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Analytical Essay

Party Systems in Latin America after the Third Wave: A Critical Re-assessment

Miguel Carreras

Abstract: This essay calls for a more nuanced analysis of the evolution of party systems in Latin America. I contend that the general impression that party systems are collapsing in Latin America and that processes of partisan and electoral dealignment are affecting most countries in the region is incorrect. I also argue that the process of moderation and de-ideologization of the main political parties in many Latin American party systems often facilitates processes of democratic consolidation. Finally, I discuss the positive impact recent transformations of Latin American party systems had on political representation in the region, by showing that formerly excluded groups – especially indigenous groups – have been integrated into the political system.

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Keywords: Latin America, party system change, dealignment, realignment, democratization, political representation

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Introduction

A cursory glance at recent books and academic articles on party system change in Latin America would lead to the conclusion that parties are no longer effective mechanisms of political representation and that once solid party systems are now in shambles. This critical review takes issue with this alarmist conclusion. The main contention of this essay is that a more nuanced analysis of the evolution of party systems is necessary. On the one hand, party systems are not collapsing everywhere in the region. On the other hand, some aspects of party system evolution in the region have contributed to the consolidation of fragile democracies.

The mainstream view of the literature on parties and party systems in Latin America is extremely negative and pessimistic. At least since the seminal book published by Mainwaring and Scully (1995), the study of party systems in Latin America has focused on their weakness and their lack of institutionalization. Many books have been written about the collapse or the debilitation of the party system in countries like Perú (Tanaka 1998), Venezuela (Hawkins 2010), or Colombia (Gutiérrez Sanín 2007). This grim view of party system evolution in Latin America is reflected in recent PhD dissertations that study this issue. Seawright's thesis deals with "party system collapse" in South America (Seawright 2006). Hawkins (2003) and Lupu (2011) analyze the breakdown of parties and party systems in Latin America.

Hawkins (2003: 2) argues that Latin American countries have recently experienced a dual trend: "the breakdown of traditional party systems and the rise of antipartyism and charismatic movements". In the same vein, Van Cott (2005: 4) argues that "parties and party systems in the region have suffered a marked deterioration in the last two decades" and Hagopian (1998) contends that Latin American countries have experienced a process of party system dealignment in the post-democratization period. According to Roberts and Wibbels (1999: 575) "the instability of party systems has become a source of puzzlement and concern." In sum, the crisis of party systems in Latin America is perceived as a general phenomenon that affects the democratic consolidation of all the countries in the region.

This analytical essay argues that these generalizations and these sweeping statements need to be nuanced. Although the books, dissertations, and articles aforementioned often cast their arguments in general terms, they tend to study always the same cases (Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, and Ecuador). Although the "crisis of representation" in the Andean countries – and Venezuela – is undeniable (Mainwaring, Bejarano, and León-gómez 2006), the extrapolation from these cases to the whole region is often unwarranted. It is essential to distinguish between cases of party system dealignment, in which voters lose confidence in all the parties and the party

system collapses; and cases of party system realignment, in which the emergence of new political cleavages leads to a long-term shift in the preferences of the voters. In both cases, party system volatility may be very high but these are two completely different political phenomena that should not be lumped together. The distinction has not been clearly made by scholars interested in Latin American party systems.

This paper will proceed as follows. The first part of this essay takes issue with the argument that all party systems in Latin America have experienced a process of dealignment, by showing that the evolution of party systems is often better described as a process of realignment. The second section of the paper contends that the evolution of party systems in many Latin American countries go in a direction that favors the consolidation of fragile democracies. The final section similarly argues that the recent changes in Latin American party systems often have positive effects for democratic representation.

Dealignment or Realignment?

The evolution of party identification among citizens may take three different avenues. First, the attachment of voters to parties may simply remain stable across time. Stability in societal levels of party identification is more the exception than the rule, however, both in Latin America and elsewhere since political and socioeconomic changes are often associated with new patterns of party attachments among citizens. Second, there may be a partisan dealignment when citizens lose confidence in political parties in general, and start voting for anti-systemic parties. Finally, a process of party realignment may occur. Party system realignment implies a durable change in the structure of the party system. It involves a shift in support between parties in the system often occurring at the time of a critical election (Key 1955). The formation of new parties and the decay of old parties should not be automatically considered as evidence of dealignment. The creation of new parties to reflect new interests is part of the process of realignment (Sundquist 1983).

