



*Time, Power, and Resistances in Latin America:
Narratives, Democracy, and Global Reconfigurations
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How have some presidents co-opted electoral bodies in Latin America?

¿Cómo han cooptado algunos presidentes a los organismos electorales en América Latina?

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ABSTRACT

This study, based on qualitative comparative politics research in Latin America, analyzes the theoretical framework of the concept of political co-optation from political science, philosophical, and economic perspectives. It seeks to answer the question: How have some presidents co-opted electoral bodies in Latin America? It also takes up the challenge of theoretically and empirically testing the hypothesis that the operationalization of the co-optation of electoral bodies carried out by the presidencies of Chávez, Correa, and Morales to remain in power constitutes a model of political-electoral co-optation adopted by some populist presidents in Latin America. To this end, the state of the art is examined in depth, starting from the concept of subtle domination, the notion of cultural rootedness, the conceptual specification of the co-optation of the electoral body, and the description of how the concept has been addressed in Latin America during different stages identified in the literature as the “Left Turn” (1998-2010) and the “Tired Democracy” (2011-present), or the “Pink Tide” (1998-2015) and the “Right Turn” (2015-2023). The research also aims to construct a theoretical and empirical analysis of the powers of veto players and of populism as a useful category for this study, concluding with a comparative analysis of the cases and of the variables emerging from the Latin American findings.

Keywords: Political Co-optation; Status Quo; Electoral Autonomy; Democracy; Veto Players.

RESUMEN

Con una investigación cualitativa de política comparada en América Latina se analizará el marco teórico del concepto de cooptación política desde la definición politóloga, filosófica y económica. Aspirando a responder la interpelación de: ¿Cómo han cooptado algunos presidentes a los organismos electorales en América Latina?; así como, aceptando la provocación para comprobar teórica y empíricamente, la hipótesis definida como: “La operacionalización de la cooptación de los organismos electorales ejecutada por los presidencialismos de Chávez, Correa y Morales para mantenerse en el poder, son modelos de cooptación político-electoral adoptados por algunos presidentes de corte populista en América Latina”. De tal forma, se abordará exhaustivamente el estado del arte desde el concepto de dominación sutil, la concepción de arraigo cultural, la especificación conceptual de la cooptación del órgano electoral, la descripción del concepto en la región latinoamericana en las diversas etapas identificadas en la literatura como periodos denominados: “Giro a la Izquierda” (1998-2010) y “Democracia Fatigada” (2011 a la fecha) o “Marea Rosa” (1998-2015) y “Giro a la Derecha” (2015-2023). Asimismo, se pretende construir

el análisis teórico y empírico de las facultades de los actores con veto, del populismo como categoría útil para el análisis de esta investigación; finalizando con el análisis comparado de los casos y de las variables de los hallazgos latinoamericanos.

Palabras clave: Cooptación Política; Status Quo; Autonomía Electoral; Democracia; Actores Con Veto.

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic political system, electoral bodies are the institutions that legitimize peaceful political change or continuity. They are the institutions within the political system that guarantee the stability of the concept of minimal democracy, based on universal suffrage for men and women and free, competitive, and periodic elections.

It is therefore pertinent to describe the variables of political-electoral co-optation and to operationalize cases of electoral body co-optation in the Latin American region.

It is also relevant to analyze the veto power that presidents and legislative chambers have to change the status quo of political systems, a power legitimately granted to them by popular vote.

Explain co-optation in electoral bodies in Latin America from a comparative perspective, identifying the most representative positive cases with other cases in the Latin American region that have developed in the periods known as: “Turn to the Left” (1998-2010) and “Fatigued Democracy” (2011 to date) according to Alcántara, M. (2003) or in the “Pink Tide” (1998-2010) and “Turn to the Right” (2015-2023) according to Torrico, M. (2021); to identify the phenomenon of co-optation of electoral bodies by some presidents, taking as reference the cases of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, as described by Faustino Torres, A. (2022).

The qualitative research methodology of comparative politics (Sartori, 1984) and the method of similarities and differences allow this research to conduct a case-historical analysis to answer the research question: How have some presidents co-opted electoral bodies in Latin America?

The theoretical background of the state of the art identifies the actions taken by presidents in Latin America to achieve the co-optation of electoral bodies, introducing the following variables:

1. Attacking the electoral body in the media to spread mistrust: positioning it as an enemy of democracy.
2. Reinforcing the myth of “legitimate delegation,” as categorized by O’Donnell (1994), with the institutionalization of participatory democracy mechanisms (popular consultations, re-elections) and messianic discourse.
3. Purge the electoral body: control the election of its members to bias them in favor of the government in power.
4. Reforming the constitution or electoral laws to integrate the electoral body or remove its autonomy.

