PART II

CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZATION-BUILDING
The “neoliberal turn” of the 1980s and 1990s created profound, long-term challenges for the Latin American left. With the collapse of import substitution industrialization (ISI) and the emergence of an elite neoliberal consensus, the left’s traditional economic platform (e.g., industrial protectionism, price controls, nationalization of key industries) became politically infeasible in much of the region; and with the decline of labor unions and rise of the informal sector (a product of trade liberalization and deindustrialization), the left’s capacity to mobilize the popular classes weakened (Roberts 1998; Levitsky and Roberts 2011). Despite these challenges, five new left-wing parties have taken root in Latin America since the onset of the third wave of democratization in the region in 1978. Six others, after initially rising to prominence, promptly collapsed and disintegrated. Interestingly, most of the new left parties that took root were born in adversity. Brazil’s Workers’ Party (PT) and Mexico’s Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) formed in electoral opposition to authoritarian regimes, while El Salvador’s Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and Nicaragua’s Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) emerged from armed conflict. In contrast, most of the new left parties that collapsed after liftoff were born in democracy, under less adverse circumstances (e.g., Argentina’s Front for a Country in Solidarity (FREPASO), Colombia’s Democratic Alliance April 19 Movement (AD M-19), El Salvador’s Democratic Convergence (CD), Guatemala’s New Guatemala Democratic Front (FDNG), Paraguay’s National Meeting Party (PEN), and Peru’s United Left (IU).
Solidarity [FREPASO], Peru’s United Left [IU]). How do we make sense of this paradox?

The chapter argues that, paradoxically, adverse circumstances may facilitate party-building. New parties tend to collapse because, in most cases, they do not have strong territorial organizations and committed activists and, consequently, do not survive early electoral letdowns and crises. A central theoretical claim of the chapter is that new parties with strong territorial organizations and committed activists tend to emerge under adverse conditions – specifically, conditions of limited access to (1) state resources (Shefter 1994) and (2) mass media. Office-seekers with limited state and media access have no choice but to undertake the slow, labor-intensive, and non-vote-maximizing work of organization-building. At the ground level, organization-building is laborious, largely unremunerated, sometimes risky, and, typically, unlikely to bear electoral fruit in the short term. Consequently, the process selects for “believers” (Panebianco 1988: 26–30), or ideologically committed activists. Limited access to state resources and mass media thus may facilitate successful party-building – and, notably, is characteristic of office-seekers engaged in antiauthoritarian struggles. Thus, the chapter’s takeaway argument is that party-building is more likely to succeed in authoritarian contexts (provided that repression is not too extreme) than under democracy.

The chapter is organized in two sections. The first presents the theoretical argument that low state and media access – a set of adverse conditions associated with opposition to authoritarian rule – facilitates party-building. The second illustrates this argument through a comparison of three new left parties in Latin America: two that formed in opposition to authoritarian regimes, built durable party organizations, and weathered early electoral crises (Brazil’s PT, Mexico’s PRD), and one that formed under democracy, did not build a durable party organization, and collapsed after an early electoral crisis (Argentina’s FREPASO).

THE ARGUMENT: THE PARADOX OF ADVERSITY

With few exceptions, political parties must establish strong partisan brands in order to become institutionalized (Lupu 2016; Chapter 3, this

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1 In his seminal analysis of party-building in America and Europe, Martin Shefter argues that political parties founded by leaders “without positions of power in the prevailing regime” must build mass party organizations in order to “bludgeon their way into the political system” (1994: 5). The theory presented in this chapter incorporates and builds on Shefter’s insight.
It is rare, though, for parties to be born with strong brands (see Levitsky, Loxton, and Van Dyck, Chapter 1, this volume). Most new parties must first go through a process of brand development, in which they differentiate themselves from other parties and, crucially, demonstrate internal consistency over time (Lupu 2016; Chapter 3, this volume). During this embryonic period, new parties commonly experience electoral setbacks and crises. New parties tend to disintegrate not only because they face such challenges, but also because they are unable to survive them.

New parties are much more likely to survive early challenges if they have strong territorial organizations and committed activists (Cyr 2012; Tavits 2013). Building a strong territorial organization, however, is no easy task. It requires significant time and work, as the party must recruit members, establish local offices, and train local organizers to do this work; develop institutions for internal decision making and conflict resolution; and procure financing for basic party infrastructure, transportation, and salaries, often through small dues and donations. These processes are slow and depend on volunteer labor. Organization-building also reduces elite nimbleness and flexibility. Large rank-and-file memberships are likely to demand internally democratic procedures that prolong party decision making, and to insist on candidates and programs that alienate sectors of the electorate. For all these reasons, new parties that invest in organization typically make slow electoral progress, at best.

Office-seeking elites thus only have a strong electoral incentive to invest in organization if they cannot win office by quicker, easier, or more vote-maximizing means. Two such means are (1) the use of the state (i.e., public money, infrastructure, personnel) for electoral purposes (Hale 2006) and (2) mass media appeals (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). Consequently, only when office-seekers lack access to state and media do they have a strong electoral incentive to invest in party organization.

State, Media, and Incentives for Organization-Building

In many developing countries, politicians in office have opportunities to use the state as a “substitute” for party organization (Hale 2006). Such politicians can siphon public money to finance their campaigns, deploy government employees (e.g., hospital workers, army members) as campaigners, recruit candidates from government agencies, and use public buildings as campaign offices. Investing in party organization takes longer, requires more fundraising, and imposes tighter constraints on elite nimbleness and
flexibility. Thus, it is often electorally rational for elites in office to forego party-building and use state resources to win elections (Hale 2006). An extended period in the opposition, then, may actually serve as a blessing in disguise for party-builders. In the opposition, office-seekers cannot use the state for electoral purposes. Effectively, they lack access to a major party substitute that has hindered party-building in numerous developing countries.

Importantly, though, in recent decades, office-seekers in the opposition often have not needed to invest in parties in order to obtain a mass following. Given the extensive reach of television and radio in most countries today, media-savvy political entrepreneurs can win major elections (including presidential elections) through mass media appeals, with little or no party organization behind them. They can appeal to millions of voters instantaneously, autonomously, and without the need for canvassing. Consequently, the rise of broadcast media has reduced elite incentives for party-building and weakened or prevented the emergence of strong parties in many present-day polities (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007: 156–157). Brazilian ex-president Fernando Henrique Cardoso memorably observed in the late 1980s that for office-seekers, “a TV channel is worth more than a party” (quoted in Mainwaring 1999: 150).

