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Weak Parties and the Inequality Trap in Latin America*

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Paper prepared for the *Latin American and Caribbean Inequality Review*

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Latin America is widely acknowledged as one of the most unequal regions of the world (Sánchez-Ancochea 2021). But it is also one of the most democratic, certainly as compared to other developing regions. These two facts seem difficult to reconcile. Both folk theories of democratic representation – to borrow a phrase from (Achen and Bartels 2016) – and canonical models in political economy would have us believe that democracies ought to reduce inequality through redistribution (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Meltzer and Richard 1981; Romer 1975). As inequality increases, the proportion of the population that would benefit materially from redistribution also increases, making it more likely that a pro-redistribution political coalition would win elections and deliver social policy. And yet, despite several decades of uninterrupted electoral democracy in most of the region, Latin American governments have consistently and with but few exceptions failed to reduce inequality substantially (see also Acemoglu et al. 2015).

This might make sense if voters were simply unaware or unconcerned with inequality (see Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). But large swaths of Latin American voters tell survey interviewers that they would like their governments to do more. Figure 1 reports the proportion of respondents to the 2018/19 AmericasBarometer in each country who agreed with the statement, "The government should reduce income differences between the rich and the poor" – the standard survey item widely used by scholars to measure support for redistribution (e.g., Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Rueda and Stegmueller 2019; but see Cavaillé and Trump 2015). In every country in the region, majorities, and often super-majorities, support government redistribution.[1] Even more directly, according to the 2015 Argentine Panel Election Study, 87% of respondents there also reported thinking inequality was too high (Lupu et al. 2015). There appears to be a large electoral constituency in Latin America that supports reducing inequality through redistribution.[2]

[1] This demand for government redistribution is high despite the fact that states in the region already redistribute through forbearance, as Holland (2017) shows.

[2] Blofield and Luna (2011) also find that the minority in Latin America that opposes redistribution is more extreme in its opposition than are opponents of redistribution in more affluent democracies.

Why are governments not responding?[3] Why, even more surprisingly, do social policies in the region so often merely exacerbate economic inequalities (Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016)?

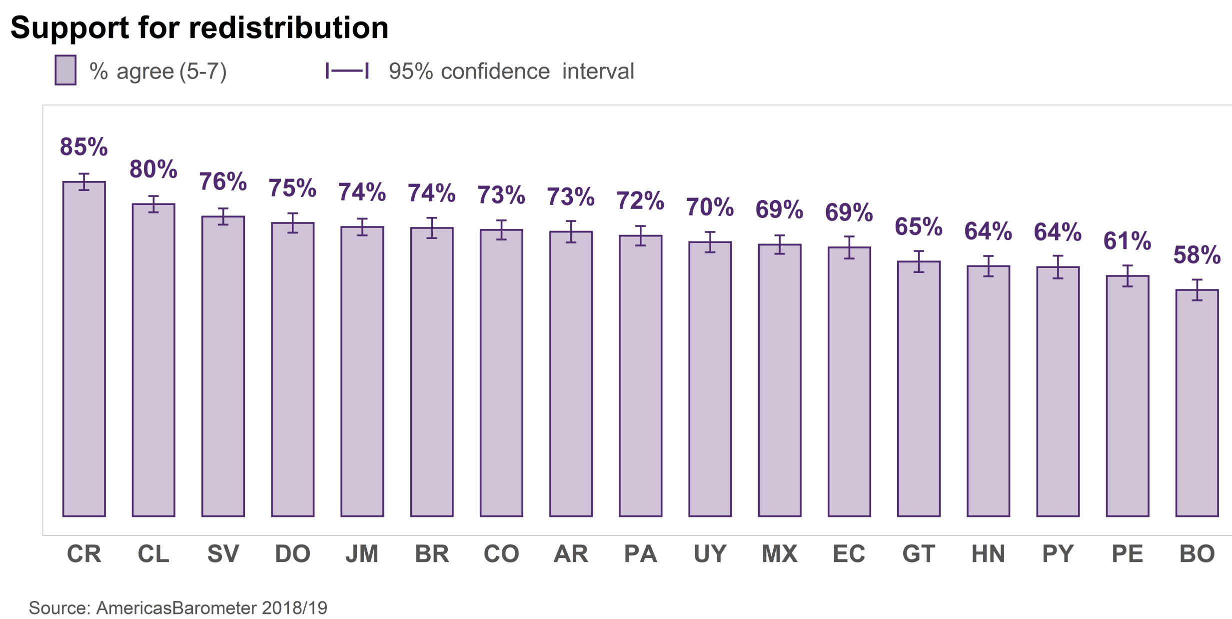

Figure 1: Support for redistribution in Latin America, 2018/19. Bars indicate the proportion of respondents in each country who responded with values of 5, 6, or 7 on the 1-7 agreement scale with the statement, "The government should reduce income difference between the rich and the poor." *Source*: AmericasBarometer