At the conclusion of this research, we will observe whether these variables described in

the introduction are sufficient to achieve the phenomenon of co-optation or whether other variables can be observed that are sufficient or necessary to confirm or refute the following hypothesis: “The operationalization of the co-optation of electoral bodies carried out by the presidential regimes of Chávez, Correa, and Morales to remain in power are models of political-electoral co-optation adopted by some populist presidents in Latin America.”

Thus, the following research objective is defined: “To describe the operationalization of the co-optation of electoral bodies in the Latin American presidential systems of Chávez, Correa, and Morales, which the state of the art has described as precedents or models of co-optation, in order to discover whether other presidents in Latin America reproduce the necessary or sufficient variables of co-optation.”

DEVELOPMENT

Political co-optation, as defined by Valenzuela and Yévenes (2015:470), is the political control that prevents autonomy and power from institutions other than the president; it is also conceived as subtle centralist repression: a practice that originates from the elites to maintain the status quo or establishment.

The reference to Latin America’s colonial past characterizes the region’s cultural element and the socio-political assimilation of caciquismo. O’Donnell (1994:63) conceptualizes these types of authoritarian government (Caesarism, caudillismo, populism, and other similar forms) as ways of characterizing delegative democracy in the region, as I paraphrase below: “... Whether due to culture, tradition, or structured learning throughout history, the plebiscitary tendencies of delegative democracy were noticeable in most Latin American countries...”

O’Donnell (1994:61) cites classical political philosophers in his work to highlight the differences between delegative democracy and representative democracy, stating that delegative democracy is, according to O’Donnell: “...more democratic but less liberal than representative democracy...”, In other words, “...delegative democracy is very individualistic, but in a more Hobbesian than Lockean way; voters are expected to elect (...) the most appropriate individual () to take responsibility for the country’s destiny...”, since “...the extreme individualism of this model is related to the organicism of the Leviathan...”.

In this model, the representative of the national executive power is seen as «the alpha and omega of politics» in the nation, unlike the Lockean model, which contemplates modifying or abolishing the social contract if necessary, thereby guaranteeing control over power.

Political co-optation of the Electoral Body

O’Donnell’s (1996:61) theoretical-conceptual reference to delegative democracy supports the idea that, in this type of regime, the institutions of the political-administrative system that most inconvenience presidents are the autonomous bodies that regulate state power through accountability mechanisms. This means that the electoral body is the autonomous body most attacked and undermined by the federal executive and legislative branches, as it represents, in the democratic political system. This institution gives legitimacy to peaceful political alternation, according to Morlino (2014:44).

Change in the status quo, powers of actors with veto power

However, the state of the art also allows us to analyze dissenting positions regarding the powers of actors with veto power. To paraphrase Tsebelis (2006:26): “...Veto players are

individual or collective actors whose consensus is necessary for a change in the status quo. It follows, then, that a change in the status quo requires a unanimous decision by all veto players...”

Thus, in this same vein of dissent, Pérez Liñán (2003:150) explains how the power struggle is one of the crises of presidentialism to the detriment of the regime’s governability, basing his position on the work of Linz (1990 and 1994), as well as on the research of Burbano de Lara and Rowland García (1998); Cox and McCubbins (2001); Jones (1995); Mainwaring (1993); Mainwaring and Shugart (1997); Mejía Acosta (2002); Shugart and Carey (1992).

However, if the actors with constitutional veto power are the president (an actor with individual veto power) and the legislative chambers (actors with collective veto power), and the struggle between powers generates political crises and crises of governance in Latin American presidential political systems, then the political strategies or actions they undertake to maintain or change the status quo are part of their constitutional or political powers.

Along the same lines, Nohlen’s (1992:53) contribution allows us to consider whether electoral bodies are part of the political institutions of Latin American presidential political systems and whether their relationships are invariably linked to party systems and key to the preservation or transformation of the status quo of political actors, conceptualized as “actors with veto power,” who will inevitably exercise their power to manipulate electoral institutions or procedures, since, according to Nohlen (1981:53 ff.), electoral bodies are the key institutions that determine “...the procedure for converting votes into executive and legislative positions...”

In a comparative perspective. Analyzing electoral co-optation in Latin America

The vast existing literature on comparative politics in the Latin American region has thoroughly mapped the territory, diagnosing the periods referred to as the “Turn to the Left” from the 1990s to 2010, and “Fatigued Democracy” with left-wing and right-wing populism from 2011 to date, periods that are also described as the “pink tide (1998-2015)” and the “turn to the right” (2015-2023).