Yet, where large segments of the opposition lack access to mass media, the only new opposition parties capable of achieving electoral success are those that build strong organizations. In many electoral authoritarian regimes today, restrictions on freedom of the press deprive new opposition parties of media access. Such parties must invest heavily in territorial organization if they wish to contend for national power.

Mobilizing Structures and the Means for Organization-Building

Elites who have incentives to invest in organization must also have the means to build strong organizations. Access to civil society feeder organizations, or “mobilizing structures” (Tarrow 1998: ch. 8), significantly reduces the costs of organization-building by supplying new parties with readymade activist networks, trained elites and cadres, and physical infrastructure (e.g., offices, phones, computers). Historically, most strong party organizations have been built on trade unions, social movements, local church associations, guerrilla armies, and other organizational platforms (see, e.g., Kitschelt 1989; Kalyvas 1996; LeBas 2011).3

3 In some cases, the state apparatus itself has served as an organizational platform for party-building. See Shefter (1994) on internally mobilized parties.
Adversity and Activist Commitment

A strong territorial organization, though necessary to cushion new parties against collapse, is not sufficient. To survive major setbacks, new parties, even those with territorial organization, require high levels of activist commitment. Conditions of low state and media access not only create incentives for organization-building, they also select for committed activists. As observed earlier, new parties with low state and media access tend to make slow electoral progress, at best. Under these circumstances, elites cannot offer selective incentives (e.g., public or party jobs) to most activists in the short term. The unavailability of selective incentives weeds out careerists and patronage-seekers. As a rule, only ideologically committed activists – Panebianco’s “believers” (1988: 26–30) – are willing to donate their time and labor to a new party with weak, uncertain electoral prospects (Shefter 1994; Greene 2007; Hanson 2010).

The Role of Authoritarianism

Low state and media access thus facilitates party-building by creating incentives for territorial organization and selection pressures for committed activists. Critically, new parties with low state and media access are more likely to be found in authoritarian contexts than democratic ones. In authoritarian systems, the ruling elite excludes the opposition from the state, either by not holding elections, or by holding elections...
but significantly handicapping the opposition through fraud, repression, excessive spending, and numerous other means. Many authoritarian regimes handicap opponents by limiting their access to media. Through selective licensing, bribes, sanctions, and outright ownership, they ensure that major media outlets support the regime and ignore or defame the opposition.

Authoritarian contexts can facilitate opposition party-building in two additional ways. First, although in extreme cases, authoritarian repression undermines party-building by deterring even the most committed regime opponents from organizing, in less extreme (and more typical) cases, such repression strengthens opposition selection pressures by weeding out activists unwilling to face the risk of violence or imprisonment. Second, the large-scale mobilization of believers, naturally, requires the existence of a higher cause. Antiauthoritarian movements tend to furnish such higher causes. They are struggles against political exclusion and, sometimes, state violence. Consequently, they stir passions, helping mobilize the founding generation of activists who are so vital to building resilient party organizations.

Under democracy, by definition, civil liberties such as freedom of speech, press, association, and protest are broadly protected, and in the contemporary era, opposition parties have access to broadcast media. Consequently, new opposition parties under democracy are, on average, more capable than their antiauthoritarian counterparts of quickly penetrating the state. In many important respects, this ease of opposition access to state and media is desirable, but it weakens the incentives and selection pressures that are critical for party-building.

THE ARGUMENT AT WORK: NEW LEFT PARTY
SURVIVAL AND COLLAPSE IN BRAZIL, MEXICO,
AND ARGENTINA

The rest of the chapter illustrates the above argument through a comparison of three Latin American new left parties: Brazil’s PT (est. 1980), Mexico’s PRD (est. 1989), and Argentina’s FREPASO (est. 1994). These parties share several analytically relevant features. Not only were they born on the political left during the same general period, they emerged in opposition to their governments’ neoliberal economic policies. Throughout

4 For more on these hybrid, “competitive authoritarian” regimes, see Levitsky and Way (2010).
their formative periods, they had limited access to state resources and strong ties to nationally organized mobilizing structures. Finally, they all suffered early electoral crises. The PT experienced a major letdown in its first election; the PRD suffered crushing defeats in its first two national elections; and FREPASO had a disastrous election in 2001. Yet, while the PT and PRD survived and took root, FREPASO disintegrated. The case studies below provide evidence that, paradoxically, the PT and PRD weathered their crises because of their origins under authoritarian rule. Deprived of access to mass media, both parties initially invested in organization and, when crisis struck, were equipped to survive. In contrast, FREPASO’s founders began their party-building project under democracy, with access to independent mass media. Consequently, they did not invest in organization and were not equipped to survive.

The PT in Brazil

Brazil’s PT was established in 1980 and spent its first half-decade as a leading opponent of Brazil’s military regime (1964–1985). Its founders came from the civil society organizations leading Brazil’s prodemocracy struggle at the grassroots level: the autonomous labor movement, or “new unionism”, in collaboration with the Catholic and Marxist left.

PT Organization-Building: State, Media, and Mobilizing Structures

During its first decade of existence, the PT had virtually no access to state resources or private finance. In a country with a federal government, over twenty state governments, and over 4,000 municipal governments, the PT, on creation, did not hold a single executive post. Not until 1989 did the PT occupy its first major executive position, the mayoralty of São Paulo. Annual party revenue was below US$ 200,000 until 1986 and $1.1 million until the mid-1990s (Ribeiro 2010: 111). Such meager patronage and financial resources were grossly insufficient to grease the wheels of a major party machine, especially in a country of Brazil’s size.