These questions are all the more puzzling given that most Latin American democracies feature the kinds of institutions regularly associated with more redistribution in more affluent contexts. Proportional electoral rules, thought to facilitate redistributive electoral coalitions in North America and Europe (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Iversen and Soskice 2006), are typical throughout Latin America. And leftist parties, those associated with redistributive policy platforms elsewhere (Esping-Anderson 1990; Rueda 2008), have governed regularly throughout the region, sometimes increasing social spending and even reducing inequality (see Huber and Stephens 2012). Even strong and encompassing labor movements, which were critical to welfare-state expansion elsewhere (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Huber and Stephens 2001), have

[3] Governments can also respond to inequality through market regulation (Morgan and Kelly 2013), but the degree to which countries in the region can engage in market regulation has declined significantly over time.

emerged in some countries in the region but often without subsequent redistributive transformations (Collier and Collier 2002).

One frequent explanation for the persistence of Latin American inequality is that states in the region lack the capacity to redistribute effectively. Since states in the region have less institutionalized state bureaucracies and more limited geographic reach than those in North America and Europe, politicians who may want to respond to demands for redistribution are hampered by the incapacity of state agencies to properly execute redistributive projects. This state weakness is often deployed to explain why Latin American welfare states are so often truncated or dualistic, able to redistribute from the rich to the middle class, but incapable of reaching the marginalized, largely informal poor (Antía 2018; Arza 2018; Holland 2017; Osorio Gonnet 2019).

Another common explanation is that market forces constrain Latin American governments from redistributing (Brooks 2009; Huber et al. 2008; Kaufman and Segura-Ubiergo 2001). Increasing capital mobility and financial globalization pressure governments to maintain market-friendly policies rather than taxing the wealthy to support social policy (Campello 2011; Castiglioni 2018). As a result, even politicians inclined to pursue redistribution feel pressured to moderate their economic policies.

Yet, Latin American states did adopt inequality-reducing social policies during the decade of the 2000s (e.g., Arza et al. 2022; Carnes and Mares 2014; Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016; López-Calva and Lustig 2010), some of which reached and incorporated informal sectors (Hunter and Sugiyama 2018). For instance, conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs proliferated across the region during this period and often managed to reduce inequality (Levy and Schady 2013; Osorio Gonnet 2019). And while these benefit programs reduced inequality only marginally and were easier to administer than more intensive social policies that would require improving the quality of service delivery (Holland and Schneider 2017), they still required substantial oversight. As Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2016) note, the success of these programs "require[s] impressive state capacity" (14). Latin American states may have lower capacity than those in Western Europe, but it seems clear they could still be doing more to reduce inequality.

Drawing on recent work on political parties and representation, this review argues that another key to the under-provision of redistribution in Latin America is the failure of political parties in the region to incorporate the redistributive preferences of citizens. Parties in the region are weak and lack institutionalization,[4] undermining the ability of even those parties that support redistribution to build the kinds of cross-class coalitions necessary to sustain broad welfare states. As a result, elections have not produced policymaking bodies that reflect the redistributive preferences of citizens, skewing policy outcomes and perpetuating high levels of inequality.

I begin by discussing why contemporary Latin American party systems are weak, focusing on both structural/institutional factors that pull party systems toward less institutionalization and recent changes to the region's political economy that undermined the more institutionalized systems. Structurally high levels of inequality play an important role in weakening parties in the region. I then link the region's low levels of party-system institutionalization with lower levels of redistribution, both theoretically and empirically through cross-national comparisons. Finally, I turn to mass and elite surveys that show that legislatures in the region fail to reflect the pro-redistribution preferences of voters, further demonstrating how weak parties undermine the representation necessary for successful redistribution. What the literature and evidence suggest is that Latin America is in a kind of inequality trap: structurally high inequality weakens parties, and weak parties are less likely to adopt the universalistic redistributive policies needed to reduce inequality.

Why Are Latin American Parties Weak?