I contend that the extent to which Latin American party systems have gone through a dealignment process (as opposed to a realignment process) has been greatly exaggerated. Hagopian (1998: 126) argues that in Latin America “partisan and electoral dealignment has proceeded farther and faster in more countries than has realignment.” Hagopian uses mostly survey data to show that trust in political parties is in decline in Latin America. It makes no doubts that citizens’ satisfaction with political parties in all the countries of the region is low. A 2004 report from the United Nations De-

velopment Program showed that Latin American countries are suffering from a severe crisis of confidence (UNDP 2004). This legitimacy crisis affects all political institutions, but the most mistrusted institution is undoubtedly political parties. Data from the Latinobarómetro surveys between 1995 and 2006 show that political parties are the least trusted institution among a long list of political and private institutions in Latin America. Only 19 percent of respondents express support for political parties in the region (Lagos 2008). The widespread legitimacy crisis has been explained in terms of the gap between citizens' expectations in Latin American countries and actual performance by the governments in the region (Hagopian 2005). However, this is not only the case in Latin America. A similar legitimacy crisis exists in most advanced and industrialized democracies (Pharr and Putnam 2000). Traditional political parties in Europe and the United States are rapidly losing their partisans, which Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) associate with the modernization process. However, party systems in Europe have remained fairly stable in the last thirty years, especially when they are compared to the party systems that have collapsed in the Andean region of Latin America. I argue that observing the actual behavior of citizens in the ballot box may be more useful to understand party system dynamics than imputing partisan dealignment from survey data.

One of the best ways to assess whether party systems are going through a process of dealignment or realignment is to observe the evolution of volatility scores in the region. An electoral realignment should lead to a temporary increase in electoral volatility, followed by stabilization. An electoral dealignment should be reflected in high levels of volatility that are resilient. Roberts and Wibbels (1999) rightly show that electoral volatility is high in Latin America. But this high overall level hides significant differences among Latin American countries. As Hawkins (2003: 17) points out "certain periods and certain countries have experienced much higher volatility than others." In the period 1980-2000 some Latin American countries, such as Costa Rica, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina, had volatility scores that remained close to the ones experienced in Western European countries. Uruguay and Honduras had volatility scores that were even lower. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the evolution of volatility scores in that period shows some peaks during specific historical circumstances which are followed by stabilization (Hawkins 2003). This is more consistent with the realignment than with the dealignment scenario. In any case, it seems that the argument that Latin American countries are going through a process of partisan and electoral dealignment is based on evidence from the most extreme cases, and hides significant differences across the region.

Interestingly, there are also notable differences in volatility scores within each country. Roberts and Wibbels (1999) find interesting differences in the patterns of volatility in presidential and legislative elections. In legislative elections, as party age increases volatility scores tend to decrease. However, in presidential elections party age does not reduce the risk of high electoral volatility. Hence, legislative elections appear to be less threatened by high levels of electoral volatility than presidential elections when the party system is institutionalized. The last general elections in Colombia are a good example of these divergent electoral dynamics. The two traditional parties – Partido Liberal and Partido Conservador – combined obtained 37.5 percent of the votes in the legislative elections, but only 10.5 percent of the votes in the first round of the presidential election. Arguably, we are assisting to a process of electoral dealignment only in presidential elections. But traditional parties still command over large apparatuses that allow them to maintain roots in society. Mainwaring and Zoco's thesis about the high levels of volatility in new democracies focuses on the pernicious role of the mass media for parties that emerged after the emergence of mass communications. According to these scholars, parties do not need to rely on large organizations to get elected (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). The evidence presented in Roberts and Wibbels (1999) suggests that this is only true for presidential elections.

The dealignment thesis only focuses on the demand side, i.e. the confidence citizens have in political parties. But scholars subscribing to this view ignore the capacity of traditional political parties to react and adapt when they are threatened by anti-systemic candidates or parties. For instance, Collor de Mello alienated himself from established political parties by his constant anti-establishment discourse. As soon as they were able to react, all political parties coalesced to get rid of this dangerous outsider (Weyland 1993). Hence, even if party identification decreases in some Latin American countries, traditional political parties may still have enough resources to avoid a complete dealignment of the party system. The re-emergence of APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana) in Perú after the fall of Fujimori also shows the resistance of traditional parties to electoral dealignment.

