Constructing Democratic Governance

Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1990s—
Themes and Issues

edited by
Jorge I. Domínguez
and
Abraham F. Lowenthal
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Conservative Party Politics in Latin America: Patterns of Electoral Mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s
Edward L. Gibson

In the 1980s a new and unexpected phenomenon swept much of Latin America: conservative electoral activism. This was a development that few could have predicted from past historical experience, especially in countries that had recently emerged from authoritarian rule. The expectation of most observers had been conservative electoral estrangement rather than activism. The literature on democratization thus tended to address the likely political action of the Right as a potential problem of democratization, particularly where powerful socioeconomic and political actors, incapable of effectively organizing themselves for the electoral struggle, might exercise the many options for “exit” available to them in nondemocratic realms. As such, the Right was seen as a force to be “pacified” or “neutralized” while democratic agendas became consolidated. This view was nicely captured in a quote from one of the most influential scholarly texts on democratization in the early 1980s:

Put in a nutshell, parties of the Right-Center and Right must be “helped” to do well, and parties of the Left-Center and Left should not win by an overwhelming majority. . . . The problem is especially acute for those partisan forces representing the interests of prepared classes, privileged professionals, and ensnared institutions. . . . Unless their party or parties can muster enough votes to stay in the game, they are likely to desert the electoral process in favor of antidemocratic conspiracy and destabilization.

The worst fears of these political observers were not borne out by events. In fact, the view of conservatism as an estranged or at best passive player in electoral politics was contradicted by events. In the 1980s the Right did well in the electoral game without much “help.” It won power outright through the electoral process in Brazil, Uruguay, Ecuador, and El Salvador. It also had a major impact on the political process, shaping the terms of the political debate as well as the policymaking process, in Peru, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina. Furthermore, toward the end of the crisis-ridden 1980s, conservative leaders and their core constituencies emerged as major coalition partners of governments embarked upon free market reforms, even in countries where they had lost the elections to populist or nonconservative governments. Democracy in the 1980s, therefore, revealed surprising capacities for conservative electoral mobilization. However, what is striking about this experience is that, just as this mobilization was effective, it also appears to have been institutionally ephemeral in a number of important cases. New coalitions between the state, conservative political leaders, and business groups have now emerged on the scene. In the process, the conservative party institutions that gained visibility in the 1980s have receded from view in the seemingly more governable democratic politics of the 1990s.

The experience of the previous decade of democratic politics thus raises a number of key questions: what conditions facilitate the emergence of conservative parties in the region? To what extent has the conservative electoral mobilization of the 1980s led to the institutionalization of participation by socioeconomic elites in democratic politics? What might all this indicate about the future relationship between the political action of social elites and democratic governance?

Democracy and the Right: From “Lost Decade” Mobilizations to Governing Coalitions

In rough terms, the political evolution of the Latin American Right since the start of the democratization wave of the 1970s and 1980s can be divided into two phases. The first of these can be labeled the “lost decade” mobilizations, which saw the rise of new mass-based movements advocating free market economic reform. This catalyzed new parties onto the political stage and made the Right an important player in electoral politics. Party politics thus became a central arena for both advancing the agendas of conservative movements and expanding its leadership and constituent base. The second phase of the political evolution of Latin American conservatism might be labeled the “governing coalition” phase. While still in its infancy, a number of trends seem already to have emerged from this phase. The first of these is the forging of new governing coalitions between the state and socioeconomic elites that have provided vital social support for the market reform process and have stabilized the civilian governments carrying out these reforms. These reforms have been followed by new sociopolitical arrangements highly favorable to socioeconomic elites. If, as Ruth and David Collier suggest, state-labor relations served as a “coalitional fulcrum” during previous crucial phases of Latin American political development, then it can be argued that, in this period of regime restruc-
turing, the coalitional fulcrum has shifted from state-labor relations to state-business relations.6

In terms of the political evolution of conservatism, the effect of this phase has been ironic. It has resulted in highly favorable political and economic conditions for the core socioeconomic constituencies of conserva-

5From the perspective of the state as an institution, however, the realignment of political coalitions in recent years has been as important as the emergence of new political parties. The former, by altering the distribution of power among existing political actors, has had a significant impact on the outcome of elections and the policies implemented by government. The latter, by introducing new players into the political arena, has opened up new avenues for political change and challenge.
access in the past. Conservative political leaders have always been oriented to the state by authoritarian means to achieve their ends. This has been especially true of the Morelos state, where the PRI has always maintained a strong political presence. The PRI has used its control of the state to maintain its political power and to silence potential opposition. The political party organization of the PRI has been an effective tool for maintaining control and suppressing opposition.

In Morelos, the PRI has used repressive measures to maintain its control. This has included the use of violence, intimidation, and propaganda. The party has also used its control of the state machinery to suppress opposition. The PRI has used its control of public services, such as water and electricity, to target its opponents. The party has also used its control of the media to limit the flow of information to the public. The PRI has used its control of the state to maintain its power and to silence potential opposition.