When scholars think about the strength of political parties from a comparative perspective, they often describe their degree of institutionalization. More institutionalized parties and party systems are those in which parties remain stable over time, competing in election after election. These types of parties have stronger organizational bases that are embedded in their constituents'

[4] Throughout this review, I use the adjectives "strong" and "institutionalized" interchangeably to describe parties and party systems.

communities and that are capable of mobilizing supporters. More institutionalized parties inspire stronger attachments among voters and build strong roots in their societies (Lupu 2015b). These features mean that more institutionalized systems produce predictable patterns of party competition and electoral bases for parties (see Mainwaring 2018; Mainwaring and Scully 1995).

For several decades, scholars have been lamenting the weakness of political parties in Latin America (Dix 1989; Kitschelt et al. 2010; Lupu 2015a: e.g.,). In their classic volume from the early 1990s, Mainwaring and Scully (1995) highlighted variation in the level of institutionalization of party systems across the region. (Roberts and Wibbels 1999) noted that party systems in Latin America were notably weaker than those of North America and Europe. The trend since then has also been one of decline: Mainwaring (2018) notes that nearly every party systems in the region de-institutionalized between the 1990s and the 2010s (see also Cohen et al. 2018). And this trend is surprising given scholar's expectations that electoral competition stabilizes party systems over time (Converse 1969; Lupu and Stokes 2010; Tavits 2005). Latin American party systems seem destined for weakness.

Scholars have identified at least three broad reasons that Latin American party systems tend to be weak. The first is the particular combination of electoral rules that prevail across the region. As Mainwaring (1999) famously demonstrated for the case of Brazil, the region's combination of presidentialism with proportional legislative electoral rules (particularly Brazil's open-list system) undermine incentives for political entrepreneurs to invest in building strong parties (see also Roberts and Wibbels 1999). These institutions incentivize cultivating a personal vote rather than investing in a party (Carey and Shugart 1995), fragmenting party systems and legislatures, and leading parties to form short-lived coalitions around presidential candidates (Shugart and Carey 1992).[5] Unlike parliamentary systems that require a certain degree of party strength to field candidates and to legislate, Latin American political institutions make it less

[5] This stands in stark contrast to the theoretical predictions and empirical findings in studies of North America and Western Europe (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Iversen and Soskice 2006), but they focus on a set of cases that are almost all parliamentary systems (with the exception of the US) and therefore do not consider how the combination of presidentialism and proportionality can undermine the redistributive implications of proportional electoral rules.

likely that politicians will make the kinds of investments necessary to build strong parties and party systems (Domínguez et al. 2016).

A second feature of recent Latin American politics that has weakened the region's parties is the trajectory of the political economy. Early studies suggested that the particular direction of economic growth could strengthen or weaken party systems (Remmer 1991; Roberts and Wibbels 1999), but more recent work suggests that this association may have been limited to earlier time periods (Cohen et al. 2018). Other work suggests that the region's turn toward market-oriented political economies over the course of the 1980s and 1990s undermined parties and party systems. In order to adopt neoliberal economic reforms, political leaders across the region reneged on campaign promises (Stokes 2001), abandoned traditional party programs, and joined forces with strange bedfellows. Lupu (2014, 2016, 2018) shows how these political machinations undermined parties by weakening voter attachments to traditional parties, weakening social cleavages (Roberts 2002, 2014), and leading in some cases to their collapse and to more fragmented, less institutionalized party systems (see also Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012).

Finally, Latin America's long-term legacy of high structural inequality also undermines institutionalized party systems. Contexts of persistently high inequality breed grievances and disillusionment with political institutions and elites among poor voters (Bermeo 2009). These grievances offer ripe opportunities for populist outsiders to campaign on anti-establishment platforms that win over marginalized poor voters (Edwards 2019; Sánchez-Ancochea 2021; Stoetzer et al. 2023; Tavits 2005). In doing so, they turn voters against traditional parties, and often against the notion of stable parties altogether, instead building personalist electoral coalitions and eschewing the constraints imposed by strong organizations (Weyland 1996).[6]

High inequality also provides opportunities for clientelism. In contexts of high inequality, wealthy citizens can spend their resources to provide targeted club goods to voters in exchange for their support (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). And while scholars disagree about whether

[6] Although populist rhetoric often feeds on grievances with inequality, populist leaders do not seem to engage in actual redistribution as a result (Strobl et al. 2023).

clientelism necessarily undermines strong political parties per se, it is certainly the case that clientelism undermines the kind of programmatic policy-orientation that is necessary for institutionalized parties focused on a program of broad redistribution (Weyland 1996). In the long run, then, persistently high inequality can undermine the kinds of institutionalized party systems that are necessary for large-scale redistribution.