The case of Costa Rica is a good example of a country that went through a process of realignment, rather than dealignment. According to Sundquist (1983: 14), a process of realignment involves more than just a redistribution of party support. A realignment also reflects “a change in the structure of the party conflict and hence the establishment of a new line of partisan cleavage on a different axis within the electorate.” In other words, a realignment is always associated with a redefinition of the issues that divide

the parties which in turn leads to a redistribution in support for the parties in the electorate. This is exactly what happened in Costa Rica. The party system in Costa Rica during the second half of the twentieth century was characterized by a duopoly formed by the center-left PLN (Partido de Liberación Nacional) and the center-right PUSC (Partido de Unidad Social Cristiana).¹ Until the mid-1970s, the PLN promoted a welfare system and statist economic policies. The economic crisis of the mid-1970s through the early 1990s pushed the PLN to adopt a more centrist platform. By the late 1980s, under the influence of global neoliberal pressures, the PLN had adopted a clear free-market orientation. Hence, the ideological differences between the two main political parties blurred, leaving a space open for a new political party on the left of the political spectrum. This space was rapidly occupied by a new party created by a new party (Partido Acción Ciudadana) formed by former PLN members dissatisfied with the neoliberal direction the party had taken (Booth 2007). This party obtained good scores in the last three presidential elections, capturing the votes of the more leftist section of the PLN electorate. Since the center-right of the political spectrum is now occupied by the PLN, the PUSC soon lost its *raison d'être* and crumbled. In sum, despite the sense of malaise that now affects the Costa Rican party system (Seligson 2002), the voters have responded by depositing their confidence in third parties, rather than by losing confidence in the party system as a whole. The situation of the party system in Costa Rica in the last fifteen years is more aptly described as a realignment than as a de-alignment (Booth 2007).

The realignment that took place in Costa Rica is not an isolated case. The realignment of partisan preferences is a natural reaction of the voters when one of the parties abandons its historical positions and its campaign promises. In the words of Aguilar and Pacek, if parties

shift their traditional positions dramatically enough to hurt their main base of support, one possible consequence is the emergence of new political forces in competition for those supporters (Aguilar and Pacek 2000: 1012).

The realignment in some Latin American countries in the 1990s is linked to the neoliberal turn in many parties traditionally associated with statist, populist, and redistributive policies. The rise to electoral success of the Alianza Frente Grande in Argentina and the Frente Amplio in Uruguay in the 1990s

1 PUSC was created in 1983 but a coalition of smaller conservative parties always opposed the PLN in general elections since the first democratic elections in 1953, thereby creating a *de facto* two-party system.

can be explained in terms of the economic policies adopted by the Peronist Party in Argentina and the Colorado Party in Uruguay.

In sum, it is highly problematic to make sweeping statements about the collapse of party systems in Latin America, assuming that most countries have gone through processes of partisan dealignment. This simplistic characterization hides significant differences across the region. While in some countries citizens have responded to the low legitimacy of the political system and the bad economic performance by “exiting” the system and becoming dealigned, in other Latin American countries citizens have responded by “voicing” their discontent and shifting their political allegiances, thereby producing a “realignment” of the party system.²

Party System Evolution and Democratization

The evolution of party systems in Latin America often went hand in hand with the consolidation of fragile democracies in the region. Many party systems in the region became more plural and allowed former armed groups to join the political arena as political parties with the same rights as established political organizations. Party systems became less polarized in the last two decades which goes a long way in explaining why the fragile Latin American democracies were able to consolidate.

In many Latin American countries, the democratic transition was accompanied by a process of moderation and de-ideologization of the main parties in the system. The transition period created a new set of opportunities and constraints that rewarded the more moderate parties and pushed the violent social movements engaged in underground activities during the military regimes to the sidelines. One of the clearest examples is the evolution of the party system in Chile in the period 1980–2010. Whereas the Chilean Communist Party (PCC – Partido Comunista de Chile) advocated “mass popular rebellion” to topple the military regime, the Socialist Party rapidly realized that violent opposition to the regime was an illusion and initiated a process of moderation that eventually led to a *rapprochement* with the Christian Democrats. The centerpiece of the ideological change that took place in the Socialist Party was the re-evaluation of the importance of having a democratic regime. Democracy started to be conceived “not as an instrument for the attainment of other ends but as an intrinsic value of the socialist project” (Roberts 1995: 501).

