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# REEVALUATING RUNOFFS IN LATIN AMERICA

*Cynthia McClintock*

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In recent decades, there has been a striking change in the way that most democracies elect their presidents. The most common rule used for electing presidents worldwide has shifted from plurality (first-past-the-post) to majority runoff (a requirement for a second round between the top two candidates if no candidate wins 50 percent of the vote). In the 1950s, plurality was used in more than 50 percent of presidential elections, but that figure fell below 30 percent during 2000–11; the portion of presidential elections using majority runoff, meanwhile, climbed from below 10 percent to about 60 percent between these periods.<sup>1</sup> The shift has continued, and in 2016, among the countries classified by Freedom House as “electoral democracies” that held direct presidential elections, 73 percent in Latin America, 88 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 86 percent in Europe, and 63 percent in the Asia-Pacific used majority runoff.<sup>2</sup>

What are the implications of the shift for democratic quality and stability? The vast majority of scholars are critical of majority runoff.<sup>3</sup> Their primary concern is that runoff, by making it less difficult for new parties to enter the electoral arena, will lead to an unmanageable proliferation of parties. As Matthew S. Shugart and John Carey have argued: “We find the plurality rule appealing because it is more likely than majority runoff to give voters an efficient choice between the candidates of two broad coalitions.”<sup>4</sup>

Concerns about majority runoff yielding a plethora of parties also arose during debates in the U.S. Congress after the 1968 election, when

the third-party presidential candidacy of George Wallace had raised the possibility that neither Republican Richard Nixon nor Democrat Hubert Humphrey would gain a majority of Electoral College votes. Bills in both Congressional chambers proposed replacing the College with a direct popular vote using runoff. These bills would have set the threshold for first-round victory at 40 rather than 50 percent, making it easier for major-party candidates to win without a runoff. These initiatives failed, of course, and today the United States is the only country in the world where a candidate who loses the popular vote can become president.

Recently, some in the United States have proposed ranked-choice voting (also called “instant runoff,” the “alternative vote,” or the “instantaneous vote”) as an alternative to the Electoral College. With this rule, voters rank their top candidates. If no candidate wins more than 50 percent of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest such votes is eliminated; voters who chose this candidate have their ballots added to the totals of their second-ranked candidate; then, the ballots are re-tabulated. This process continues until a candidate reaches 50 percent. Ranked-choice voting has been adopted for presidential elections in Ireland; for some legislative elections in Australia, India, and Papua New Guinea; and for many subnational elections, including municipal elections in six U.S. states. Though research is scant, the primary advantage of ranked-choice voting over runoff is avoiding the possibility that the second-choice candidate of most voters will be eliminated when first-choice votes are widely dispersed. The primary disadvantage is greater complexity.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to conventional wisdom about runoff, the experience of Latin American countries in recent decades offers grounds for optimism about this rule. Democracy has confronted serious challenges in Latin America since the “third wave” of democratization reached the region in 1978. These included grappling with the legacies of authoritarian leaders and parties; integrating a Marxist-influenced left often previously excluded from government; and avoiding the potential domination of politics by unrepresentative “cartel” parties. On the whole, runoff proved better suited to sustaining high-quality democracies in the face of these difficulties.

There are a number of factors behind this surprising occurrence. Plurality rules are supposed to keep the number of parties down, but in many elections more parties than expected (often three parties rather than two) were competitive. In these cases, plurality often led to complications. Conversely, although elections under runoff tended to feature a larger number of parties than those under plurality, the more open electoral arena under runoff had an upside: It enabled new parties and parties that had previously been excluded to be competitive and gain respect for the democratic process. And, mitigating common concerns about elections

in which many parties compete, the need to achieve majority support under runoff bolstered the winner's legitimacy and enticed candidates toward the political center.