Structural and institutional factors thus contribute to the weak institutionalization of party systems in Latin America, exerting a kind of gravitational pull on party systems. Although we have certainly observed stronger parties and party systems in the region across time and space, these ever-present features of the region create a context that is not especially hospitable to party-system institutionalization. At the same time, recent transformations to the political economy of the region have further undermined strong parties, such that the region now includes very few party systems that could be described as highly institutionalized. This poses a significant obstacle to efforts at broad-based redistribution to reduce the region's high levels of inequality.

How Weak Parties Undermine Redistribution

Effective redistribution depends on the ability of pro-redistribution politicians to be elected and then to build broad-based coalitions to support redistributive policy initiatives (Kitschelt et al. 2010; Mauro 2022, Forthcoming). Scholars have argued that such coalitions emerged in Latin America when shifting labor markets changed public support for government redistribution (Carnes and Mares 2014, 2015), when left parties came to power (Feierherd et al. 2023; Huber and Stephens 2012; Niedzwiecki and Pribble Forthcoming; Pribble 2013; but see Altman and Castiglioni 2020), when civil society organizations like labor unions were strong (Anria and Niedzwiecki 2016; Garay 2016; Niedzwiecki 2015), or when electoral coalitions required attracting poor voters (Altman and Castiglioni 2020; De la O 2015; Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2016; Fairfield and Garay 2017; Garay 2016).

Even so, inequality has remained stubbornly high in Latin America. As Arza et al. (2022)

note, even after the redistributive efforts of the 2000s, "historical patterns of social policy exclusion and inequality remain" (53). Although these studies help us explain the marginal differences in social policies and inequality across countries and over time, they tell us less about why overall inequality in the region persists.[7]

One important reason is that weak parties and party systems hinder the political avenues for achieving the kinds of universalist redistributive policies necessary to effectively reduce inequality.[8] Parties play a critical role in both electoral politics and legislative policymaking (Aldrich 1995; Key 1958; Schattschneider 1942; Stokes 1999). At the electoral stage, strong parties can coordinate candidate selection and limit political competition by coopting potential challengers (e.g., Cox 1997; Meguid 2005). They can offer programmatic policy packages to broad coalitions of voters divided along salient societal cleavages (Przeworski and Sprague 1986), creating electoral incentives for universalist redistribution programs.

Even the most programmatic of Latin American political parties have never achieved this ideal. Rather than mobilizing support along salient social cleavages, many parties in the region often rely on more heterogeneous social bases of support, along with clientelism and personalism, to mobilize voters (Dix 1989; Kitschelt et al. 2010; Stokes 2005). They are often only loosely linked with civil society organizations and not deeply rooted in societal groups. This creates incentives for politicians to distribute club goods selectively to their supporters rather than adopting costly redistributive policies that benefit large sectors of the electorate (Pribble 2013; Weyland 1996).[9] Weak party systems also leave openings in the political arena for flash parties, outsiders, and populists to emerge and succeed more readily (Mainwaring 2018; Mair 2013). And

[7] Scholars also argue that the region's structurally high levels of inequality are a persistent legacy of its colonial – or even precolonial – history (e.g., Dell 2010; Engerman and Sokoloff 2002; Karl 2003). However, such arguments leave unanswered the question of why democratic regimes in the region fail to respond to the public's demand to address these historical legacies.

[8] Mauro (Forthcoming) also shows that these relationships depend on the type of party system.

[9] Pribble (2013) further argues that strong ties between party elites and the party's mass base produce more redistributive policies because the party rank-and-file is more ideological than the party leadership (see May 1973). She shows, for instance, how aspects of party institutionalization (which she calls "party character") helped leftist parties adopt more redistributive welfare reforms in Chile and Uruguay while leftist governments in Argentina failed to do so.

politicians who rely on these kinds of electoral vehicles also lack the incentives to engage in broad-based redistribution, preferring instead to reward their supporters selectively or to rely on rhetorical appeals (Kitschelt et al. 2010).

At the legislative stage, broad-based redistributive policy agendas require additional coalition-building among representatives. Institutionalized political parties can negotiate coalitions that support these kinds of legislative initiatives and discipline their members to support those policy programs. But fragmented party systems will require winning coalitions with more veto players, and weak parties will be less capable of the party discipline necessary to produce universalistic legislation (Pribble 2013). This is why leftist parties in Latin America have engaged in "easy" forms of redistribution that were simply layered upon existing programs (Holland and Schneider 2017), rather than building new, more universalistic programs.

All of this requires significant effort on the part of political actors, effort that only seems worthwhile for those with longer time-horizons. Politicians who foresee a political career for themselves beyond the short term, who are part of a political party that is likely to last and to compete in future elections, are more likely to make these investments (Alesina and Spear 1987; Lupu and Riedl 2013). Those more focused on short-term gains are more likely to focus on targeting club goods to their backers than they are to pursue universalistic redistributive programs.