2 The “exit, voice, and loyalty” model of political behavior comes from Hirschman (1970).

The strategic alliance between the Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats soon led to the creation of a coalition of center-left political parties in Chile, known as the *Concertación*. This center-left coalition has competed in all democratic elections since the return to democratic rule in 1989. The parties in the right of the political spectrum also coalesced which transformed the Chilean party system into a *de facto* two-party system. The alliance of the Socialist Party with the parties in the Center led to the abandonment of the most ambitious projects of socioeconomic transformation in favor of more gradual reforms that accept the basic tenets of the neoliberal policies adopted by the military regime. The parties that composed the *Concertación* were wary that radical reforms and popular mobilization would trigger a reaction from the military and the political Right, thereby destabilizing the democratic transition. Hence, they chose to channel grassroots participation into electoral mobilization, and they advocated more gradual and moderate reforms (Roberts 1995). All in all, the moderation of the Chilean political parties and the de-ideologization of the party system was an essential component of the re-democratization process. A more polarized party system with highly ideological parties advocating a radical socioeconomic transformation could have led to a disruption of the transition by the military. The responsible behavior of the Chilean political parties was also essential in the process of consolidation of democracy in the two decades after the transition. In spite of its numerous electoral successes, the *Concertación* projected an image of moderation and respected democratic procedures. In return, political parties in the Right proved to be a critical but constructive opposition in Congress and supported many bills initiated by the government (Angell 2007).

A parallel process of moderation of the main leftist party occurred in Brazil. The Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) participated in the 1989 and 1993 presidential elections with a socialist platform advocating a radical transformation of the Brazilian economy. The ideological distinctiveness of the PT in the 1980s and early 1990s was based on both dogmatic and strategic reasons. On the one hand, many PT leaders were intellectuals that believed in the possibility of a fundamental transformation of the Brazilian society and wanted voters to follow them in this process of change. On the other hand, the PT's ideological radicalism made strategic sense because it allowed the party to secure the loyalty of a core group of supporters. However, in the mid-1990s it became clear that large sectors of the Brazilian population had accepted the basic tenets of the neoliberal plan of the Cardoso administration and preferred moderate changes within the system rather than a fundamental transformation of the system. Recognizing that the electorate was fragmented and not very ideological, the PT moved to the

center programmatically and adopted a more pragmatic platform, advocating popular policies within the confines of the existing socioeconomic order – e.g. conditional cash transfers to the poor. This ideological moderation was essential for the PT presidential candidate (Lula) to arrive to power in 2002 after three unsuccessful bids. The PT moderation was not plainly an electoral façade, since Lula governed in a pragmatic way without advocating a fundamental transformation of the Brazilian socioeconomic structure (Hunter 2007, 2010).

The moderation of the main leftist parties in Chile and Brazil is significant because it leads to a moderation of the party system as a whole, which facilitates the consolidation of fragile democracies. In most Latin American countries, elections no longer represent a fundamental choice between two radically opposed political options. Instead, they oppose a series of catch-all parties that seek to pragmatically influence the direction of policy-making without intending to fundamentally alter the economic and sociopolitical order. For instance, the rightist coalition arrived to power in Chile after more than twenty years in the opposition with a moderate message and accepting the main welfare policies adopted by the *Concertación* (Moreno 2011). Brazil and Chile are not isolated cases in what respects the ideological moderation of the party system. The same transformation occurred in countries like Uruguay where the Frente Amplio moderated its discourse and gained power as a social-democratic party, and in some Central American countries – Nicaragua and El Salvador – where the political movements that fought civil wars in the 1980s now compete within the system as political parties in the center-left of the political spectrum.

The link between party system evolution and democratization is even clearer in Mexico. In an oft-cited statement at a conference in Mexico City in 1990, the Peruvian writer Vargas Llosa captured the essence of the authoritarian one-party regime when he argued that Mexico

has all of the characteristics of dictatorship: the perpetuation, not of one person, but of an irremovable party, a party that allows sufficient space for criticism, provided such criticism serves to maintain the appearance of a democratic party, but which suppresses by all means, including the worst, whatever criticism may threaten its perpetuation of power (cited in Reding 1991: 257).

