

ISSUE BRIEF

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No policies, no party: Four cases from Latin America

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Across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), personality-driven political movements and political outsiders are increasingly prevalent, often at the expense of party-based politics. A theme of recent elections in the region has been a widespread embrace of political figures and movements vowing to upend the status quo. From Ecuador to Argentina to Guatemala, political outsiders have unseated the establishment. Meanwhile, recently formed, ideologically vague political movements in Mexico and El Salvador overtook the traditional parties that they broke away from to win landslide elections. With few exceptions, the region has failed to develop competitive, institutionalized, and programmatic parties. This breakdown in party systems and proliferation of personality-driven movements has not delivered better results. Improving institutionalized competition among programmatic, ideologically distinct, and identifiable parties would bolster Latin American democracy, delivering citizens freedom and prosperity.

Within the past decade, several countries with once seemingly institutionalized party systems, such as El Salvador and Mexico, collapsed as parties lost their grip on power to personality-driven figures and movements.¹ Others, like Ecuador and Guatemala, have systems that appear to provide a wide variety of options to citizens through a great proliferation of parties. These systems are unpredictable to citizens, and parties are unable to develop the structure, ideology, and institutionality necessary to deliver solutions to citizen's needs.²

This piece examines how political parties across four Latin American countries in two types of systems have failed to serve as effective vehicles for delivering democracy, and what must change for parties in the region to succeed. We examine the breakdown of the formerly institutionalized party systems in Mexico and El Salvador, and the persistently weak parties in Guatemala and Ecuador. Each country's experience illustrates how a lack of programmatic parties has contributed to poor governance,

The Freedom and Prosperity Center aims to increase the well-being of people everywhere and especially that of the poor and marginalized in developing countries through unbiased, data-based research on the relationship between prosperity and economic, political, and legal freedoms, in support of sound policy choices.

1 Following Mainwaring and Scully, an institutionalized political party system must meet four conditions: stability in the rules and nature of interparty competition; component parties possess somewhat stable roots in society; major political actors accord legitimacy to the electoral process and to parties; and party organizations exist apart from the interests of ambitious leaders. See Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully, eds., *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

2 Systems with these characteristics are commonly referred to as feckless pluralism in the academic literature of political parties, a category of political systems explained by Thomas Carothers. See Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Carothers-13-1.pdf>.

which fails to adequately deliver essential services to citizens, potentially undermining democracy and the freedom it should deliver. For each case, we reference data from the Atlantic Council Freedom and Prosperity Indexes and other sources to illustrate the critical role of parties in advancing democracy.

Democracy needs programmatic parties

The failure of Latin American political parties to develop programmatic depth and establish societal ties feeds a vicious cycle of democratic decline and diminishing satisfaction with democracy. According to Latinobarometro, as of 2023 less than 48 percent of citizens supported democracy in the region. This represents a decline of 15 percentage points in just over a decade, down from 63 percent in 2010. Meanwhile, the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index shows that the region has stagnated at a "moderate" level of freedom.³ The inability of the region to make progress toward greater freedom coincides with a decline in political party institutionalization across 60 percent of countries in the region since 2019, according to an analysis of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data.⁴

In a successfully institutionalized system, parties have strong roots in society and political actors see parties as a necessary part of democratic politics. Political actors behave based on the structural rules of party competition and the understanding that these rules will prevail into the future.⁵ Parties are not used as the vehicle for a single leader or circle of elites to exert power. Rather, programmatic parties have stable ideological principles and provide citizens with choice over policy.⁶

When democratic party competition fails to deliver quality of life, citizens may look to populist and authoritarian alternatives—a phenomenon occurring among a growing minority across the region. In 2023, 17 percent of citizens in LAC agreed that "an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one"—an increase from 13 percent in 2020.⁷ While these numbers do not represent majorities, they are considerable enough to influence political outcomes. Unfortunately for citizens, opening the door to authoritarian leaders will lead to further erosion

of democratic institutions, among other consequences to human rights and fundamental freedoms.

These consequences extend beyond individual country borders. Weak economic growth and insecurity are major drivers of migration to the United States and beyond. The region's economic prosperity is also beneficial to the US outright: there are more US free trade partners in Latin America than in any other region of the world.⁸ From a security perspective, stability and rule of law in Latin America also reduces impunity for those who use the region as a trafficking route to the United States. For example, the rule of law—bolstering United Nations International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala increased successful prosecutions of criminal networks during its tenure, in marked contrast to co-optation of the country's judiciary by corrupt actors since the commission's ouster in 2019.⁹ Without programmatic political parties to define concrete policy platforms, leaders are unlikely to develop policy responses that meet citizens' needs—economic, security, or otherwise. To protect democracy in the region, countries must strengthen the institutionalization of party systems and develop parties with transparent operations, renewable leadership structures, sound ideological principles, and mechanisms to connect with voters.