The early PT also lacked access to mass media. During the years of Brazil’s military dictatorship, television ownership and access increased substantially, and control of popular local and regional TV stations became essential for congressional and subnational political success. Brazil’s military presidents systematically awarded broadcasting concessions to local and regional bosses on political grounds, in implicit

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1 Adjusted for 2010 inflation levels.
exchange for progovernment media coverage, “creating the new phenomenon of electronic [clientelism]” (Porto 2003: 294). This pattern, which harmed the new unionism and PT during the late military period, continued after the 1985 transition to civilian rule under presidents José Sarney (1985–1990) and Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–1992), who were both opponents of the PT. During Sarney’s term, the distribution of local television and radio licenses on political grounds “reached a new level” (Porto 2012: 63), and through Collor’s abbreviated tenure, “political favoritism” remained “the only criterion” for awarding broadcasting concessions.6

Throughout the PT’s gestation period and formative years, a single network – *Globo* – held a monopoly in television news and systematically omitted, distorted, and manipulated its political coverage in order to weaken and defame the left-wing opposition (Porto 2012). *Globo*’s most flagrant breach of journalistic neutrality occurred in 1989, when the network’s flagship news program, *Jornal Nacional*, heavily edited presidential debate segments in order to improve the image of right-wing candidate, Fernando Collor, and portray the PT’s leader, Lula da Silva, as radical and dangerous. In 1993, Lula identified *Globo*’s media monopoly as a central impediment to full democratization in Brazil (*Beyond Citizen Kane*).

Out of power and off the airwaves, the early PT depended almost exclusively on grassroots activism for electoral gain – a reality not lost on early PT organizers.7 While low access to material resources and media made organization-building electorally necessary, the PT’s ties to civil society made such organization-building possible. The early PT built an extensive party infrastructure by tapping into three main feeder groups: new unions, the Catholic left, and the Marxist left. New unions not only supplied the PT’s top leaders but also provided the PT with more cadres, activists, members, and office locales than any other civil society feeder organization (Keck 1992: 77–79). The Catholic left, however, also played a vital role in early PT organization-building. With the rise of the new unionism in the late 1970s, Catholic base-level communities became heavily involved in the autonomous labor struggle and, later, the PT. The Catholic left’s strength in rural and peripheral urban areas, where the new unionism was generally weak, extended the early PT’s organizational reach (Keck 1992: 78–79). Finally, many elites and cadres from

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6 Quoted in BBC documentary, *Beyond Citizen Kane*.
7 See Van Dyck (2014b: chapter 2).
Brazil’s three leading Marxist parties\(^8\) defected to join the PT instead of the larger, more established, center-left Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), and the PT also absorbed a group of more radical Marxist organizations such as the ‘Trotskyist Workers’ Faction (Secco 2011: 47–49; Keck 1992: 79–81).

During the 1980s, the PT established an extensive organizational presence in several areas of Brazil, particularly the urban, industrialized Southeast and South and several rural states (e.g., Acre, Pará). In 1980 and 1981, PT membership and formal branch presence skyrocketed and, thereafter, expanded steadily. By 1989, the PT had 625,000 members (Keck 1992: 110) and formal branches in nearly half of Brazil’s municipalities (Ribeiro 2010: 24). By the mid-1990s, PT membership approached 1 million (Ribeiro 2010: 244).

**Selection Effects and Activist Commitment**

PT founders describe the organization-building of the 1980s as an extremely difficult undertaking requiring immense effort.\(^9\) The difficulty stemmed primarily from the need to recruit and register hundreds of thousands of party members in hundreds of municipalities, and to train an army of activists to do this organizing work. Organizers worked without pay and, in some exceptional cases, under threat of repression.\(^10\) Such conditions, together with the early PT’s electoral marginality, shaped the profile of the party’s early joiners. By and large, those who joined the early PT did so out of a commitment to the party’s cause, platform, and participatory ethos.

**Surviving Crisis in 1982**

The PT’s strong organization and committed activists fortified it amid early electoral crisis. In the 1982 municipal, state, and congressional elections, the PT suffered a major letdown. The party had entered the electoral season with optimism due to the “great energy of struggle”\(^11\) and unexpectedly large rally audiences during the PT’s 1982 campaigns (Keck 1992: 141–144; Bom 2008: 96). Most activists believed that Lula

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\(^8\) Namely, Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB – Brazilian Communist Party), Partido Comunista do Brasil (PcdoB – Communist Party of Brazil), Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (MR-8 – October 8 Revolutionary Movement).

\(^9\) See, for example, Bom (2008: 90). Also see Van Dyck (2014b: ch. 2).

\(^10\) Anti-left violence in the late 1970s and 1980s affected agricultural workers primarily (Petit 1996: 142), and Marxist activists and industrial workers secondarily. Several new unionists were killed by local authorities, including Manoel Fiel Filho in 1976 and two strikers in Leme, São Paulo in the mid-1980s.

\(^11\) Author’s interview with Antônio Donato, May 4, 2010.
would win the São Paulo governorship, the most important of the offices contested (Bom 2008: 96). Lula placed a distant fourth, though, and in a country with over 4,000 municipalities, the PT won only two small mayoralities. In Brazil’s congress, the PT received a paltry 3.5 percent of the seats. Keck (1992: 149, 152–153, 156) calls the 1982 results a “profound shock and disappointment to the PT,” which “the PT experienced as a severe defeat,” and after which “deep disappointment and a kind of collective depression” set in.

Nevertheless, the PT quickly rebounded at the base level. In intra-party dialogues after the election, party leaders assessed that the 1982 campaigns had distanced the party from its civil society roots. The party thus initiated a “return to the base” and a renewed emphasis on “social action” (Keck 1992: 197). With no elected offices to occupy, top party leaders, including Lula, rededicated themselves to the new unionism. In 1983, they founded the umbrella new union confederation, the Unified Workers’ Central (CUT), beginning a successful effort to expand the autonomous labor movement. The PT’s renewed focus on social action came to involve other civil society actors as well, particularly landless workers. On the strength of the PT’s grassroots leadership (Secco 2011: 113), Brazil’s 1983–1984 movement for direct elections (Diretas já) became the largest mass mobilization in the country’s history.

