

Democratization and the Emergence of Responsive Party Systems in Latin America

Summary of the research plan

The point of departure of this project is the failure of the major theories of democratization to explain differences in the consolidation of democracy across Latin America. We argue that an important determinant for the successful democratization is the emergence of a party system that is responsive to the citizenry. Because many parties in Latin America and elsewhere use clientelistic appeals to mobilize voters, they fail to represent the programmatic preferences of their electorate, which would be one of democracy's most central goals according to democratic theory. Following recent theories of accountability (Kitschelt 2000, Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007), programmatic, clientelistic, and charismatic linkages between citizens and policymakers compete with one another in mobilizing voters, and the prevalence of programmatic linkages is a necessary condition for responsive party systems. In this research project, we therefore study under which conditions programmatic linkages replace clientelistic linkages. The project combines comparative historical analysis and quantitative statistical methods to empirically analyze this process.

We postulate two routes to programmatic party competition. One is historical and took place during the first wave of democratization in the early 20th century, similar to the formation of ideological cleavages in Western Europe. The other is more recent and depends on the presence of parties that actively seek to overcome clientelistic patterns of mobilization.

We study the first route by adopting a "Rokkanian" perspective that focuses on critical junctures and historical legacies that set countries apart (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, Rokkan 1999, Collier and Collier 1991). In some countries in Latin America, such as in Chile and Uruguay, strong ideological cleavages emerged during the early steps towards democracy, and this resulted in an early prevalence of programmatic party competition. In other countries, a different historical sequencing allowed the established political elites to maintain clientelistic modes of mobilization. As a result, party systems may remain unresponsive to the demands of the citizenry for decades. The first aim of the project is thus to develop a cleavage account of party system formation that contrasts the development in twelve Latin American countries with that of Western Europe and North America. In order to apply the cleavage approach to contexts outside the old democracies, we must, however, adapt it. In particular, we will extend the approach by integrating the deliberate attempts of political elites to prevent socio-structural conflicts from manifesting themselves politically.

We then use the insights generated from this historical analysis to derive predictions concerning contemporary patterns of interest representation across the continent. Our hypothesis is that the way conflicts were mobilized early on affects the long-term balance between clientelistic and programmatic mobilization strategies employed by parties. We test these predictions in a quantitative analysis of contemporary linkage

practices in our twelve Latin American countries. For this analysis, we develop a new analytical model to identify and measure different types of linkages between parties and voters. We then analyze these modes of party mobilization and the quality of representation by combining data on the programmatic position of parties with data on the preferences of voters, measuring the congruence between parties and voters at various points in time between the mid-1990s and the 2000s. In addition, we draw on innovative data from an expert survey to assess the linkages employed by parties to mobilize voters.

In this quantitative analysis of contemporary linkage practices, we will also address the second, alternative route to programmatic party competition. This route is open even to those countries that lack the favourable historical circumstances of the forerunners in terms of democratic accountability. In line with recent research pointing to the role of agency in cleavage formation, we do not expect the early historical experience to fully determine contemporary patterns of party competition. Consequently, we study the extent to which clientelistic linkages are successfully being crowded out in a gradual process that started with the most recent wave of democratization in Latin America in the 1980s. Indeed, in a number of countries such as Brazil, new parties of the left have appeared, which explicitly aim at changing the dominant ways of voter mobilization. There is some evidence that in refusing to make clientelistic appeals, parties opting for programmatic linkages can force the other, established parties to adopt more clear-cut programmatic profiles as well. In other countries, recent movements of the left centred on charismatic personalities have succeeded in breaking into party systems where historically rooted parties failed to respond to the preferences of voters. Venezuela is a case in point.

We hypothesize that these two forms of left-wing mobilization have diverging consequences for the emergence of responsive party systems, and consequently for the quality of democracy. While programs play the dominant role in the first case, they are amalgamated with charismatic linkages and selective incentives in the latter case. Presumably, this undermines the institutionalization of a party system and the establishment of firm mechanisms of accountability.