In fact, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) controlled the different levers of governmental power for more than five decades, including the presidency, governorships, and both houses of Congress. During this period, the PRI and the government combined to commit electoral fraud with impunity (Craig and Cornelius 1995). In sum, the autocratic regime in Mexico was based on the quasi uncontested hegemony of the ruling party: the

PRI. The democratic transition in Mexico was spearheaded by an active effort by the opposition parties to participate in the electoral arena, taking advantage of the cracks in the system engineered by the PRI. According to Loaeza (2002: 294), the Mexican transition “can be understood as the dismantling of the hegemony of one party closely linked with the state, and the gradual formation of a multiparty system.” Explaining the combination of factors that made this transition possible is beyond the scope of this essay.³ What matters here is that political parties were not passive actors that indirectly benefited from the democratization process. On the contrary, the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional – National Action Party) and the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática – Party of the Democratic Revolution) were instrumental in weakening the hegemonic party by mobilizing disgruntled voters at the regional and local level. The PAN is a conservative party founded in 1939 by societal groups associated with the Catholic Church. It played the role of loyal opposition during most of the twentieth century participating in elections without real chances of success given that the PRI enjoyed widespread control of the state apparatus.

This changed in the 1980s when sectors within the PAN associated with industrial groups and regional economic elites strongly repudiated the governmental decision to expropriate the banks. This *neopanismo* chose a strategy of “electoral insurrection” and mobilized resources to try to compete on equal footing with the PRI at the municipal level, especially in the north (Loaeza 1999; Middlebrook 2002). This strategy gradually paid off and the PAN was victorious in many municipal elections in the 1980s. The success rate of the PRI in municipal elections dropped from almost 100 percent in the early 1980s to 70 percent in the mid-1990s (De Remes 2000). According to Hiskey and Canache (2005), the rapid growth of the PAN at the local level was due to a diffusion effect. After the party won its first municipal elections, PAN candidates in neighboring municipalities gained strength and mobilizational capacity, and learned how to behave strategically during the electoral process. After this breakthrough at the local level, the PAN won many gubernatorial elections in the 1990s (Baja California, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Aguascalientes), paving the way for the PAN victory in the 2000 presidential elections.

The rise to prominence of the PRD followed a different path. The PRD emerged as a faction of the PRI following an inter-elite dispute concerning the exclusion of some political leaders from nomination to political office. The PRD also represented a reaction of the more leftists sectors of

3 For a rich and detailed analysis of the demise of the autocratic regime in Mexico, see Magaloni (2006).

the PRI against the neoliberal direction the economic policies were taking under the government of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988). The new party rapidly became a formidable electoral machine in Mexico City and some Southern states. The candidate of the PRD in the 1988 presidential elections (Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas) “gave voters a way to move from passive detachment, or simple dislike of the system, to active detachment, or acting against it” (Bruhn 1996: 16). Despite widespread accusations of fraud, Cárdenas came closer than any other presidential candidate in the past to oust the PRI by obtaining an outstanding 31 percent of the vote according to official results. The PRD capitalized on a moment of frailty of the one-party regime due to the severe economic crisis and the increasing disenchantment of the electorate with the corruption of party officials. The emergence of the PRD in that critical moment provided the first serious blow to the autocratic regime, and paved the way for the electoral successes of the PRD and the PAN in the next decade.⁴

The emergence of these two parties sparked a strategic response on the part of the voters. Citizens that were dissatisfied with the one-party regime and wanted a change in the direction of democratization finally had credible alternatives in the party system. During the 1990s, anti-PRI voters alternated between the PAN and the PRD supporting the party that appeared most likely to defeat the PRI, in spite of the clear ideological differences existing between the two parties (Domínguez 1999; Klesner 2005). The bottom line is that the democratization process in Mexico is indistinguishable from the evolution of the party system. The strategic decisions of opposition party leaders and opposition voters greatly contributed to the demise of the autocratic one-party regime in Mexico.