The PT performed unexpectedly well in the mayoral elections of November 1985. The party ran campaigns in nearly every state capital, and PT candidates reported breakout performances across the country. The PT won the mayoralty of Fortaleza (then Brazil’s fifth largest city), and unlike in 1982, PT candidates finished second or third in a number of other major municipal contests, including São Paulo’s. In part, the PT’s performance reflected its new civil society ties, developed since 1982. In addition, though, the PT had begun to solidify a distinctive party brand. The PT’s boycott of the January 1985 presidential election – following the Brazilian Congress’s rejection, months earlier, of the amendment for direct elections – had consolidated its image as a party of principle, less willing to compromise for short-term political gain than the PMDB (Secco 2011: 119). This helped the PT attract and cement Brazil’s left-wing vote. By the second half of the 1980s, the PT dominated the left side of Brazil’s electoral spectrum.12

The PT’s evolution from the late 1980s to the 2010s is well known and widely studied. In 1989, Lula da Silva burst onto the national political scene and almost won the presidential election, significantly raising the PT’s national profile. In 1994 and 1998, though, Lula suffered successive presidential defeats, largely because the PT ran too far to the ideological extreme, as “niche parties” often do (Greene, Chapter 6, this volume; Hunter 2010). As in 1982, these setbacks (especially Lula’s 1994 loss) dashed party members’ and supporters’ expectations. Nevertheless, the PT – as it had done before – survived to “play another day.” In fact, in contrast to the early 1980s, the PT of the 1990s, even as it lost repeated presidential elections, never ran a serious risk of collapse. Below the presidential level, the PT made steady electoral gains. After winning only two mayoralities in 1982, the PT won 36 in 1988, 54 in 1992, 115 in 1996, and 187 in 2000 (Hunter 2010: 202). In 1989, the PT won the São Paulo mayoralty, one of Brazil’s most important executive posts after the presidency. In 1990, the PT crossed the 10 percent threshold in the lower house of congress and continued to gain in 1994 and 1998 (see Figure 5.2). In 1994, the PT won its first two governorships (Espírito Santo, Brasília), and in 1998, it won three (Acre, Mato Grosso do Sul, Rio Grande do Sul). In short, while Lula was losing presidential elections, the PT was steadily growing and becoming institutionalized as a major national party.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the PT became Brazil’s most successful party. At the national level, the party finally “adapted,” embracing macroeconomic orthodoxy and modernizing its campaign tactics (Samuels 2004; Hunter 2010). These adaptations paved the way for Lula’s 2002 presidential victory and enabled the PT to follow Lula’s 2002 victory with repeat victories in 2006, 2010, and 2014. Between 1994 and 2014, the PT regularly won 10–20 percent in the lower house of congress, and in 2014, it captured four governorships.

What is critical, however, is that the PT survived the formative years. The 1980s tested the PT’s durability, as the party suffered a major electoral setback in 1982 and operated on the margins of national electoral politics for nearly a decade. The PT survived this difficult period and could subsequently take root because of its durable party organization, built under adverse, authoritarian conditions.


Nogueira-Budny (2013) advances a related argument about the PT, which he refers to as the “no pain, no gain” thesis. Nogueira-Budny shows that the PT’s formative experiences
The PRD in Mexico

Mexico’s (PRD) is another case of an opposition party that formed under adverse, authoritarian circumstances, built a strong organization with committed activists, survived early electoral crisis, and took root. The PRD was born in 1989 under the authoritarian rule of the hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). It grew out of a mass movement to elect Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, leftist PRI defector, president of Mexico in 1988. After Carlos Salinas of the PRI defeated Cárdenas in an election widely viewed as fraudulent, the left-wing movement that had backed Cárdenas strengthened, and from it, the PRD emerged in 1989.

**PRD Organization-Building: State, Media, and Mobilizing Structures**

The PRD was born with no governors and only a handful of mayors in small, poor municipalities. It did not win a single governorship or major mayoralty until the late 1990s, in contrast to the conservative National Action Party (PAN), the PRI’s other main opposition party. The PRD also lacked major sources of private funding and thus suffered from chronic “financial shortages” and a lack of “resources to invest in electoral campaigns … and professional cadres” (Borjas 2003: 297). At the local level, early PRD candidates often financed and ran their own campaigns. As under bureaucratic authoritarian rule ultimately contributed to its success by facilitating its adaptation from Marxism-Leninism to market liberalism.

![Figure 5.2. PT vote share in lower house of Congress.](image-url)
late as the mid-1990s, the national PRD organization could only afford fifty permanent staff (Bruhn 1997: 189). One party activist and scholar summarized that as late as the mid-1990s, “there was nothing [i.e., no patronage] to distribute.”

In contrast, the PRI had vast financial resources (public and private) at its disposal, which it used to outspend the PRD by overwhelming margins during the first half of the 1990s (Greene 2008: 107–114). The Salinas administration (1988–1994) also created and implemented a major poverty relief program, PRONASOL (National Solidarity Program), which targeted electorally strategic municipalities across Mexico and helped the PRI co-opt or divide many local electorates and civil society organizations previously sympathetic to Cárdenas (Molinar and Weldon 1994).

The early PRD also lacked access to mass media. Lawson (2002) has shown that until the late 1990s, the owners of Mexico’s major media conglomerates, in exchange for preferential treatment by the government, systematically set the public agenda in accordance with PRI priorities, omitted politically disadvantageous developments from news programming, favorably covered the PRI, and cast PRI opponents in a negative light. At the center of Mexico’s PRI-dominated media establishment lay the **Televisa** conglomerate (est. 1973). By the 1990s, **Televisa**, much like Brazil’s **Globo** network, monopolized Mexico’s television market, commanding over 80 percent of Mexico’s television audience (Lawson 2002: 29). In a telling quotation from the mid-1990s, **Televisa’s** chief executive, Emilio Azcarragá Jr., called himself a “soldier of the PRI” and described his network as “part of the governmental system” (quoted in Lawson 2002: 30).

Unsurprisingly, the early PRD suffered from systematic media hostility and blacklisting. During the 1988 presidential campaign, Cárdenas received under nine hours of airtime on **Televisa’s** primetime cable news program, **24 Horas** (**24 Hours**), while Salinas received over 140 hours (Rodríguez 2010: 190). In the lead-up to the 1994 presidential campaign, PRI candidate Ernest Zedillo received forty-six times more airtime than Cárdenas and the PAN’s Diego Fernández de Cevallos combined (Bruhn 1997: 280). According to several analyses, unfair media treatment significantly harmed the PRD in both the 1991 congressional election and 1994 general election (Gómez 1997: 16; Borjas 2003: 430–431, 513–515, 571, 587).

