

Indigenous voters and party system fragmentation in Latin America

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Abstract

This article shows that ethnic cleavages have contributed to electoral fragmentation in Latin America, but not in the way that the social cleavages literature would expect. It finds that party system fragmentation in the region is not correlated with ethnic diversity, but rather with the proportion of the population that is indigenous. The failure of the main parties to adequately represent indigenous people, it argues, has led indigenous voters to shift their support to a variety of smaller populist and leftist parties, which has produced high levels of party system fragmentation in indigenous areas. Where a significant indigenous party has emerged, however, indigenous voters have flocked to that party, which has reduced party system fragmentation. Analyses of sub-national electoral data from Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru provide support for these arguments.

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Party system fragmentation is widely associated with a variety of political and economic ills. Countries with high levels of party system fragmentation are commonly thought to be less governable and more prone to populism, economic crisis, executive-legislative deadlock, and democratic breakdown (Kaufman and Stallings, 1989; Linz, 1994; Haggard and Kaufman, 1995). Multi-party systems may be particularly

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pernicious in Latin America because of the prevalence of presidential systems in the region, which [Mainwaring \(1993\)](#) suggests tends to exacerbate the problems associated with party system fragmentation. Indeed, a large number of Latin American nations, including Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, and Venezuela, have highly fragmented party systems, and these nations have at times experienced the economic and political problems associated with such systems.

The myriad problems associated with multi-party systems in Latin America make it crucial that we understand the causes of party system fragmentation in the region. With the exception of [Coppedge \(1997\)](#), existing studies of party system fragmentation in Latin America have focused exclusively on institutional causes, such as the existence of majority run-off presidential elections, non-concurrent presidential-legislative elections, high district magnitude, and direct elections of governors ([Shugart and Carey, 1992](#); [Jones, 1995](#); [Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997](#); [Payne et al., 2002](#); [Moreno, 2003](#)).¹ The current emphasis on the institutional roots of party system fragmentation in Latin America is surprising considering that the literature on the causes of party system fragmentation coming from other regions has long stressed the important role played by social cleavages in shaping party systems ([Lipset and Rokkan, 1967](#); [Powell, 1982](#); [Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994](#); [Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997](#); [Moser, 2001](#)).

This article examines how social cleavages—in particular the voting patterns of the indigenous population—have affected party system fragmentation in the region. It finds that the proportion of the population that is indigenous is highly correlated with party system fragmentation at the sub-national level in the region, especially in those countries where indigenous identities are highly salient. As this study shows, indigenous people have tended to vote for the main parties at lower levels than non-indigenous people in large part because these parties have failed to adequately represent them. Where no significant indigenous party exists, indigenous voters have typically split their votes between the main parties and a variety of smaller populist and leftist parties, which has produced high levels of party system fragmentation. Where an indigenous party has emerged, however, indigenous voters have typically flocked to it in large numbers, which has reduced party system fragmentation. The findings of this article thus parallel earlier studies by [Van Cott \(2000\)](#) and [Madrid \(in press\)](#), which found that the political exclusion of the indigenous has led to low levels of party system institutionalization and high levels of electoral volatility.

[Section 1](#) of this article discusses why, contrary to the expectations of the social cleavages literature, ethnic diversity is not likely to cause party system fragmentation in Latin America. It then explains why party system fragmentation is likely to worsen with increases in the proportion of the population that is indigenous, except where important indigenous parties exist. [Section 2](#) tests these hypotheses through quantitative analyses of the determinants of party system fragmentation at the sub-national level in four Latin American countries with large indigenous populations. The conclusion explores the implications of these findings.

¹ [Coppedge \(1997\)](#) suggests that a variety of political and social cleavages shape party system fragmentation in Latin America, but he does not seek to measure such cleavages.

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