The Paradox of Adversity: New Left Party Party Survival and Collapse in Latin America

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Abstract

Political parties are the basic building blocks of representative democracy. They reduce information costs for voters, enhance executive accountability, and contribute to democratic governability by facilitating legislative organization and aggregating the interests of powerful societal groups. Yet we continue to know relatively little about the conditions under which strong parties form. The dominant theories of party-building are mostly based on historical studies of the United States and Western European countries, almost all of which developed stable party systems. Drawing on this literature, a segment of the early scholarship on party-building in third-wave democracies optimistically took ‘party development’ for granted, assuming that parties would follow from democracy, cleavages, or certain electoral rules. Yet party-building outcomes in third-wave democracies fell short of scholars’ initial, optimistic expectations. In many third-wave polities, social cleavages, attempts at electoral engineering, and decades of democratic competition did not produce durable parties. On the other hand, in numerous third-wave democracies, new political parties did take root. What accounts for the variation in party-building outcomes observed across the developing world? More generally, under what conditions does party-building succeed?

Drawing on evidence from fourteen months of interviews and archival research in Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Argentina, this project provides the first systematic comparison of party-building success and failure on the Latin American new left. It argues that most new parties do not survive because they do not build strong organizations composed of committed activists. As a result, they do not withstand early crises. Paradoxically, parties with strong organizations and committed activists are more likely to form under conditions of adversity. Office-seekers with low access to state resources and mass media have an incentive to do the difficult work of organization-building. Intense polarization and conflict (e.g., civil war, populist mobilization) generate committed activists by producing the higher causes that spur individuals and groups to collective action. New party-builders are more likely to experience this cluster of adverse conditions under authoritarian rule.