Classifying cases of populist phenomena as observable political behaviors that occur in the region, according to Alcántara (2012: 273). Alcántara (2017), in turn, draws on O’Donnell’s (1994) conceptualization of “delegative democracy” to explain the transitions to democracy in the region, the factors that modulate them, and the challenges they face regarding the quality of democracy.

Portrait of the main positive cases of political-electoral co-optation in the region

Undoubtedly, several political scientists have been concerned with and engaged in studying the phenomenon, such as Faustino (2022:99), who compared the impact on the autonomy and independence of electoral bodies in the cases of the populist governments of Venezuela in 1999, Ecuador in 2008, and Bolivia in 2009, as quoted: “...Populist governments in Latin America, to maintain their hegemony, redefined electoral bodies. The most important changes concerned the appointment of members of the highest governing bodies. This study analyzes the cases of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, where governments exerted influence to take control of these bodies. It concludes that the impartiality of the electoral function was affected...”
Delimitation of cases.

Following Faustino (2022), the following positive cases of the political phenomenon under

analysis can be identified:

- Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, Venezuela (1999-2013).
- Juan Evo Morales, Bolivia (2006-2019).
- Rafael Vicente Correa Delgado, Ecuador (2007-2017).

Based on the characteristics that describe political-electoral co-optation, the argument can be inferred that: “Populist political leaders are the most likely to co-opt electoral bodies in Latin America in order to transform the status quo.” To select the most current cases of populist political leadership, based on the literature of Urbinati (2020) and Casullo (2019):

- Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico (2018-2024).
- Nayib Argmando Bukele Ortez, El Salvador (2019-present).

Based on the historical reference of the Latin American region during the period known as the “shift to the right” from 2015 to 2023, the following cases are selected:

- Mauricio Macri, Argentina (2015).
- Jair Messias Bolsonaro, Brazil (2019-2022).

This selection concludes with a case of popular, but not populist, leadership based on the contribution of Pippa Norris (2012- 2014) regarding Latin American cases that received the highest ratings in electoral integrity: José Alberto Mujica Cordano, Uruguay (2010-2014).

Methodological strategy

Following Ragin (1987), the comparison method is selected to understand, explain, and interpret the categories of analysis, as well as to analyze observable political behaviors and events in order to contrast them empirically (Sanders, 1995, p. 25) with each other and as a whole, with the elements identified in the theoretical analysis as key to the operationalization of co-optation, selecting the method of comparing a few countries (Landman, 2011) and using the qualitative verification method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), proposed by Ragin (1985; 2006).

The terms of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela from 1999 to 2013, Evo Morales in Bolivia from 2006 to 2019, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador from 2007 to 2017 co-opted the electoral bodies of their countries, with the operationalization of the following categories of analysis:

1. Partisan misalignment (alternation). The political conditions that existed when they came to power were conducive to the emergence of their leadership, with polarized, multiparty systems and high levels of fragmentation, which facilitated partisan misalignment (alternation) with ease.
2. Party Movement: Alternation that they promoted with the emergence of their political leadership through social movements that later formed political parties in order to participate in the electoral contest.
3. Messianic discourse: The marked positioning of their political intention as the saviors of the nation, who came to vindicate the people with their messianic discourse, is a very distinctive characteristic that can be identified, although none of them express attacks on electoral bodies in their speeches.
4. Promotion of electoral reforms that led to a loss of autonomy for electoral bodies: Through these reforms, they institutionalized constitutional regulations to co-opt the electoral bodies of their countries.
5. Decline in the Electoral Integrity Perception Index. These electoral reforms led to a decline in public perceptions of the integrity of electoral bodies and electoral

management.

6. Institutionalization of direct democracy. The electoral reforms also included mechanisms of direct democracy, which they managed to institutionalize (popular consultation, recall of mandate, referendum, and plebiscite) both normatively and instrumentally, thereby reinforcing the “myth of legitimate delegation” and, consequently, remaining in power for several terms.

7. Intervention in the selection of members. Similarly, the electoral reforms allowed them to establish regulations to intervene in the selection and appointment of members of electoral bodies and to engage in lobbying strategies to co-opt the will of electoral arbiters in favor of their political interests.

8. Remaining in power for several terms. All categories of analysis indicated that they could be re-elected to their positions.

Truth table

Next, using the QCA methodology, the analysis will be empirically verified to filter the independent variables or categories of analysis and to identify, with the truth table, which cases (N=8); as well as to determine which variables or categories operationalize the process of presidential co-optation of the electoral body, and which ones are necessary and which ones are sufficient to obtain the result of the electoral political co-optation of some presidents in Latin America.