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15 Author’s interview with Adriana Borjas, July 11, 2011.
The PRD thus relied on grassroots volunteers to reach voters, and like Brazil’s PT, the PRD was able to build a strong activist-based organization because of its ties to civil society. The early PRD drew primarily from three groups: the traditional Marxist left, the “social” (or “extra-parliamentary”) left, and ex-PRI networks. In late 1988, Mexico’s then largest left party, the Socialist Mexican Party (PMS), dissolved itself so that the PRD could adopt its registry and absorb its members and offices. Thus, on creation, the PRD inherited several thousand ex-PMS leaders and cadres, a disproportionate number of whom would rise to positions of national leadership or win major office (Martínez 2005). The social left, however, provided the PRD with a much larger number of early members and activists. This sector encompassed organizations and movements that eschewed electoral politics, detested the PRI, had “iron-willed activist bases,” and sometimes engaged in “warlike (including armed) forms of struggle” (Martínez 2005: 53, 55). Among social left actors, rural unions in the southern states and urban popular movements in Mexico City (particularly the Neighborhood Assembly, or Asamblea de Barrios) played the most important role in supplying PRD members and establishing local PRD branches (Rodríguez 2010: 257–258; Bruhn 1998: 225). Finally, large networks of defecting PRI cadres and activists fed into the PRD, particularly in Michoacán and Tabasco, the home states (respectively) of the PRD’s most prominent PRI defector, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and fellow PRI defector and future PRD presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).17

PRD organizational-building quickly resulted in a high degree of territorial implantation. Within a few years of its birth, the PRD had established a strong presence in several parts of Mexico, especially Mexico City and several of the country’s poor southern states (e.g., Michoacán, Guerrero, Tabasco). By the middle of the 1990s, the PRD had over 1 million members and offices in over half of Mexico’s more than 2,000 municipalities (Borjas 2003: 371).

Selection Effects and Activist Commitment
Joining the early PRD typically required a willingness to do party work without a salary or the prospect of a likely election victory or government

The Paradox of Adversity

job. In one member’s words, the early PRD “couldn’t be a business.”18 As late as the second half of the 1990s, activism also required, in many cases, a willingness to put one’s own safety at risk (Rodríguez 2010: 284). In fact, in proportional terms, the number of left-wing activists killed in Mexico during this period – estimates range from 250 to 60019 – exceeded the number killed in Brazil under military rule (Rodríguez 2010: 297). The realities of political work without pay, dim electoral prospects, and threats of violence discouraged careerists from joining the early PRD. For the most part, only individuals with sincere ideological commitments to the PRD joined as active members during the party’s formative years.

Surviving Crisis in 1991 and 1994

Organizational strength and activist commitment fortified the PRD amid early electoral crisis. The PRD suffered major setbacks in its first two national elections, the 1991 congressional election and 1994 general election. Before the 1991 election, PRD “leaders and activists shared … a certainty” that the PRD would win “broad representation” in the legislature despite the resource asymmetries, media bias, and repression of the campaign (Borjas 2003: 388). The party performed abysmally, though, unexpectedly losing seats and finishing a distant third with only 8 percent of the vote. The result dashed member expectations and threatened the party’s survival. Some prominent social left leaders, in protest of the PRI’s hostile campaign tactics, advocated that the PRD withdraw from the electoral sphere. Cárdenas would later describe 1991 as the most challenging episode in the PRD’s history: “The objective of the ’91 mid-terms was the real, effective liquidation of the PRD … [T]his was the PRD’s hardest electoral moment” (quoted in Borjas 2003, vol. II: 408).

In fact, however, the 1991 crisis galvanized much of the PRD base. The PRD’s twenty-year commemorative volume states: “1991 represented for the PRD its first political setback but at the same time the consolidation of an iron-willed base” (González et al. 2010: 66). When asked why the PRD did not fold after the 1991 elections, one founding activist from the radical left replied that the PRI had murdered scores of activists and committed widespread fraud; thus, the PRI’s victory was seen as illegitimate and did not discourage most party activists. Another founder with social left origins expressed a similar sentiment, stating that the PRI’s hostility

18 Author’s interview with Silvia Gómez, July 4, 2011.

only motivated the base – that most PRD activists did not even entertain the thought of giving up after 1991. The gubernatorial election results of 1992 and 1993 demonstrated the PRD’s base-level resilience, as the party received large (though not winning) vote shares in Michoacán, Guerrero, Nayarit, Veracruz, and Zacatecas (Borjas 2003: 490–491).

In the 1994 presidential election, the PRD suffered a second major setback. Contesting the presidency for a second time, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas ran too far to the left of the median voter (Greene 2007) and lost in a landslide, receiving just 17 percent of the vote and finishing a distant third. The lopsidedness of the outcome was not anticipated; in fact, many PRD members had believed that Cárdenas would prevail (González et al. 2010: 66; Borjas 2003: 507). Moreover, the prospect of a Cárdenas presidential victory in 1994 – and, with it, both the completion of Mexico’s transition to democracy and a historic victory for the Mexican left – had animated PRD members since the party’s founding. That Cárdenas not only lost, but received under one-fifth of the vote, deflated hopes, led to anger, disillusionment, and recriminations, and damaged the party’s credibility and self-conception as a serious contender.

As in 1991, though, most PRD activists – more radical, on average, than the party moderates who blamed Cárdenas’s defeat on ideological intransigence – remained unfazed. They viewed the 1994 result, like the 1991 result, as an illegitimate outcome based on fraud, overwhelming financial advantage, media corruption, and brutal repression. The defeat, in their view, was merely another lost battle in a longer-term war with the PRI. Many PRD members had been killed during the 1994 campaign, and one PRD founder, when asked by the author what enabled the PRD to rebound from the 1994 presidential defeat, responded, “We were at war.” Thus, as had occurred after the 1991 congressional election, PRD activist networks regrouped, directing their energies toward upcoming subnational campaigns and, in Tabasco, postelection civil resistance (Borjas 2003, vol. II: 94, 599–600).

