances.

The problem of party building is the subject of the last two works reviewed here. The first of these is Edwin Ackerman's compelling comparison of the origins of the PRI in Mexico versus the MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario) in Bolivia. Ackerman's departure point is that despite both emerging from a revolution, attempting to organize peasants and workers in a comprehensive revolutionary party, and enjoying some early success, only the PRI succeeded in establishing a hegemonic party system while the MNR split and fell victim to a military coup in 1964 (although it made a comeback in the 1990s). To explain these diverging outcomes, Ackerman points to the "paradoxical effect of social fragmentation on facilitating political organization" (1).

Specifically, two underlying structural conditions made possible the successful organization of the PRI while blocking the organization of the MNR. First, the economic destruction of communal property holdings (privatization) made it possible for peasants to develop new interests capable of being represented. Second, the simultaneous erosion of forms of local political authority made it politically possible for them to ally and participate in unions (1, 34).

The distinctive contribution of Ackerman's work is its careful archival comparisons not only between the PRI and the MNR, but—persuasively—within these two organizations across geographical space. Ackerman develops measures of where social fragmentation had progressed most and least within each case and then links these states to relative rates of success of the new party organizations. It was, at least to this reader, a little unclear exactly how the erosion index was created, and it seems odd that Michoacán and Morelos in the case of Mexico are ranked as less eroded than Chiapas or Oaxaca, where indigenous communal political forms survive to this day.

The larger question, however, is what contributions this work might make to contemporary analysis of party building. Is the PRI an obsolete party form? Or might the lessons learned here apply to contemporary aspiring parties? Having noted that "articulation [is] conditional on the social fragmentation produced by capitalism" (33), Ackerman is not unaware that neoliberal

capitalism can also produce social atomization and hence according to his theory, the foundations for party organization (e.g., 38, 144). This is, in fact, how he explains the ubiquity of the party form under capitalism to this day: because of a "permanent potential for party articulation" (147). Yet most Latin American parties in the modern landscape do not replicate the organizational prowess of the PRI; many are barely organized at all. One cannot help suspecting that some element is missing, some ingredient in the secret sauce that explains successful party organization. Perhaps this is agency; Ackerman deliberately focuses on enabling conditions rather than pursuing a voluntaristic model of party formation.

Van Dyck, however, proposes another solution. For him, weak organization is the default position of most new parties, especially in the contemporary era where mass media provides an alternative way of communicating with voters that does not require the time, labor, and effort associated with building a political organization. New party elites "only have electoral incentives to build strong organizations . . . if they are born under adversity—specifically, if they initially lack access to two major party 'substitutes': mass media and state resources" (6). Because new parties in full democracies can access media and can more easily gain access to state resources, they typically do not need to invest in organization to win elections. The ultimate result, however, is that these parties lack staying power and are more likely to collapse in the face of electoral setbacks than parties that develop under liberalizing or competitive authoritarianism, which are forced to develop activists and organizations in order to compete in elections at all (6).

Van Dyck also throws in another crucial characteristic of these successful new parties: "a particular kind of leader—one who combines external appeal with internal dominance" (40). Only this kind of leader can avoid the risk of schism which can fatally undermine new parties.

Van Dyck does not address the historical development of parties like the PRI or the MNR, and it is unclear that his framework could be adapted to explain Ackerman's cases, just as Ackerman seems less well-positioned to explain Van Dyck's cases. Both the PRI and the MNR faced adverse circumstances (emerging from a revolution), which might explain their investment in organization, but both also had access to state resources early on, which they used successfully (and enthusiastically) to develop organizations.

What Van Dyck does well, like Ackerman, is that he examines cases of failure as well as success and supplies careful case studies of each to bolster his arguments. "Organization" here seems to be a relative term. The PRD at least was never as well organized as the author implies (many of its "activists" existed only at moments of internal or external elections), yet clearly its organizational structure, even where coopted from the PRI, surpassed the case of FREPASO in Argentina which deliberately avoided organizing. This suggests that organizational development does not need to equal that of the historic PRI to be effective for surviving electoral challenges.

Similarly, the determination of whether a party had the "right" kind of leader is a relative condition and seems at times a little post hoc. Internal dominance, for example, is determined at least in part by whether anyone challenged the leader for control, rather than by criteria such as the type of cross factional ties enjoyed prior to the foundation of the party.

The very fact that these are relative terms might lead us to more optimistic conclusions about the future of parties than Van Dyck would allow. The title of his book, *Democracy Against Parties*, and his own arguments throughout, suggest that "as democracy has thrived, parties have suffered" (179). Today, "widespread party weakness should worry us . . . weak parties increase the likelihood of democratic breakdown . . . [and] where democracy survives amid party weakness, the quality of democracy, almost of necessity, erodes" (179, 190–91). Ackerman would overpredict the likelihood of party organization given enabling conditions of capitalist dispossession and weakened political representation. Van Dyck may underpredict it, if even relatively weak organizational structures can enable new parties to survive.

Nevertheless, Van Dyck is right that public trust in and satisfaction with democracy has declined. This brings us full circle back to *Democracias en vilo*, which begins with this observation. There may be more than one reason for this trend, including not only party weakness and discrediting, but also state inefficiency, structural economic problems, and inflated expectations. Yet parties, as this selection of books suggests, are surely implicated.

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