Between competition and domination: El Salvador and Mexico

Over the last few decades, the stable party systems in El Salvador and Mexico have failed to develop policy solutions to insecurity, corruption, and economic inequality. In recent elections, established parties were displaced by new movements that increasingly blur the line between the ruling party and the state. These cases demonstrate that an institutionalized system with plural, competitive parties is not enough to defend against backsliding toward single-party dominance.

MEXICO

Two decades ago, Mexico's shift away from dominant-party rule occurred gradually. Commanding Mexican politics for most of the

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- 3 Atlantic Council, "Freedom and Prosperity Indexes," n.d., <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/#rankings>, accessed September 11, 2024.
 - 4 Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem [Political Party Institutionalization, Latin America and the Caribbean—2019 to Present] Dataset v14," Varieties of Democracy Project, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.23696/mcwt-fr58>.
 - 5 Scott Mainwaring and Mariano Torcal, "Party System Institutionalization and Party System Theory after the Third Wave of Democratization," in *Handbook of Party Politics*, ed. Richard S. Katz and William Crotty (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mariano-Torcal/publication/264888729_Party_system_institutionalization_and_party_system_theory_after_the_third_wave_of_democratization/links/5731e12d08ae9f741b234c47/Party-system-institutionalization-and-party-system-theory-after-the-third-wave-of-democratization.pdf, 204-221.
 - 6 Nic Cheeseman et al., *Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2014), <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/politics-meets-policies.pdf>, III-XI.
 - 7 Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2023: La Recesión Democrática de América Latina* (Santiago de Chile: Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2023), <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>.
 - 8 US Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "U.S. Free Trade Agreement Partner Countries," n.d., <https://www.trade.gov/us-free-trade-agreement-partner-countries>, accessed September 11, 2024.
 - 9 Schwartz, Rachel A. "When Impunity Fights Back: The Legacies and Lessons of Guatemala's CICIG." *LASA Forum* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 40–48. Accessed September 16, 2024, <https://doi.org/https://forum.lasaweb.org/files/vol55-issue2/dossier-impunidad-7.pdf>.

twentieth century, the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional; PRI) governed with uninterrupted power until 2000. Following the 2000 elections, the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional; PAN), Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática; PRD), and PRI emerged as the key parties of the newly plural democratic system. In the years following, the party system institutionalized, providing voters a choice between center-left PRD, centrist PRI, and center-right PAN. However, resulting governments largely failed to provide key public services, including social programs to reduce poverty, build infrastructure, combat corruption, and improve dire insecurity. This was due to parties' unwillingness or inability to implement internal democratic processes that would renew party leadership and develop coherent policy programs.

Now, Mexico appears to be shifting once again toward a system dominated by a single party. A decade ago, the country's National Regeneration Movement—better known as Morena—was non-existent. As of 2017, Morena did not hold a single governorship, but in 2018, only four years after its official incorporation, the left-wing party won the presidency. In that campaign, Morena, led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), appealed to voter frustration on issues that other parties had failed to develop policies to address, including poverty, insecurity, and corruption. This messaging successfully framed the election as a choice between meaningful change and a continuation of the status quo.¹⁰

In 2024, Morena and its allies swept the elections with presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum receiving nearly 60 percent of the votes and the party gaining a supermajority in the house of representatives, a simple majority in the senate, and control of twenty-four of thirty-one governorships and the federal district. The party's rise has coincided with a significant decline in political party strength as its rival parties have deteriorated, down -0.155 since 2019 according to V-Dem's Party Institutionalization Index. This represents weakening levels of party organization, party links to civil society, party supporters, coherence of party platforms, and party-line voting in the legislature.¹¹ In the same period, the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Indexes show a drop in judicial independence (from 59.7 to 50.4) as well as a notable decline in political rights (from 80.8 to 69.3). These troubling numbers reflect the AMLO administration's efforts to defund independent institutions, promotion of laws that repress demonstrations, routine use of the national guard to crush pro-

tests, and attacks on the press. Meanwhile, opposition parties have failed to articulate concrete policy proposals, garner public trust, or present compelling candidates. As a result, they have suffered major electoral losses. Now, the Morena party has consolidated its power and will have the ability to implement its leadership's agenda with little interference from opposition parties or institutional checks and balances over the next six years.¹²