### **Plurality, Runoff, and Democracy**

To compare the impact of plurality and runoff across Latin American countries, our study classified countries according to their electoral rules and levels of democracy. Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela used plurality throughout the third wave. Meanwhile Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, and Uruguay shifted to majority runoff either at or after the time that the third wave reached the country.

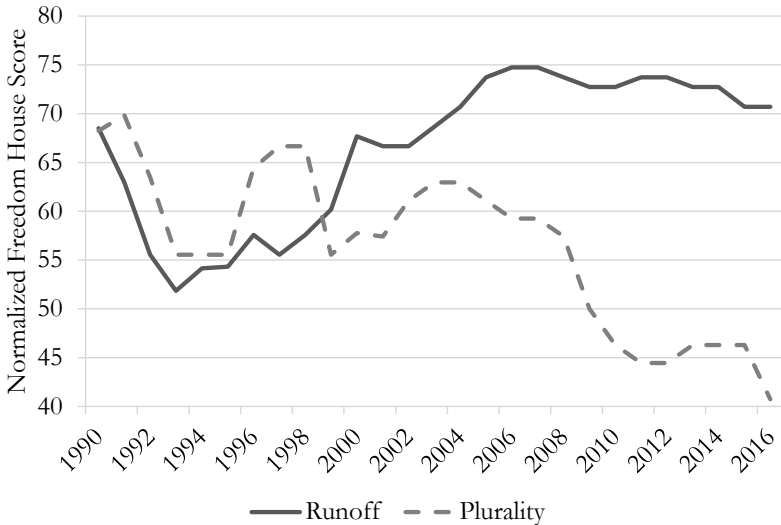
In a few cases, anomalous electoral-rule characteristics made these classifications more complicated. First, Bolivia is omitted from the study due to an unusual rule, in effect until 2009, that charged the legislature with selecting the president from among the top two finishers (or, prior to 1990, the top three) if no candidate tallied 50 percent.

Second, a number of countries set thresholds for victory below 50 percent. These were Argentina since its 1995 election (with a threshold of 45 percent, or 40 percent if the top candidate enjoys a ten-point lead); Costa Rica (40 percent); Ecuador since its 2002 election (40 percent with a ten-point lead); and Nicaragua for its 1996 election (45 percent) and for its 2001, 2006, and 2011 elections (35 percent with a 5 percent lead or 40 percent without). This group was too small for a separate quantitative analysis. Because a threshold below 40 percent is widely deemed so low as to be tantamount to plurality, I classified rules with thresholds for a first-round victory between 40 and 50 percent as runoff but those with thresholds below 40 percent as plurality. The only country with a threshold under 40 percent for more than one election was Nicaragua. It adopted this rule in 2000 at the urging of Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) leader Daniel Ortega, who sought to return to the presidency but doubted that he could garner more than 40 percent in a first round or win a subsequent runoff.

For levels of democracy, I used Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties. As most scholars do, I added the two categories and used the totals to produce a scale from 100 (the best democratic performance) to 0 (the worst). I also examined scores from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices, which became available only in January 2016. Specifically, I used V-Dem's indicators for liberal democracy, which emphasize civil liberties and effective checks and balances.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis begins with the year 1990, at which point the third wave had reached most of the countries in the dataset. According to most analysts, however, five countries (El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Para-

**FIGURE—PRESIDENTIAL-ELECTION RULES AND FREEDOM HOUSE SCORES, 1990–2016**



*Note:* This graphic displays averages of normalized Freedom House scores across all countries with runoff and plurality systems during the years of measurement.

guay, and Nicaragua) had not yet transitioned to democracy as of 1990. Since election rules usually matter only in free and fair elections, these countries were included in the dataset only after they began to hold such elections.

The Figure above compares the trajectory of Freedom House scores for countries with runoff to those of countries with plurality between 1990 and 2016. Average Freedom House scores for the two groups initially followed similar trajectories, with a slight advantage for plurality countries until 1999. After 1999, however, runoff countries consistently boasted higher scores. Scores for plurality countries dropped sharply after 2004, and by the period 2011–16 the gap between the two groups widened to almost thirty percentage points.