In sum, then, despite suffering electoral crises in both 1991 and 1994, the PRD survived and pressed forward. In a 2010 interview, party founder and early federal deputy, Carlos Navarrete, eloquently summarized the PRD’s early spirit of resistance:

[PRD president Carlos Salinas’s 1988–1994 term] was a very hard time … They were times of persecution, of hundreds of dead activists. They were times in which

20 Author’s interview with Paco Saucedo, July 9, 2011.
21 Author’s interview with Salvador Nava, July 9, 2011.
they stole elections from us, covering the width and depth of the country. They were times in which the government besieged us. They were times of resistance, fundamentally, of not giving up, of maintaining and raising our flags. (Navarrete 2010: 265; emphasis not in the original)

**The Institutionalization of the PRD**

The PRD’s development during the second half of the 1990s and first two decades of the twentieth century is well known and widely studied. During the 1990s and first two decades of the twenty-first century, the PRD became institutionalized as Mexico’s third major party. In 2006 and 2012, the PRD’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) came close to winning the presidency. Between 1994 and 2015, the PRD elected at least 10 percent of Mexico’s congress members in every election (see Figure 5.3), with a higher average vote share than Brazil’s PT. The PRD also won over a dozen governorships between 1998 and 2015, and it held the Mexico City mayoralty – perhaps the second most important elected office in the country – continuously from 1997 to 2015.

The PRD’s success since the mid-1990s stems from several factors, including media liberalization (Lawson 2002), the PRD’s co-optation and absorption of regional PRI elites and their machines, and the party’s increased use of paid activists such as the Sun Brigades (Van Dyck 2014b: chapter 4). Above all, though, the PRD’s gains reflect the

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**FIGURE 5.3.** PRD vote share in lower house of Congress.
solidification and expansion of its brand. Since 2000, most Mexicans have been able to locate the PRD party symbol, an Aztec Sun, on the left-right spectrum,\(^\text{23}\) and PRD partisans in the electorate have guaranteed the PRD a solid electoral floor nationally.

For the PRD, collapse remains unlikely despite the recent defections of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the party’s founder, and AMLO, the party’s 2006 and 2012 presidential candidate.\(^\text{24}\) The PRD’s “hardcore vote” (\textit{voto duro}) virtually guarantees a high baseline level of access to office and the associated patronage. It also guarantees access to financial resources; the landmark electoral reforms of 1996, which tied generous public financing to parties’ performance in congressional elections, have filled PRD coffers since the late 1990s. Additionally, the PRD’s committed activist base remains an important source of electoral capacity and resilience.

The PRD has paid an electoral price for catering to its base (Greene 2007; Chapter 6, this volume). In particular, the presidency continues to elude the PRD, and in this sense, the PRD has failed where Brazil’s PT has succeeded. In fact, many scholars treat the PRD as a failure or underachiever, citing the party’s repeated presidential defeats and internal dysfunction (Bruhn 1998; Greene 2007; Chapter 6, this volume; Mossige 2013). Yet, like the PT, the PRD has established itself as a perennial contender for national power, something very few new parties in Latin America, left or otherwise, have achieved. In short, the achievements of the PRD have received far too little emphasis. Viewed in comparative perspective, the PRD is an unmistakable case of successful party-building.

In explaining this success, what is critical is that the PRD survived its formative period. The Salinas years, and especially the PRD’s defeats in 1991 and 1994, seriously tested the party’s durability. Like Brazil’s PT, the PRD ultimately took root because it managed to survive early crisis, and like the PT, the PRD drew its early strength and resilience from a committed, organized activist base forged in the crucible of authoritarianism.


\(^{24}\) AMLO left the PRD shortly after his loss in the 2012 presidential election. He now leads the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), a left party in Mexico that became officially registered in 2014. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas left the PRD in late 2014, citing a range of unresolved differences with the current party leadership.
FREPASO in Argentina

In contrast to the PT and PRD, Argentina’s FREPASO is a case of an opposition party that formed under democratic, relatively advantageous conditions, did not invest in organization, and collapsed after suffering an early electoral crisis. FREPASO’s origins lie in a 1990 schism within Argentina’s then governing party, the historically populist Peronist Party (PJ). In 1989, president Carlos Menem (PJ) reneged on populist campaign promises and implemented extensive neoliberal reforms, provoking opposition from a bloc of left-leaning PJ congressmen. Eight of these congressmen, known as the “Group of Eight” and led by Carlos “Chacho” Álvarez, defected from the PJ in mid-1990. The initial electoral vehicles that they created failed, but political opportunity struck after the congressional elections of October 1993. In November 1993, Raúl Alfonsín, the leader of the PJ’s main opposition party, the Radical Civil Union (UCR), signed the Olivos Pact, which pledged UCR support for a controversial constitutional amendment allowing Menem to run for reelection in 1995. The UCR’s perceived “subordination” to Menem’s institutional tampering provoked a backlash among its own middle-class constituency (Jozami 2004: 56, 19). Álvarez and the Group of Eight, now leading the center-left party, the Big Front (FG), quickly became the public face of opposition to Menemismo and UCR complicity (Pazos and Camps 1995: 180, 215). In the April 1994 constituent assembly elections, the FG made an electoral breakthrough, winning 13 percent of the national vote, up almost 10 percentage points from the congressional election just months earlier (Abal Medina 2009: 368). This result marked the beginning of the FG’s meteoric, five-year path to national power. From the mid- to late 1990s, Álvarez and fellow FG elites forged a succession of increasingly centrist alliances, making anticorruption and ethics the centerpiece of their platform and backtracking on their original opposition to neoliberalism (Jozami 2004: 26–27, 123–139; Lupu 2016). In late 1994, the FG joined forces with center-right ex-governor of Mendoza province, José Octavio Bordón, and his new party, Open Politics for Social Integrity (PAIS), to create the center-left party FREPASO. In 1995, FREPASO’s Bordón/Álvarez ticket placed second in the presidential election, behind Menem, and FREPASO placed third in the congressional election, behind the PJ and UCR. In 1997, FREPASO moved further to the center by

25 FREPASO held an open primary to nominate its presidential candidate, and Bordón won a surprise victory largely due to his organizational base in Mendoza.
forming an electoral coalition with the UCR, the Alliance for Justice, Work, and Education. In 1997, the Alliance won control of the congress, and in 1999, the Alliance won both the congress and the presidency, with Fernando de la Rúa (UCR) and Chacho Álvarez (FREPASO) on the winning presidential ticket. In the span of five years, then, FG/FREPASO rose from electoral marginality to national power. How was this achieved?