EL SALVADOR

The upending of El Salvador's party system has been equally swift. Following the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords to end the country's twelve-year civil war, former rebel group Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was incorporated as a left-wing political party. For twenty years, El Salvador's political system found stability as a two-party system contested between the FMLN and its right-wing counterpart, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista; ARENA). The system provided consistent rules and citizens had a choice between ideologically distinct, competitive parties; however, these parties failed to adapt policies to meet society's demands. By the 2000s, El Salvador suffered from severe economic and security challenges. Consistently low gross domestic product growth dropped to 1.7 percent in 2014. Meanwhile, post-war insecurity peaked in 2015 when the country had the highest homicide rates in the LAC region.¹³

In 2019, then-Mayor of San Salvador Nayib Bukele won the presidency under the banner of the emergent Grand Alliance for National Unity (Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional; GANA) party, established by ARENA defectors in 2010, as well as his own nascent New Ideas (Nuevas Ideas) party. Bukele's political history—with affiliations including left-wing FMLN as well as center-right GANA—illustrates that his appeal is not rooted in ideology. Instead, his populist, anti-status-quo brand known as "Bukelismo" emphasizes tough-on-crime policies, centralization of power around Bukele himself, and constant communication with citizens through social media. New Ideas responded to citizen disillusionment with both FMLN and ARENA parties, rooted in the perceived corruption of these parties and their failures to develop programmatic policies during their decades in power.¹⁴

By the elections in 2024, Bukele had firmly established his leadership and New Ideas' control of the political system. Although

10 Kenneth F. Greene and Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer, "Latin America's Shifting Politics: Mexico's Party System under Stress," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (October 2018): 31-42, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/latin-americas-shifting-politics-mexicos-party-system-under-stress/>.

11 Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Codebook v14," Varieties of Democracy Project, 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4774440>.

12 There is another rising party of note in Mexico, Citizen Movement (Movimiento Ciudadano; MC), which outperformed expectations in the 2024 elections by winning over 10 percent of the presidential vote and governorships in two states. Importantly, MC's 2024 campaign prioritized conducting outreach to citizens, including youth, and using messaging and platforms that resonated with its constituencies.

13 World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) – El Salvador," n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2022&locations=SV&start=1966>, accessed September 11, 2024; David Gagne, "InSight Crime's 2015 Homicide Round-Up," *InSight Crime*, n.d., <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/insight-crime-homicide-round-up-2015-latin-america-caribbean/>, accessed September 11, 2024.

14 Bukele linked the country's ongoing problems to the failure of corrupt, traditional parties with his 2019 campaign slogan: "There is enough money to go around when no one steals." (In Spanish, "El dinero alcanza cuando nadie roba.")

there was contention about the final election figures—not to mention questions about his eligibility to run for a second consecutive term—Bukele won the presidency with a commanding majority, as did his party in the Legislative Assembly. Neither FMLN nor ARENA managed even 10 percent of the presidential vote. The traditionally competitive parties struggled to present clear programmatic policy platforms and renew their leadership. For instance, the ARENA party's presidential candidate had spent much of his adult life abroad, focusing his campaign primarily on diaspora interests, with less emphasis on domestic policy proposals.

Although Bukele has made notable strides in reducing insecurity, these efforts have involved mass incarcerations and actions outside of the country's constitutional frameworks, raising concerns about transparency and potential human rights implications. The deleterious consequences of these policies are reflected in the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index data, which show a drop of freedom in El Salvador from 66.7 in 2019 to 52.9 in 2023. In the same period, the data indicate precipitous declines in political rights, from 79.3 to 57.4, and judicial independence, from 54 to 20.

Turbulence and opportunity: Ecuador and Guatemala

In Guatemala and Ecuador, party politics resemble a game of musical chairs. New parties frequently emerge from ruptures within existing parties and politicians routinely switch parties, a practice known as *transfuguismo*, to seek out new opportunities. Political elites are also disconnected from constituents.¹⁵ As a result, party systems are centered around clientelist approaches, creating a volatile political system rife with corruption and ineffective governance.