The trajectory for V-Dem liberal democracy scores between 1990 and 2016 was very similar. Scores also plummeted among plurality countries after 1999 but rose among runoff countries and, during 2011–16, the gap averaged more than twenty percentage points.

To assess whether it was presidential-election rules or other factors that affected levels of democracy, I conducted regression analysis. I controlled for variables including GDP per capita (in constant 2010 U.S. dollars); annual percentage change in GDP growth; inequality (the Gini coefficient); education (percentage completing primary school); the number of years a country had been democratic; and the effective number of political parties (ENPP), calculated using Murkku Laakso and Rein Taagepera's index.<sup>7</sup> The results showed a statistically signifi-

cant effect of presidential-election rules on democracy scores: Runoff was significant to superior Freedom House and V-Dem scores at the .05 level.

### Why More Parties Compete

In keeping with earlier studies, I found that countries with plurality tended to have a smaller number of parties than those with runoff. Over the period 1990–2016, the average number of parties was approximately 2.9 under plurality versus 4.5 under runoff. More than six parties competed in the most recent elections in Chile, Colombia, and Guatemala, and more than ten in Brazil. In Ecuador, the number averaged about 6.0 between 1990 and 2009.

The reasons for a smaller number of political parties under plurality are various. First, a new party trying to emerge is rarely poised to win at the start. Under plurality, most citizens vote strategically for the candidate they prefer among those who have a chance of winning; new parties are effectively “spoiler” parties. But under runoff, citizens can vote sincerely in the first round for the candidate they like best out of the entire field. The runner-up party has a second opportunity to win, and the parties that do not advance to the runoff can still make their voices heard through endorsements.

Second, under runoff, a new party can test its strength in the first round and is not compelled to dilute its brand by forming alliances. Under plurality, however, if there is a longstanding party with a political base of 35 or 40 percent, a new party must ally with other parties to win. For example, in Venezuela after the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez and his consolidation of a large political base, opposition parties had to form alliances to have any chance of victory. The result was an opposition “unity candidate” drawn from the leadership of the two partly discredited “traditional” parties: Democratic Action (AD) in the 2006 election and the Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization (COPEI) in 2012.

In Latin America, the challenges that new parties face under plurality are particularly severe due to frequently inaccurate opinion polls. Between 2000 and 2012, only 34 percent of preelection polls in presidential races in Latin America conducted approximately one month before the election were correct within 5.0 points of the actual result, and only 48 percent of the polls at approximately three months out were correct within 10.0 points. The corresponding figures for presidential or prime-ministerial elections in France, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States between 2000 and 2012 were 73 percent and 88 percent. Inaccurate polls increase the difficulty of strategic voting and—since polls cannot be trusted to indicate which opposition leader will be the strongest—of alliance negotiations.

The expectation of plurality advocates is not only that runoff leads to

a larger number of parties but also that a larger number of parties impairs democracy. In my analysis, however, this fear of plurality advocates was not borne out: A larger number of political parties had no negative effect on Freedom House or V-Dem scores. Indeed, a larger number of parties was correlated with superior Freedom House and V-Dem scores, although this finding was not statistically significant. How could this be?

One reason is that, when Latin American countries had a small number of parties, this was often because longstanding parties remained dominant. Unfortunately, many of these parties were or gradually became undemocratic in a variety of ways.