The PRI has also been effective in maintaining its control through the use of its political party organization. The PRI has a strong network of activists and members who are committed to the party's goals. The party has used its network of activists to maintain its control and to suppress opposition. The PRI has also used its network of activists to promote its policies and to suppress those of its opponents. The PRI has used its network of activists to maintain its power and to silence potential opposition.

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Conservative Party Politics in Latin America

The conservative political landscape in Latin America has been shaped by the interaction of various historical, cultural, and social factors. Many of the region's political parties are rooted in the 19th century, and their evolution has been marked by periods of stability and instability, often influenced by external factors such as economic conditions, international relations, and social movements.

Throughout the 20th century, the conservative parties in Latin America have undergone significant transformations. These changes have been driven by internal developments within the parties, as well as by external pressures such as economic globalization, the rise of new political ideologies, and the impact of international organizations and foreign aid.

In recent years, the conservative parties have faced challenges from both within and without. Internal divisions within the parties, as well as changes in political alignment and policy priorities, have contributed to their evolving role in the region's political landscape. Additionally, the impact of globalization and the rise of new political forces have further complicated the landscape, presenting both opportunities and threats to the conservative parties.

The challenge for the conservative parties in Latin America is to adapt to these changing circumstances while maintaining their core values and policies. This requires a balance between preserving traditional principles and embracing new ideas and strategies that can help them remain relevant and effective in the face of increasing competition from other political forces.

The future of the conservative parties in Latin America is uncertain, but it is clear that they will continue to play a significant role in the region's political dynamics. Their ability to respond effectively to the challenges they face will be critical to their ongoing success and influence.
Conservative Party Policies in Latin America

A powerful leftist movement demanding radical change, and economic and political crises, have placed governments in Latin America under pressure from reformers demanding political and economic reform. Two examples of these crises have been the cases of Argentina and Mexico.

In Argentina, the economic crisis of 1982 led to a military coup, which replaced civilian government with a military junta. The junta embarked on a program of economic liberalization and austerity measures, which included the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the devaluation of the currency. This program was supported by the US government, which saw it as a means to stabilize the economy and prevent Argentina from defaulting on its debt. However, this program also led to a deep economic recession and widespread unemployment.

In Mexico, the economic crisis of 1982 also led to a political crisis, with the overthrow of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI was replaced by a coalition of opposition parties, which promised economic liberalization and political reform. However, this coalition was unable to implement these promises, and the government was unable to control the economic crisis, which led to high inflation and unemployment. The government also faced opposition from the military, which had its own interests and was resistant to changes in the political system.

The election of a new PRI leader, Roberto Madrazo, in 1988, was seen as a move toward political stability and economic reform. However, thePRI's efforts to implement reform were met with resistance from the military and business interests, and the country continued to struggle with economic problems.

The election of a new president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, in 1988, was seen as a move toward political and economic reform. However, the government faced opposition from the military and business interests, and the country continued to struggle with economic problems.

The failure of the PRI to address the country's economic problems led to a decline in its popularity, and the PRI was eventually replaced by a coalition of opposition parties, which promised to implement economic liberalization and political reform. However, this coalition was unable to implement these promises, and the government was unable to control the economic crisis, which led to high inflation and unemployment. The government also faced opposition from the military, which had its own interests and was resistant to changes in the political system.

The election of a new president, Vicente Fox, in 2000, was seen as a move toward political stability and economic reform. However, the government faced opposition from the military and business interests, and the country continued to struggle with economic problems.

In conclusion, the case studies of Argentina and Mexico show that the attempt to implement political and economic reform is not easy, and that the military and business interests are often resistant to changes in the political system. The failures of the PRI and the political coalition in Mexico to address the country's economic problems led to a decline in their popularity, and the replacement of these governments by new leaders, who promised to implement economic liberalization and political reform. However, these promises were not realized, and the country continued to struggle with economic problems.
however, the incentives for sustained strategies of party opposition tend to be weak. The political rewards for engaging in electoral politics are generally lower than those available in non-electoral arenas. This is especially true for opposition parties that face the difficulty of winning elections and their allies in most Latin American regimes. The often scanty materialization of the opposition's legislative leadership in government is further diminished by the presence of a multiparty legislature. The opposition parties are often divided among themselves, with petty squabbles and intra-party conflicts reducing their ability to present a united front. This fragmentation and lack of discipline within the opposition can undermine its ability to effectively challenge the ruling party and obstruct its policies. The lack of a strong opposition leader or party can also exacerbate this problem, as the opposition parties may have difficulty in coming together to present a credible alternative to the ruling party. The electoral process itself can also be biased against the opposition parties, with the incumbent government享有 many advantages such as state resources, media support, and a dominant position in electoral institutions. Even when opposition parties do manage to form a majority, they may lack the resources, organization, and political skill to effectively govern and implement their policies. The opposition parties are often skeptical of the electoral process and the legitimacy of the ruling party, which can further undermine their ability to effectively challenge the government.
The primary victim of this process is the institutionalization of conservative party politics. As long as conservative parties remain merely part of a varied arsenal for pressure against the state, rather than as institutions permanently organized for the capture of power through elections, it is difficult to foresee their consolidation as shapers of the political process in Latin American democratic politics.