GUATEMALA

Since Guatemala became a democracy in 1985, the country's political landscape has been comprised of small, often short-lived, parties without meaningful policy platforms or internal democracy structures. A small circle of corrupt elites has dominated, commonly referred to as the "*pacto de corruptos*" (pact of the corrupt), which has included military leaders, business

families, organized crime, and corrupt politicians. Together, they have selected unqualified or compromised individuals who would implement their interests to lead judicial, ministerial, and regulatory posts.¹⁶ Corrupt leadership has contributed to a weak economy, mismanagement of public resources, and a lack of services like health care and education being delivered to citizens—especially for the large population of Indigenous and rural Guatemalans.

Meanwhile, parties have remained fragile and fractious, failing to provide the necessary structure for credible alternatives. According to V-Dem, Guatemala has consistently held a party institutionalization score of approximately half that of the median country in Latin America since 2019. This is illustrated by the whopping twenty-two presidential candidates and at least twenty-nine political parties registered in the 2023 election.¹⁷ Strikingly, over 70 percent of congressional deputies sought reelection under different parties than they had served previously.¹⁸ Amid this environment of weak party institutionalization and pervasive corruption, Atlantic Council data show a decline in political rights from 79.8 in 2019 to 68 in 2023, as well as a sharp drop in judicial independence, from 62.3 in 2019 to 52.3 in 2023. These declines reflect pervasive corruption and organized crime, attacks on journalists and activists, and attempted electoral interference that nearly upended the democratic results of the 2023 election.

Ahead of the June 2023 election, certain institutions, influenced by entrenched interests, took steps to weaken candidates who challenged the status quo.¹⁹ The judicial electoral body arbitrarily suspended the candidacies of Roberto Arzú, the son of a former president, and Indigenous leader Thelma Cabrera. Just a month before election day, the electoral body also disqualified the frontrunner candidate, Carlos Pineda. This blatant disenfranchisement incited voters to voice their displeasure—first against the political establishment itself, and then by putting their support behind a reformist candidate. Notably, the first-place winner of the first round of the elections was not a candidate (Bernardo Arevalo came in third), but rather an empty ballot.

Following the first round of voting, prosecutors aligned with corrupt interests concocted legal pretexts to remove Arevalo's ability to compete in the second round. In response, youth and

15 Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Carothers-13-1.pdf>.

16 This has included high court judges, an attorney general, and multiple ministries including high-level Social Security and Customs posts. InSight Crime, "Power, Impunity, and the 2023 Guatemala Elections," n.d., <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/power-impunity-2023-guatemala-elections/>, accessed September 11, 2024; Transparency International, "Our Work in Guatemala," n.d., <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/guatemala#:~:text=Scoring%20180%20countries%20around%20the,154%20out%20of%20180%20countries>, accessed September 11, 2024.

17 Viviana Mutz, "Conoce los 29 Partidos que Participan en las Elecciones Generales 2023," *República*, June 11, 2023, <https://republica.gt/politica/los-29-partidos-politicos-que-participan-en-las-elecciones-generales-2023-20236116200>.

18 Pamela Ruiz, "Barred Candidates Cast a Shadow over Guatemala's Polls," International Crisis Group, n.d., <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/guatemala/barred-candidates-cast-shadow-over-guatemalas-polls>, accessed September 11, 2024.

19 Carin Zissis and Chase Harrison, "Explainer: Guatemala's 2023 Presidential Elections," Americas Society/Council of the Americas, n.d., <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-guatemalas-2023-presidential-elections>, accessed September 11, 2024.

Indigenous communities led protests to defend the democratic process. Voters united behind Arevalo and his anti-corruption platform, delivering him the second round with over 61 percent. Despite efforts to prevent his inauguration, Arevalo was sworn into office in January 2024.²⁰

Democratic triumph in Guatemala is not guaranteed. The new administration must deliver results to the people or risk handing back power to corrupt interests in four years.²¹ Arevalo's Semilla party is at a disadvantage, having been delisted as part of the efforts to prevent him from governing with a ruling legislative bloc. Rebuilding the party around a strengthened programmatic platform will be one way to demonstrate to voters that he aims to follow through on his commitments. Other parties should also take the public's support for a policy platform (e.g., anti-corruption) and rejection of personality-focused politics as a call to action to deepen their own policy proposals and leadership structures before the next elections.

ECUADOR

Ecuador has over two hundred parties, with little history of successful coalitions to organize them in robust governing frameworks.²² Elite-serving parties have become electoral vehicles for prominent personalities but are organizationally weak, lack policy programs, suffer from low party loyalty, and do not often engage constituents between election cycles. Parties focus on presidential victory rather than building out actionable governing plans for the economy, security, health care, and other key areas. This has led to fragmented legislatures at odds with presidential administrations, governing paralysis, and failure to provide critical services to citizens.