Party System Change and Representation

The study of the link between party system change and political representation in Latin America is largely neglected. In one of the rare works that study this link, Roberts (2002) argues that the deepening of social inequalities in the region has gone hand in hand with an erosion of class cleavages in the political arena. According to this important contribution, the transition from ISI (Import Substitution Industrialization) to neoliberalism led to a decline of mass-based, labor-mobilizing parties, thereby producing a crisis of

4 The opposition would probably have increased no matter what in the 1988 presidential elections, but the regime would not have been so affected if the opposition vote had been scattered across several smaller parties or if disenfranchised voters had preferred to abstain because of the lack of a credible alternative.

political representation in Latin America. Although neoliberalism may have had a negative impact on political representation, other recent changes in Latin American party systems have, on the contrary, permitted a better representation of groups that were left out of the political arena.

Political representation is a highly contested concept, which is difficult to pin down empirically (Pitkin 1967). Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin (1999: 7) argue that “a government that pursues the interest of a majority at a cost to the minority, is representative.” Their argument is correct only insofar as those who are in the minority today can be part of the majority tomorrow. If some ascriptive characteristic condemns a group to be in the minority all the time, the political system cannot be said to represent this group. That was the situation of some social groups in Latin America until recently.

The most important among these groups are certainly the indigenous communities. In many countries in the Andean region or in Central America, indigenous populations represent a substantial part of the population. In other countries, such as Chile or Colombia, they constitute an underrepresented minority. Birnir (2001, 2007) suggests that ethnic fractionalization leads to stable patterns of electoral competition that provide representation for the different ethnic groups. But this expectation is based on the assumption that the party system is organized along ethnic lines and that there are parties that establish long-lasting ties with indigenous constituencies. However, in Latin America party systems have not traditionally divided along ethnic lines and no major ethnic party was created until the 1990s. Successful parties have tended to be catch-all parties that draw support from large constituencies spanning across class and ethnic cleavages (Dix 1989; Roberts 2002). Although these catch-all parties are supposed to represent all social and ethnic groups, Madrid (2005) points out that indigenous populations have lagged behind the rest of the population according to different indicators of socioeconomic status, such as income, education, and life expectancy. Thus, in all likelihood, indigenous populations do not feel well represented by traditional catch-all parties. Moreover, whenever indigenous groups entered into alliances with traditional catch-all or leftist parties they were “manipulated, betrayed, and exploited” (Van Cott 2005: 212). In fact, indigenous movements tended to be junior partners in these coalitions. They lacked decision-making power and were unable to place indigenous leaders in top positions in the organization. Traditional parties required that indigenous politicians became primarily loyal to the party rather than to their indigenous constituencies. Moreover, the parties often dropped indigenous issues from the agenda after the elections (Van Cott 2005).

The evolution of party systems in Latin America in the last twenty years has clearly been beneficial for the representation of these historically exclud-

ed groups. As made evident in the important contribution of Van Cott (2005), the emergence of ethnic parties in Latin America allowed for a better representation of indigenous communities in at least three important ways. First, the new ethnic parties increased the policy-making power of the indigenous groups. In the last twenty years, ethnic parties were able to push for new laws or constitutional reforms that promote their cultural rights and uphold certain aspects of the traditional justice systems in indigenous areas. Second, the existence of successful ethnic parties provides “symbolic representation” (Pitkin 1967: chapter 5) to indigenous communities. For instance, after being ignored by the official ideology of the Bolivian state which only recognized the Bolivian nation, indigenous communities now have one of their own as chief of state. In addition to any policy benefits that ethnic parties provide to their communities, this symbolic integration of formerly excluded groups to the national community also contributes to enhancing the representation of indigenous groups. Finally, ethnic parties also increase representation indirectly because the success of these new parties “has increased the propensity of traditional parties to reach out to indigenous voters and to incorporate their demands” (Van Cott 2005: 232).

Another trait of party system evolution in the last ten years in Latin America is the rise of leftist parties in many countries. The rise of the left is often presented as a threat to the stability of Latin American democracies. Some scholars differentiate between a moderate, social-democratic left in countries like Brazil and Uruguay; and a more radical and anti-democratic left in countries like Venezuela or Ecuador (Castañeda 2006; Petkoff 2005). The mainstream view is that the rise of the left represents a threat to democratic stability in many countries. Although it is clear that some of the leftist populist presidents that are now in power in Latin America endanger democratic institutions, the rise of the left has also led to an increase in democratic representation in the region. In the words of Bruhn,

left parties tend to specialize in demands like the redistribution of wealth, social services, and attention to basic needs for the marginalized and often unorganized poor. [...] If the ideological spectrum narrows, democratic competition may cease to offer meaningful choices, in the long run alienating citizens and leaving social problems unchanneled and unaddressed until they reach crisis proportions and cause the regime to crack in unexpected ways (Bruhn 1996: 9).