These tendencies leave Latin America in a kind of inequality trap. Structurally high levels of inequality exert a gravitational pull that undermines the institutionalization of parties and party systems. At the same time, weak parties are far less likely to successfully pursue the kinds of broad-based redistributive programs that are necessary to effectively reduce inequality. Although shifting political forces can help to reduce inequality somewhat, these persistent dynamics make substantial change less likely – and help us understand why Latin American democracies have failed to address the region's extraordinary inequality.

Comparisons Across Countries

Research suggests that inequality produces weak party systems and that weak parties undermine redistribution. We can see evidence of these relationships by looking across Latin American countries. Figure 2 plots the bivariate relationships between party system institutionalization on the one hand and inequality and redistribution on the other. Inequality is the Gini coefficient for household disposable income based on data from the Commitment to Equity Institute (CEQ; see Lustig 2022) that draw on available high-quality household surveys fielded between 2007 and 2017.[10] Using these same data, redistribution is measured as the change in Gini coefficient as we go from market income inequality to disposable income inequality. In other words, this measures the distributional effects of taxes and government transfers.[11]

Party system institutionalization is a difficult concept to measure. I use a broad measure derived from annual expert coding collected and provided by the V-Dem Institute. This index captures the extent to which party organizations make decisions through routinized processes and the degree to which party labels are meaningful signals for voters and elites, the core features of the concept (Bizzarro et al. 2020).[12]

The left-hand panel in Figure 2 shows that countries in the region with more institutionalized party systems indeed exhibit lower levels of economic inequality. And the right-hand panel shows that those with more institutionalized party systems also redistribute more. These patterns look very similar using a measure of legislative electoral volatility (from Mauro

[10] CEQ data are available for Argentina (2012, 2017), Bolivia (2009, 2015), Brazil (2009), Chile (2013), Colombia (2010, 2014), Costa Rica (2010), Dominican Republic (2007), Ecuador (2011), El Salvador (2011, 2013, 2015), Guatemala (2011, 2014), Honduras (2011), Mexico (2010, 2012, 2014), Nicaragua (2009), Panama (2016), Paraguay (2014), Peru (2009, 2011), Uruguay (2009), and Venezuela (2013).

[11] Of course, taxes and transfers also have second-order effects on market incomes that are not accounted for by this measure, but it is the standard measure of redistribution in the literature.

[12] Specifically, the measure relies on five items in the V-Dem expert survey: (1) “How many political parties for national-level office have permanent organizations?” (2) “How many parties have permanent local party branches?” (3) “How many political parties with representation in the national legislature or presidency have publicly available party platforms (manifestos) that are publicized and relatively distinct from one another?” (4) “Is it normal for members of the legislature to vote with other members of their party on important bills?” (5) “Among the major parties, what is the main or most common form of linkage to their constituents?”

(Forthcoming)) as a proxy for party-system institutionalization in place of the V-Dem measure (see Roberts and Wibbels 1999). Using the best available data on inequality and redistribution in Latin America, we see patterns consistent with what research on parties and inequality suggests.