Conclusion: The Possible Futures of Conservative Political Organization

After almost two decades of democratization in Latin America, the institutional forms of upper-class representation are still very much in question. The early fears of upper-class subversion of democratic government have by and large not materialized, new and more favorable arrangements in the economic and political realm have emerged from the turbulent experiences of the 1980s and early 1990s. The property and the socially powerful today support democratic governments. However, their connection to democratic institutions continues to be tenuous.

As a possible scenario for the future of conservative political organization, the consolidation of existing conservative parties as influential and regular players in democratic politics should by now be ruled out. El Salvador’s ARENA has shown signs of moving in this direction. Its hold on power since 1989, reaffirmed by its comfortable victory in the presidential and local elections of 1994, has given it the opportunity to evolve beyond its pre-electoral status as an elite-based opposition movement. In Mexico the PAN has, after fits and starts, established itself as a major challenger to the PRI’s hegemony in key regions of the country. It is able to forge ties with national business, and build to a critical mass from incremental regional gains, it may challenge the PRI’s hold on national power. However, in most of the countries discussed here, the possibilities for such an institutionalization scenario seem more remote. Thus three other scenarios may be advanced as plausible futures for conservative political organizations.

The first scenario is merely a return to the time-tried pattern of state-centered pressure politics (relying on economic power, military power, or both). In this case, the current state-conservative coalitions will serve only as temporary marriages of convenience, leaving no lasting institutional legacy in the party realm, other than the erosion of the party institutions built in the 1980s.

However, things have changed in much of Latin America, and there are reasons to hope that the current disarticulation of conservative party politics does not merely represent a return to old historical patterns. The combined experiences of disastrous military rule and lost decade mobilizations have left their mark on the structure of politics and the incentives guiding conservative political action. Burned bridges with entrenched military allies, as well as the surprising effectiveness of the electoral routes chosen in the 1980s, may have rendered old conservative ways unfeasible or unattractive to political leaders and much of the business community. Conservatives jumped into the arenas of electoral politics and mass persuasion in the 1980s, and there may be powerful factors preventing easy exit. Thus, while the deinstitutionalization of conservative parties seems to be a widespread phenomenon, it might well be part of a transition to “something else” in the electoral realm rather than a return to past patterns of electoral marginalization.

Thus a second and more hopeful scenario for the consolidation of Latin American democracies might be termed the “conservatism of populism.” It would be a sequel of sorts to the ideological and programmatic “conservatism” of populist parties that shaped policymaking in the aftermath of the lost decade mobilizations. Where this leads to successful economic policies and favorable electoral dividends, it may help to bring about deeper changes at the institutional and coalitional levels. The “poppulist conservatism” scenario would involve (and in several cases has already involved) the absorption of conservatives into the leadership ranks of populist parties. More fundamentally, however, it would be driven by a shift in the social bases of these parties.

Changes in the region’s political economy, particularly the lessening of business-state dependence as developmentalist yields to new economic models, would lead to new patterns of upper-class political representation. In this scenario, the formerly “populist” parties could become the electoral carriers of conservatism—the modern guarantors of market stability with a ready-made popular base. Historic state-business ties would yield to more stable party-business ties. The ideological and pragmatic convergences that have brought populist leaders together with business groups today would thus lead to longer-lasting institutional unions.

In this scenario, the social base of populist parties would become increasingly transformed by the addition of upper- and upper-middle-class voters. At the interest group level, the support of business groups for populist parties would become solidified and increasingly open, making business a pivotal base of financial and political support and displacing the parties’ more traditional labor and middle sector constituencies. In effect, this development would constitute a core constituency shift for populist parties, rendering them effective advocates of upper-class political agendas while maintaining mass support for these agendas.

Trends in this direction are already visible in Argentina, where the Peronist party has succeeded in mobilizing important electoral support from upper-income voters and has deepened its ties with the large business community. This budding core constituency shift appears now to be prompting a leadership union, as important conservative party lead-
Conservative Party Politics in Latin America

The conservative party movement in Latin America has been a major player in the region's political landscape for many years. The movement has been characterized by a focus on economic liberalization, privatization, and the promotion of market-oriented policies. This has often been accompanied by a strong emphasis on maintaining social stability and reducing government intervention in the economy.

The conservative parties in Latin America have traditionally been associated with a pro-business and pro-free-market agenda. They have often been seen as advocates for economic growth and modernization, and they have sought to reduce the role of the state in the economy. This has led to a focus on tax cuts, deregulation, and privatization of state-owned enterprises.

In many cases, the conservative parties have been in power for extended periods, and they have been able to implement a range of policies that have had a significant impact on the region's economy. These policies have often been controversial, however, with their critics arguing that they have contributed to increased inequality and social unrest.

The conservative parties in Latin America have also been strongly connected to the Catholic Church and other conservative groups. This has often led to a focus on social issues, such as anti-abortion policies and opposition to gay rights.

Despite these challenges, the conservative parties in Latin America remain a powerful force in the region's political landscape, and they continue to play a significant role in shaping policy decisions and influencing the region's economic and social development.