**FREPASO’s Organizational Weakness: State, Media, and Mobilizing Structures**

Mass media, and especially television, were the “primary engine” of FG/FREPASO’s meteoric growth (Novaro and Palermo 1998: 117). Party leaders made “efficient and intense use” of mass media, constantly holding televised press conferences, participating in interviews with broadcast outlets and major newspapers, and making TV-tailored “political displays” (Novaro and Palermo 1998: 117, 150–151). Chacho Álvarez, in particular, was a “media phenomenon” who “charmed the media with [his] irreverence toward the traditional rituals of politics, [his] ease of manner and speed” (Abal Medina 2009: 369). According to one ex-FG member, Álvarez’s political genius lay in his ability to anticipate public opinion shifts, and in his recognition of “the importance of media, above all television” (quoted in Pazos and Camps 1995: 263). Álvarez’s media charisma crystallized in late 1993, when he became the most visible antagonist of Menemismo and corruption during the Olivos negotiations and backlash (Pazos and Camps 1995: 180, 215). From late 1993 onward, Álvarez “began to be required by the press” due to his charisma, eloquent critiques, and rapid responses to events (Pazos and Camps 1995: 179).

Álvarez and the FREPASO leadership considered media a highly desirable, even necessary, alternative to organization-building. Throughout the 1990s, FREPASO’s founders were engaged in a near-permanent campaign, competing in national elections in 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, and 1999. The recruitment and training of activists and development of a nationwide organizational infrastructure would have consumed energy and resources while important national elections loomed (Novaro and Palermo 1998: 116). As one party member succinctly put it: “There was no time to build an organization.”

Chacho Álvarez provided the same assessment in a 1997 interview, stating that he and fellow party leaders

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26 Author’s interview with Héctor Mazzei, July 12, 2012.
could not devote energy to organization-building with major elections constantly on the horizon.\footnote{Álvarez’s interview with Steven Levitsky, July 29, 1997.}

FREPASO leaders also recognized that, if a party organization was established, internal decision-making procedures would slow elite response time. FREPASO prized the capacity for rapid response. A party observer recalled that Álvarez wanted to “move nimbly.”\footnote{Author’s interview with Aldo Gallotti, August 3, 2012.} Contemporary politics required speed, he said, as journalists often appeared with a microphone and FREPASO had to respond. According to an ex-FREPASO member, party leaders “always fought to have freedom of action, hoping not to be tied down by institutional procedures when making decisions … [T]he party’s nucleus … considered Álvarez’s speed of response an important requirement” (Abal Medina 2009: 360).

Moreover, a large activist base would have denied FREPASO leaders, especially Álvarez, ideological and tactical flexibility. Through the 1990s, Álvarez and other party elites had ties to left-wing mobilizing structures with national reach, including several radical left parties and, most importantly, Argentina’s two largest anti-Menemist union confederations, the Argentine Workers’ Central (est. 1991) and the Teachers’ Confederation of the Argentina Republic. FREPASO’s leaders, however, consciously refrained from incorporating these groups into the party and using them as a platform for organization-building (Van Dyck 2014b: ch. 7). A party organization composed of such groups might have selected unelectable candidates or pressured FREPASO candidates to refuse centrist alliances and take extreme policy positions. Such decisions would have satisfied the base but alienated the middle-class voters that FREPASO was successfully targeting. By keeping the organized left at arm’s length, Álvarez and fellow elites could make the most electorally rational decisions on program, coalitions, and party candidacies without consulting members (Pazos and Camps: 263–264). In the words of one former member, the “hypercentralization” of decision making within FREPASO allowed for “extreme operational flexibility.”\footnote{Author’s interview with Edgardo Mocca, August 5, 2012. See also Abal Medina (2009: 361).}

In short, FREPASO leaders recognized that by relying on mass media and restricting decision-making power to a tiny elite (often to Álvarez alone), FREPASO could quickly and easily attain national visibility, adapt nimbly to circumstances, and make electorally optimal ideological and tactical choices. Organization-building, by consuming scarce time and
resources and placing procedural, ideological, and tactical constraints on elite decision making, would have prevented FREPASO from rapidly progressing in perpetually imminent elections. For these reasons, after 1991, “[t]he idea of building a solid and stable party organization was never in [the] minds” of “Álvarez and his followers” (Abal Medina 2009: 360).

Thus, by the end of the 1990s, FREPASO dominated the left side of the Argentine political spectrum, but it had a vanishingly small party apparatus and a “practically non-existent” base-level organization (Abal Medina 2009: 364). The party never employed more than five staff (Abal Medina 2009: 363). In 1998, party members Novaro and Palermo noted that “the FG and then FREPASO seem to have an almost ghostlike existence outside of the media arena” (1998: 151). One campaign strategist for the Alliance described FREPASO simply: “There was no organization.”

**Crisis and Collapse in 2001**

Like the PT and PRD, FREPASO faced an early electoral crisis. Upon entering office in December 1999, the Alliance government inherited a rapidly contracting economy and a ballooning national debt, and its orthodox policies did not stem the tide. The Alliance’s problems magnified in late 2000 when a senate corruption scandal erupted, implicating several Alliance senators and two Alliance ministers (including one from FREPASO). Through September of 2000, Álvarez maintained public support for De la Rúa but privately urged him to fire the two implicated ministers. After de la Rúa refused, Álvarez tendered his resignation in October 2000. Following Álvarez’s resignation, Argentina’s economic and fiscal crises worsened, and in the 2001 midterm congressional elections, voters harshly punished the Alliance. The PJ retook the lower house, and the Alliance’s vote share plummeted to 23 percent, down nearly half from 44 percent in 1999. For FREPASO, the outcome was especially dire. Whereas the UCR lost slightly more than a quarter of its congressional seats (from eighty-nine to sixty-five), FREPASO lost over half of its seats (from thirty-seven to fifteen). Two months later, amid riots triggered by a national bank freeze, President De la Rúa resigned, and the PJ returned to the presidency in late December 2001.