Some longstanding parties harbored significant “authoritarian legacies.”<sup>8</sup> In thirteen of our seventeen countries, at least one of the two political parties that received the largest vote shares in the first legislative election of the third wave had been complicit in a military coup, in serious violations of human rights, or (when previously in power) in abuses of checks and balances.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, some longstanding parties were “cartel” parties: Intertwined with the state, they gained power over electoral laws and machinery and, when there were two such parties, colluded to ensure that at least one of them won.<sup>10</sup> Parties were not bridges between state and society but castles with vast moats that protected their lords from the masses. Successful cartel parties included the Partido Justicialista (Peronist Party) in Argentina, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, and the National Republican Association (ANR or Colorado Party) in Paraguay. Also belonging to this category were all the party duopolies that endured at the start of the third wave (in Colombia, Honduras, Uruguay, and Venezuela).<sup>11</sup>

Further, the persistence of *caudillismo* meant that incumbent and former presidents who wanted to “die with their boots on” often dominated established parties. For the period 1988–2006, Javier Corrales calculated that, when ex-presidents were allowed to compete, they did so and won at least 10 percent more frequently in Latin America than in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Extending the dataset chronologically and examining a slightly different set of countries, I found a similar pattern. Indeed, in Latin America even losing candidates often dominated their parties for years.

A second reason why a smaller number of parties was not correlated with superior democratic quality was that the number of parties under plurality, though lower than under runoff, was often higher than countries with plurality rules could properly accommodate. The average number of parties across countries with plurality approached 3.0, and in each of these countries it exceeded 3.0 in at least one election between the first third-wave vote and 2016. With three or more parties, the prospects for the election of presidents who command less than 40 percent of the vote—a worry of both plurality and runoff advocates—are considerable. During the third wave in Latin America, at least one election

was won with 41 percent or less in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

There are several factors behind the larger-than-expected number of parties under plurality rules. New competitors emerged when voters, amid severe inequality, flocked to leftist parties in the first decade of the 2000s. In the current decade they seem to be looking to parties that promise integrity.

Further, despite the incentive structure of plurality, party coalitions often proved elusive, and dominant parties or leaders profited from divided oppositions. In the Dominican Republic in the 1986, 1990, and 1994 elections, *caudillo* Joaquín Balaguer exploited rivalries between two opposition leaders, Juan Bosch and José Francisco Peña Gómez. In Mexico, even when it appeared (incorrectly) that the traditionally hegemonic PRI would win the 2000 election, ideological differences, leaders' ambitions, and campaign-finance rules kept the opposition National Action Party (PAN) and Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) from forming an alliance. In Nicaragua in 2006, the longstanding Liberal Party divided over the issue of corruption, enabling the return to power of Ortega. In Paraguay, the opposition to the long-dominant Colorado Party usually split between the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (PLRA), which has long been the electoral runner-up, and newcomers. In Uruguay during the 1990s, the established parties—the Colorados and the Blancos—chose not to ally against a challenge from the left due to distinct clientelist networks and a rivalry dating back more than a century.

Still, plurality advocates' concerns about the proliferation of parties under runoff are not unwarranted. With many parties, executives are less likely to have majorities in the legislature. Parties are more likely to be personalistic vehicles. Finally, in a field of many presidential candidates, a candidate supported as a second choice by most voters—who would win under ranked-choice voting—might not reach a runoff.

The problems posed by a very large number of parties were especially evident in Ecuador between 1990 and 2009. Presidents' parties often held less than 30 percent of the legislative seats, and executive-legislative conflict was severe. Without institutionalized parties, successive presidents shifted their policy positions and, lacking both political bases and legislative majorities, were ousted. Several presidents would have been unlikely to win under ranked-choice voting. In part for these reasons, Ecuador was the only runoff country whose Freedom House scores declined between 2000 and 2012.