In fact, the arrival to power of the populist left in Latin America results from the lack of representation of large sectors of society in countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, or Bolivia during the second half of the twentieth century. For instance, the Venezuelan political regime from 1958 to 1998 can be considered a “partiararchy” because it manifested “a high degree of party

dominance in every relevant sphere—nominations, voting procedures, legislative behavior, penetration of civil society, and influence over the media” (Coppedge 1994: 15). Moreover, the two main parties (AD (Acción Democrática – Democratic Action) and COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente – Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee)) tended to act as catch-all parties and to propose very similar centrist programs after the Punto Fijo agreement in 1958. The combination of these two factors effectively meant that large sectors of the population (i.e. the working classes and the informal sectors in urban areas) enjoyed no real political representation. The rise of a leftist populist president (Hugo Chávez) allowed these formerly excluded groups to be re-integrated in the polity. The same is true of other leftist and populist parties in Latin America.

In sum, although the rise of leftist parties, indigenous movements, and populist outsiders in the last twenty years in the region has posed – and continues to pose – a serious threat for democratic stability and institutional consolidation, it has also led to more representative party systems that are able to integrate groups that have traditionally been politically excluded (rural sectors, informal workers, and indigenous communities) to the political community.

Concluding Remarks

This essay has presented the evolution of party systems in Latin America in a fairly positive light. First, I have shown that the general impression derived from recent works that party systems are collapsing in Latin America and that processes of dealignment are at work in most countries in the region is incorrect. Although Latin American party systems look very different today that they did twenty years ago, the evolution is more accurately described in many countries (e.g. Argentina, Costa Rica, and Uruguay) as a process of realignment than as a process of dealignment. In response to new political cleavages, voters have switched their partisan preferences but they have not completely lost confidence on all the parties in the system. Second, I argue that the changes in the party systems often facilitated the processes of democratic consolidation in many Latin American countries. In Mexico, the strategic behavior of opposition parties capitalized on a moment of fragility of the ruling party to accelerate the democratic transition. In many countries that suffered authoritarian regimes, the moderation of the main parties in the system after the transition was essential to allow the consolidation of the democratic regimes. Finally, this essay discussed the positive impact the recent transformations of Latin American party systems have on political

representation in the region, by showing that formerly excluded groups – especially indigenous groups – have been integrated into the political system.

The goal, however, is not to replace a very stylized negative view of party system change in Latin America by an equally simplistic – but positive – view of the evolution of party systems in the region. The objective of this paper is to call attention to the fact that the view that party systems in Latin America are all collapsing is incorrect. The demise of established party systems in Venezuela and in the Andean countries has – understandably – attracted a lot of attention and a number of important contributions to the literature on parties and party systems in Latin America. Nonetheless, the focus on these extreme cases has led to exaggerated conclusions about the instability and the lack of institutionalization of party systems in the region. In sum, this paper is a call for a necessary re-equilibration. The expansion of the horizon of cases we study should lead to the formulation of many new and puzzling research questions in the comparative study of party systems in Latin America. The most urgent task is to explain the factors that lead certain countries down a realignment path, while other countries suffer a more serious dealignment crisis.

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Sistemas de partidos en América Latina después de la tercera ola de democratización: un análisis crítico

Resumen: Este ensayo propone un análisis más matizado de la evolución de los sistemas de partidos en América latina. En primer lugar, argumento que la impresión generalizada de que los sistemas de partidos están colapsando en toda la región es incorrecta. En segundo lugar, propongo que algunos cambios en los sistemas de partidos (por ejemplo la moderación estratégica de los partidos del sistema) muchas veces favorece procesos de consolidación democrática en la región. Finalmente, discuto el impacto positivo que tienen las recientes transformaciones en los sistemas de partidos latinoamericanos para la representación política de grupos previamente excluidos en la región.

Palabras clave: América latina, sistema de partidos, desalineación partidaria, realineación partidaria, democratización, representación política