From 2006 to 2017, President Rafael Correa and his Country Alliance party (Alianza País; AP) controlled politics in Ecuador, bringing stability but through populism, authoritarian tendencies, and attacks on fundamental freedoms. Meanwhile, the country's opposition parties remained weak and divided, their leaders focused on personal opportunities for power rather than developing programmatic policy. In 2017, the election of Lenín Moreno, Correa's chosen successor, generated an unexpected opening in the country. Moreno broke with his predecessor and began to prosecute the former government's corruption and support the restoration of democratic norms. Meanwhile, the AP party underwent an irrevocable split, and the party system became even more fragmented. In 2021, the presidential election of longtime candidate Guillermo Lasso (Creating Opportunities party), who had a weak mandate, began a new period of

heightened political instability leading to his impeachment and a snap election. Current President Daniel Noboa came to power with the National Democratic Action party, created for his bid for the presidency in 2023. Weak parties have perpetuated weak governance, allowing an explosion of insecurity and deepening citizen dissatisfaction with the democratic system.

V-Dem data demonstrate that despite Ecuador's recent political volatility and rising insecurity, its political party institutionalization has remained essentially unchanged since 2019, as has the level of freedom in the country, as recorded in the Atlantic Council Freedom and Prosperity Indexes. However, this recent volatile but more democratic period shows that political rights have remained approximately ten points higher than during the Correa period, and judicial and legislative independence have also increased substantially compared with the Correa era. Ecuador has made progress toward greater freedom as it has moved toward a more competitive party system. However, the country's ability to further advance will require programmatic parties with expansive leadership structures to deliver responsive policy.

Conclusions and recommendations

Across our four case countries—Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Ecuador—democratic processes persist through regular elections, but weak party system institutionalization and the lack of programmatic parties contribute to poor democratic governance. Freedom and Prosperity Indexes data reflect the countries' corresponding rates of judicial independence, political rights, and levels of freedom. Parties are primarily a mechanism for elites to exert power, political participation beyond voting is limited, and accountability is poor. Citizens are attracted to new leaders promising a change from the status quo, regardless of the threat they present to democratic institutions.

The gulf between political elites and citizens in many LAC countries is rooted in political and sociocultural norms, which elections alone cannot bridge. Parties must reject the short-term potential gains of disruptive tactics and adopt sustainable methods to connect with the electorate around policy solutions. Specifically, parties must articulate their platforms so that voters can understand what they stand for and what they will do in office. Crucially, these platforms must be driven by constituent engagement. To complement these efforts, parties should prioritize transparency mechanisms, such as campaign finance reforms, open primaries, and transparent internal leadership elections. Parties should also support voter education initiatives that empower citizens to make informed choices based

20 Sonia Pérez D., "Bernardo Arévalo Sworn in as Guatemala's President despite Months of Efforts to Derail Inauguration," *AP News*, August 29, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/guatemala-arevalo-inauguration-opposition-f968cd763fa6540a784ea9612fc33e38>.

21 Dina Fernández, "Arévalo Wants to Change Guatemala. Some Say He's Moving Too Slowly," *Americas Quarterly*, April 18, 2024, <https://americasquarterly.org/article/arevalo-wants-to-change-guatemala-some-say-hes-moving-too-slowly/>.

22 Ana Guerrero, "¿Cuántos Auditores de Partidos Políticos y Movimientos se Inscribieron para las Elecciones 2025 en Ecuador?" *El Comercio*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/auditores-partidos-politicos-movimientos-inscribieron-elecciones-2025.html>.

on policy priorities. By adopting these strategies, political parties can better understand citizen needs and develop effective policy platforms to deliver them.

The international community can play a pivotal role assisting democratically motivated parties toward these goals. Recently, the United States and other international actors applied pressure on Guatemala to ensure that corrupt elites allowed Arevalo to take office democratically. The international community can support political parties not just during elections, but between them as well, providing opportunities for pro-democracy actors to establish robust programmatic and leadership structures.

This support can include party-level capacity building, as well as regional and international exchanges of best practices among parties. Additionally, supporting media, human rights activists, and civil society organizations in their efforts to hold parties and elected officials accountable to their policy commitments is crucial in maintaining a healthy political ecosystem. By investing in these areas, the international community can foster resilient and responsive party systems that uphold democratic values and serve their citizens.

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STATE OF THE PARTIES

This paper is the fourth in the Freedom and Prosperity Center's "State of the Parties" series analyzing the strength of multi-party systems in different regions of the world.



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