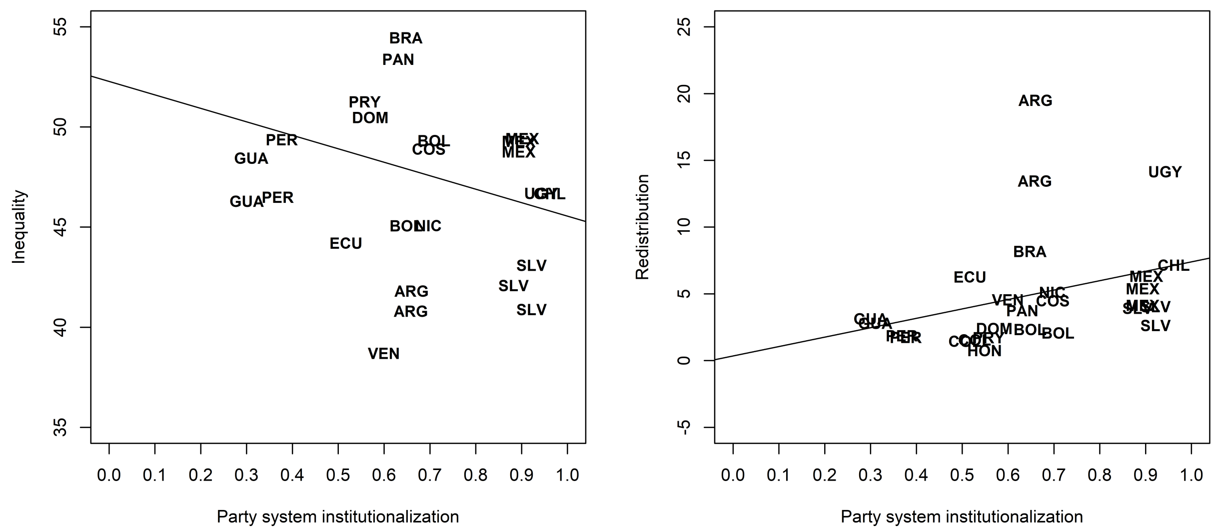

Figure 2: Inequality, Party Systems, and Redistribution. Values represent the level of party-system institutionalization and inequality/redistribution by country-year, with lines showing the bivariate relationship. *Sources*: CEQ, V-Dem.

Of course, these correlations rely on a very small number of data points within just a decade. An alternative is to use annual observations over a long period of time. Even though both inequality and party-system institutionalization are slow-moving variables, it could be useful to see whether the changes that we do observe over time are also consistent with these expectations.

Annual data on inequality and redistribution are available for Latin America from sources like the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) (Solt 2009, 2020), but the data are less reliable. Many of the annual observations in this dataset are imputed and some come from household surveys with limited national coverage (see Ferreira et al. 2015; Jenkins 2015).[13] Still,

[13] SWIID data on market and disposable income inequality suggest negative levels of redistribution in a number of countries, which is difficult to reconcile with their existing redistributive social programs (or with CEQ data from overlapping periods). My analysis below drops observations with negative redistribution.

these data are widely used by scholars of political economy (e.g., Houle 2017; Mauro 2022), and, reassuringly, they largely confirm the patterns in the more reliable CEQ data.

Table 1 reports estimates from simple models that regress inequality and redistribution on party-system institutionalization on an annual basis between 1990 and 2017 across 14 Latin American countries.[14] The models include controls for other economic outcomes that may confound the relationship between party-system institutionalization and inequality or redistribution: logged per capita GDP, economic growth, annual inflation, and exports (measured as a share of GDP). The models also include year fixed effects.

Table 1: Party Systems, Inequality, and Redistribution

Variable	Inequality	Redistribution
Party-system institutionalization	-11.619* (4.289)	5.646* (1.674)
Economic controls	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓
Countries	14	14
Observations	305	305

Notes: Estimated results from regressing disposable household inequality and redistribution on party-system institutionalization, along with economic control variables (logged GDP per capita, economic growth, annual inflation, and exports as a share of GDP) and year dummies. Sources: Solt (2020), V-Dem, World Bank. $^*p < 0.05$

Consistent with the more limited set of observations from CEQ, the results in Table 1 suggest that party-system institutionalization indeed correlates with lower levels of inequality and higher rates of government redistribution. As much of the recent research on the political economy of inequality in Latin America suggests, institutionalized party systems are key ingredients in reducing inequality through government redistribution. Latin America's propensity toward weak party systems poses a major political obstacle to reducing inequality in the region.

[14] The countries included in the analysis are Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

And yet, if structurally high levels of inequality also undermine strong parties, then it may be difficult for the region to escape this inequality trap.

Opinion Congruence in Latin America

Looking at variation across countries and over time is one way to observe how weak parties undermine opportunities for redistribution. But these high-level correlations tell us little about what the politics of redistribution actually looks like within these governments. One way to look for more fine-grained evidence is to look at whether elected officials fail to reflect the preferences of voters when it comes to economic issues like redistribution. If governments in Latin America under-provide redistribution because the politicians who get elected are less motivated to pursue universalistic redistributive projects, then we should be able to see that gap in congruence between mass opinion and the positions of elected officials.

One way to do this is to compare the preference of citizens reported in mass surveys to the positions of elected officials in surveys of national legislators. Scholars of Latin American politics have only recently begun to take seriously the study of representation – whether the preferences of citizens in the region get reflected in the representatives they elect (what representation scholars call *congruence*) and in the policies those elected representatives produce (what representation scholars call *responsiveness*) (see Lupu and Pontusson 2024; Miller and Stokes 1963). But a recent global analysis by Lupu and Warner (2022a) provides this kind of analysis of opinion congruence, finding an overall bias in favor of the preferences of more affluent citizens across the cases (see also Luna and Zechmeister 2005; Lupu and Warner 2017). In a follow-up study, the same authors find that this pro-affluent bias is especially pronounced in context characterized by higher levels of clientelism and economic inequality (Lupu and Warner 2022b).