In 2001, then, both the UCR and FREPASO suffered electoral crisis. An important difference between the two parties, however, was that the UCR had a national grassroots organization, while FREPASO did not. On the strength of its territorial organization, the UCR survived,
albeit in diminished form, and to this day remains a major player in Argentine politics, currently holding more than 20 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and more than 15 percent of the seats in the senate. In contrast, FREPASO, at the time of the 2001 crisis, was nothing but a small elite network, entirely dependent on voter identification with its brand. Thus, according to a former member, “when FREPASO lost its image, it lost everything.”31 After the 2001 election, FREPASO’s members defected in order to preserve their careers. Most returned to the PJ, to smaller left parties, or to PJ satellite parties. In the words of one ex-FREPASO member, “each [member] returned home.”32 Summarizing FREPASO’s collapse, an Alliance campaign consultant invoked a common metaphor: “Building an image through the media is like building with mud.”33

CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the critical importance of organization for successful party-building. The PT and PRD built strong grassroots

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31 Author’s interview with Héctor Mazzei, July 12, 2012.
32 Author’s interview with Héctor Mazzei, July 12, 2012.
33 Author’s interview with Francisco de Santibañes, August 2, 2012.
organizations composed of committed activists, and this enabled them to rebound from early crisis and eventually take root. FREPASO lacked a grassroots organization and thus collapsed amid early crisis.

One might object that FREPASO’s electoral crisis occurred in a radically different (and significantly worse) context than the PT and PRD crises. The PT and PRD, after all, were mere opposition parties when they experienced crushing electoral defeats, while FREPASO was a governing party whose national brand failed due to the party’s disastrous performance in office. One could argue that this contextual difference mattered more for the parties’ divergent trajectories than the internal, organizational differences emphasized in this chapter. For a few reasons, this argument is unpersuasive – or at least should not be overstated. First, it is not obvious, in theory, that new parties in the opposition should have an easier time regrouping from electoral crisis than new governing parties. To be sure, new parties that fail in government face a difficult test, as they must rebuild their brands and maintain party morale despite internal perceptions that a short-term return to power is impossible. However, crushing electoral defeats suffered by new parties in the opposition bring great challenges of their own, dashing member expectations, curbing activist enthusiasm, and generating a sense of internal pessimism or hopelessness. The PT and PRD are cases in point. Moreover, even if we assume that FREPASO’s electoral crisis was more severe than the PT’s and PRD’s, it does not follow that FREPASO’s subsequent collapse was inevitable; only that it was more likely, other things equal. This leaves room for the possibility that, if FREPASO had invested in territorial organization and an activist base before 1999–2001, it still would have been able to survive, in some form, after its disastrous performance in government and the crushing 2001 election. Finally, and relatedly, the electoral resilience of Argentina’s UCR at the congressional and subnational levels since the 2001 election provides some evidence that governing parties can survive the electoral fallout from a disastrous performance if they are territorially organized. As discussed above, the UCR was FREPASO’s senior partner in the coalition that governed Argentina from 1999 to 2001, and like FREPASO, the UCR suffered massive losses in the 2001 legislative election. In contrast to FREPASO, however, the UCR survived – albeit in diminished form – and, at present (2015), remains a major player in Argentine politics, currently holding more than 20 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and more than 15 percent of the seats in the senate.
Given this chapter’s focus on organizational strength, one might ask what role brand development, which is largely independent of organization, played in the cases of party-building examined. In his chapter for this volume, Lupu highlights the role of brand dilution in explaining the divergent trajectories of the PT and FREPASO. On his account, FREPASO diluted its brand by moving sharply to the right on economic policy during the second half of the 1990s. For Argentine voters, this made FREPASO both internally inconsistent over time and, by the late 1990s, almost indistinct from other Argentine parties, particularly the UCR. In contrast, the PT, even as it moderated in the 2000s, preserved more of its left-wing brand than FREPASO did, largely due to its social policy initiatives. The PT also, unlike FREPASO, remained well to the left of its main competitors (e.g., the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy [PSDB]). Lupu (2016) argues that new parties with diluted brands, like FREPASO, depend exclusively on strong government performance. It follows, on his account, that the Argentine economic crisis and corruption scandal of the late 1990s and early 2000s – over which FREPASO presided, in coalition with the UCR – put the nail in FREPASO’s coffin.

This chapter emphasizes, however, that parties do not exist in voters’ minds alone (see Levitsky, Loxton, and Van Dyck, Chapter 1, this volume). Indeed, FREPASO’s collapse illustrates how fragile new parties are if they exist in voters’ minds alone. The formative period of party development is critical precisely because most parties, early on, are still in the process – like FREPASO was in the 1990s – of crafting, expanding, and solidifying their brands. The PT and PRD, early in their development, did not have strong brands. They also lacked governing responsibilities. Both had disastrous first elections, reflecting considerable brand weakness. The PT and PRD survived these crises because they existed on the ground, not just in voters’ minds. By the time crisis struck, they had established strong activist networks in much of the national territory, and these activists stuck it out.

Committed activists, of course, are not uniformly positive in their effects. As Greene aptly observes in Chapter 6, this volume, parties with organizations composed of ideologues, or “niche parties,” often eschew vote-maximizing behavior long after birth, as the PT did throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and the PRD did throughout the 1990s and 2000s. But committed activists are also critical for early survival, and thus are best seen as a mixed blessing for new parties.

Importantly, the antiauthoritarian struggles that generate strong organizations and committed activists do not last forever; the antiauthoritarian
struggles in Brazil and Mexico provide cases in point. How do parties provide incentives to activists and cadres once these struggles end? As Chapter 1, this volume, suggests, access to the state may be critical for the longer-term survival of political parties. Even if state resources do not produce strong party organizations, they may help sustain party organizations or even expand them. Party leaders can use state patronage to attract new activists and retain the services of old ones. Bruhn (Chapter 8, this volume) provides evidence that generous public financing helped the PRD sustain its large party organization after the formative period, from the late 1990s onward. There is also evidence that both the PT and PRD have used public monies to expand their organizational reach after the formative period (Samuels and Zucco, Chapter 12, this volume; Van Dyck 2014a).

In short, the conditions for party survival change over time. As parties exit the formative period, access to patronage and public finance often become critical, greasing the wheels of party machines and facilitating long-term consolidation. But in the beginning, adversity is critical.