Table 5.1. Truth table											
N	Cases	X1. Partisan misalignment	X2. Party Movement	X3. Discourse. Leadership Messianic.	X4. Speech. Media attack.	X5. Electoral reform. Loss of Autonomy.	X6. Deficit in the Integrity Index.	X7. Institutionalization Participatory Democracy	X8. Presidential intervention. Selection members of the Electoral Body.	X9. Continuity in power for several terms.	Y. Political- Electoral Co-optation
1	Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, Venezuela (1999-2013)	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Juan Evo Morales, Bolivia (2006-2019)	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
3	Rafael Vicente Correa Delgado, Ecuador (2007-2017)	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
4	Jair Messias Bolsonaro, Brazil (2019-2022).	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
5	Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico (2018-2024).	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
6	Nayib Armando Bukele Ortiz El Salvador, (2019-2024).	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
7	José Alberto Mujica Cordano, Uruguay (2010-2015).	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
8	Mauricio Macri, Argentina (2015-2019)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
		NECESSARY, SUFFICIENT	NECESSARY, NO SUFFICIENT	NECESSARY, SUFFICIENT	NO NECESSARY, NO SUFFICIENT.	NECESSARY, NO SUFFICIENT	NECESSARY, NO SUFFICIENT	NECESSARY, NO SUFFICIENT	NECESSARY, SUFFICIENT	NECESSARY, NO SUFFICIENT	

CONCLUSIONS

As hypothesized, the compared cases adopt the models of co-optation of electoral bodies operationalized by Chávez, Correa, and Morales, although they have not yet achieved the same results.

Specifically, the comparative case that most closely reflects the adoption of the Chavista model is that of Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico (2018-2024), who achieved partisan misalignment (alternation) upon coming to power through a movement party espousing a messianic discourse. although it is the only case in which his discourse reflects a media attack on the electoral body, he also undertakes electoral reforms aimed at reducing the autonomy of electoral bodies but has not yet managed to implement them fully; as a result, he has not yet managed to generate a deficit in the perception of the electoral integrity index; However, it does manage to institutionalize normative and instrumental mechanisms of direct democracy with the political intention of reinforcing the “myth of legitimate delegation,” although it does not achieve the binding result it expected in the 2022 recall referendum. Likewise, it does not manage to intervene in the selection of the members of the national electoral body, as the mechanism for renewing the vacant positions of National Electoral Councilors of the National Electoral Institute in Mexico in 2023 was carried out through a random selection mechanism, so it was not even necessary to implement the political strategy of “lobbying.” The last variable described in the truth table, referring to the permanence of the mandate for several consecutive terms, did not occur in the Mexican case analyzed in the truth table either.

Subsequently, the comparative case of Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022) shows that, upon coming to power, he faced partisan misalignment and pronounced a messianic discourse. However, his government decreased the perception of electoral integrity. It constitutionally identifies his powers of intervention in the selection of members of the electoral body. However, he does not achieve reelection despite his attempts and, as a result, fails to co-opt the electoral body.

The cases that least resemble the characteristics of the co-optation models are those of Macri in Argentina (2015-2019) and Mujica in Uruguay (2010-2015), each with only two characteristics that do not significantly impact the outcome of co-optation, despite one being identified as a right-wing populist leader and the other as a non-populist left-wing leader.

The last case to be highlighted in this analysis is that of Bukele in El Salvador (2019-2024), as it reflects in the table of truth the conditions of sufficiency with the variables of:

1. Partisan misalignment (alternation)
2. Messianic discourse
3. Constitutional intervention in the selection of the members of the electoral body.

The latest finding shows that he has managed to co-opt the electoral bodies, as they authorized him to register for the 2024 election and seek re-election to his mandate, despite the re-election mechanism in El Salvador being unconstitutional. It should be noted that the members of the Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE) were appointed by the Congress controlled by the Bukele government, enabling him to remain in power.

In conclusion, the hypothesis is partially confirmed, as the presidential systems of Chávez, Correa, and Morales do indeed create the necessary conditions for the co-optation of electoral bodies in the region, a phenomenon adopted by some presidents in Latin America. Moreover, although left-wing populist presidents were the ones who most often presented the necessary

and sufficient conditions for the phenomenon, only one of the cases compared achieved co-optation, understood as the electoral body's loss of autonomy, tending to institutionalize mechanisms to remain in power.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of participatory democracy mechanisms that presidents implement through political-electoral reforms during their terms undermines the analytical definition of the concept of co-optation of the electoral body, since, far from co-opting it to remain in power, it further democratizes it.

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