These global studies largely compare mass and elite self-placements on the left-right ideological scale, but they also allow us to look specifically at economic issue preferences in the context of Latin America. Lupu and Warner (2022a) do this to examine the ideological direction of the pro-affluent bias they document. The AmericasBarometer mass surveys and the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) surveys harmonized the wordings and scales of a series of issue questions between 2010 and 2014, yielding high-quality data on opinion congruence on a set of comparable issue items.[15]

This analysis focuses on a factored index of economic preferences using four questions that asked respondents to rate their agreement (on a 7-point scale) with statements about the role of the state in ownership of natural resources, ensuring citizens' wellbeing, creating jobs, and providing healthcare.[16] Since the question wordings are nearly identical, we factor citizens and elites within the same country-year together. Finally, we rescale the issue-areas to the range [-1,1], where lower values indicate support for state intervention in the economy. We group mass respondents into socioeconomic groups by using a factored index of wealth based on responses to a set of questions about household ownership of a series of durable goods like a car or a refrigerator (see Filmer and Pritchett 2001). We then use this index to divide mass samples along quintiles of wealth.

Figure 3 plots the mean preferences of the poorest and richest mass quintiles along with the mean preference of legislators on economic issues, by country. For the sake of comparability, we normalize the average poor preference to zero for each country. The mean preference of the richest quintile is represented by the circles, and the mean preference of elites is represented by the squares.

[15] The dataset includes the 2010, 2012, and 2014 AmericasBarometer mass surveys and the PELA survey from the matching legislative term. We do not have information on economic preferences in Panama because the economic questions were not asked in the AmericasBarometer surveys there. We also do not have data on Venezuela because PELA did not conduct legislator surveys there during this period.

[16] This index has the added benefit of reducing measurement error, as compared to relying on a single survey item like left-right placement (Ansolabehere et al. 2008). The wording of the individual items was as follows: "Now I am going to read some items about the role of the national government. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements..." (1) "The (Country) government, instead of the private sector, should own the most important enterprises and industries of the country. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?" (2) "The (Country) government, more than individuals, should be primarily responsible for ensuring the well-being of the people. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?" (3) "The (Country) government, more than the private sector, should be primarily responsible for creating jobs. To what extent to do you agree or disagree with this statement?" (4) "The (Country) government, more than the private sector should be primarily responsible for providing health care services. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?"

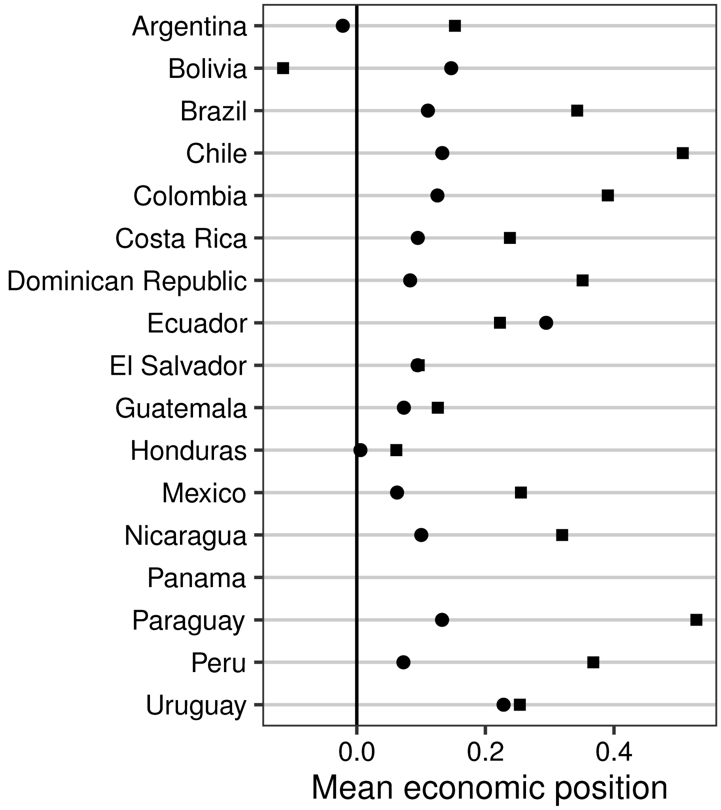

Figure 3: Economic congruence in Latin America. For each country, the mean preference of the poorest quintile of citizens is normalized to zero, with legislators' mean preference represented by squares and the richest quintile of citizens' mean preference in circles. *Source*: Lupu and Warner (2022a).

In nearly every country in the region, the rich prefer less state intervention in the economy than do the poor, consistent with findings in prior work in Latin America and elsewhere (McCall 2013; Morgan and Kelly 2013; but see Berens 2015; Haggard et al. 2013; Holland 2018). The exceptions are Argentina and Honduras, where the difference between rich and poor is negligible.[17] In most countries in the region, legislators prefer even less state intervention in the economy than even the richest quintile, suggesting that their preferences are probably closer to the very affluent. Their rightward bias is particularly extreme in cases like Chile and Paraguay. In one case, Ecuador, legislators are in between the rich and the poor, but substantially closer to the

[17] It is worth noting that respondents here are divided into quintiles and so the affluent group represents a large swath of population. If we had samples large enough to divide into finer categories, we may well find that the very richest in these countries are more opposed to state involvement in the economy.

rich. In only one case, Bolivia, do legislators on average prefer more state intervention in the economy than even the poor. But that may be an artifact of the particular period for which we have these data. During this period, Bolivia was governed by a leftist president who had written a new constitution that built in electoral advantages for his ruling party (Levitsky and Loxton 2013), and indeed his party was a regional exception in its level of institutionalization and deep ties to active civil society organizations (Anria 2019).

On the whole, the economic preferences of poorer Latin Americans are simply not being reflected in the legislatures they elect. This is not entirely unique to Latin America, as Lupu and Warner (2022a) show, but the bias appears to be higher in the kinds of political and economic contexts that characterize most Latin American democracies (Lupu and Warner 2022b). These patterns are consistent with the expectations of research on parties that suggests that weak parties in Latin America produce politicians less inclined toward the universalistic redistributive policies that could address the region's extraordinary inequality. They suggest that Latin American democracies fail to deliver the redistribution that large majorities of the public demand not just because of state incapacity but also because their party systems do not produce the kind of representation that fosters these kinds of programmatic agendas.

The Politics of Inequality in Latin America

Many Latin American democracies contain the ingredients that are thought to have produced and sustain large, redistributive welfare states in Western Europe: high rates of public demand for redistribution, leftist parties in government, strong labor unions during critical historical moments, and proportional electoral institutions. And yet, Latin America remains, stubbornly, among the most unequal regions in the world. Redistributive welfare states in the region remain small, truncated, or nonexistent – even in states that are clearly capable of engaging in more redistribution. Although recent years have seen some improvements in some countries, the region remains the most unequal in the world.

This review examines how scholarship on political parties and representation can help us make sense of the under-provision of redistribution in the region. Why have democratic government failed to address the region's inequality and failed to respond to the overwhelming public support for redistribution?

Political conditions in Latin America undermine the degree to which even democratically elected governments will engage in the broad-based redistribution necessary to address Latin America's high inequality. The region's structurally high levels of inequality make it difficult for political parties to institutionalize, instead privileging personalism and clientelistic ties between voters and politicians. As a result, parties in the region lack the institutionalization necessary to build stable electoral and legislative coalitions and to incentivize politicians to pursue universalistic redistribution.

What these political factors highlight is the fact that persistently high levels of economic inequality have proved to be self-reinforcing. Such structurally high levels of inequality create a political environment that is less hospitable to the emergence of institutionalized party systems, and weak party systems are less likely to engage in the kind of government redistribution that can significantly reduce inequality. Economic inequality is also associated with political inequalities that undermine redistributive politics: more economically unequal contexts seem to exhibit higher levels of political bias among elected representatives toward the preferences of the affluent. To the extent that representatives act upon those preferences in policymaking, we would expect fewer redistributive policy outcomes. Again, the result is less redistribution and, therefore, enduring economic inequality. High inequality is a difficult trap to escape.

This does not mean that economic inequality is wholly inescapable. Indeed, there are important instances in which countries in the region achieved substantial redistribution, as well as impressive party-system institutionalization.[18] High levels of economic inequality may help to foster political conditions that are not particularly conducive to redistribution, but they need not

[18] Given data availability, we know less about whether Latin American democracies exhibited higher levels of political equality in some instances, though there is some variation over time and across countries in the Lupu and Warner (2022a) dataset.

be deterministic. There are still tools and reforms policymakers could pursue to induce and support more institutionalized party systems and strengthen political representation. If they are effective, they may go a long way toward producing more government redistribution and fighting economic inequality in the region. But we must also recognize that the problem of high inequality in Latin America is as much a cause as it is an outcome of the region's political failure to meet public demand for redistribution.

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