## Presidential Legitimacy

Supporters of plurality expect this rule to produce two strong parties. When there are in fact three or more, however, there is a risk that a candidate who would have been unlikely to be able to muster majority



support and win a runoff might be elected president. A president elected by a minority of voters who could not have won the support of a majority suffers a legitimacy deficit according to the classic understanding of legitimacy as “the consent of the people.”<sup>13</sup>

The perception that a president’s legitimacy is based on winning a majority of the vote is widespread. In 2006–2007 surveys that I carried out with legislators in Latin America (primarily in Chile, Mexico, and Peru), 84 percent of the 133 legislators who preferred runoff chose greater legitimacy for the president as their reason. This was the most commonly cited reason among legislators in all countries. The legislators’ concern likely stems, in part, from the memory of military coups during the years prior to the third wave of democratization. The coups in Argentina in 1963, Brazil in 1955, Chile in 1973, Ecuador in 1968, and Peru in 1962 had manifold causes, but presidents who lacked an electoral majority were one common factor: These overthrows occurred after elections in which the incoming presidents had won with, respectively, 25, 36, 37, 33, and 28 percent of the vote, and those seeking to explain the coups often cited the fallen government’s lack of legitimacy.

For the 45 elections held under plurality between 1978 and 2012, I determined that in seven of them (15 percent) a “reversal” of the first-round result (defeat of the first-round victor by the first-round runner-up) would have been likely or virtually certain under a runoff rule. These were the elections in Colombia in 1986; the Dominican Republic in 1986 and 1990; Nicaragua in 2006; Paraguay in 1993 and 2003; and Uruguay in 1984. Small vote shares also weakened presidential legitimacy when the result of a runoff would have been merely uncertain—as in Mexico’s 2006 election, won by Felipe Calderón, or Paraguay’s 2008 vote, won by Fernando Lugo—and even when the plurality winner would likely have won in a runoff, as with Rafael Caldera in Venezuela’s 1993 election.

These leaders were not always able to overcome their postelection legitimacy deficits. After Mexico’s 2006 election, Calderón struggled, as did Caldera after Venezuela’s 1993 election; after Paraguay’s 1993 election, Juan Carlos Wasmosy was almost overthrown; after Paraguay’s 2008 election, Lugo was impeached. Problems also arose in cases where presidents without majorities succeeded in cementing their power. Two such presidents, who had prevailed through unscrupulous exploitation of divisions in the opposition, grew increasingly disrespectful of democratic norms once in power: Balaguer in the Dominican Republic (who won 42 percent in 1986 and 35.5 percent in 1990) and Ortega in Nicaragua (who claimed 38 percent in 2006).

In runoff countries, on the other hand, winning majorities in a second round can bolster legitimacy. Amid the considerable political polarization in Latin America, this has helped presidents whose parties were seen as leftist or populist, including Chile’s Ricardo Lagos in 1999–2000 and

Michelle Bachelet in 2005–2006; Leonel Fernández in 1996 in the Dominican Republic; Ecuador’s Jaime Roldós in 1978–79 and Rodrigo Borja in 1998; Salvador Sánchez Cerén in 2014 in El Salvador; Guatemala’s Vinicio Cerezo in 1985 and Alvaro Colom in 2007; Ollanta Humala in 2011 in Peru; and José Mujica in 2009 in Uruguay.

Plurality advocates worry about elections won in reversals. With good reason, they fear that the president will be unlikely to have a legislative majority. This is especially the case in Latin America, where the legislative election is most often concurrent with the first round of presidential voting. Proponents of plurality often cite the cases of Jorge Serrano, who won an election in Guatemala in 1991 after receiving a mere 24 percent of votes in the first round, and Alberto Fujimori, elected in Peru in 1990 after a 29 percent tally in the first round. Both presidents executed *auto-golpes* (self-coups) that rocked their countries’ democracies.

Still, the problem of a president lacking a legislative majority is often not as severe as that of a president with a legitimacy deficit. In the cases of Guatemala in 1991 and Peru in 1990, victories by the first-round winners—Jorge Carpio with 26 percent and Mario Vargas Llosa with 33 percent, respectively—would also have been fraught: Both lost the runoffs in landslides and, as these losses attested, both were poor coalition-builders. A considerable number of other first-round winners who lost runoffs would have been likely to provoke widespread dismay had they been elected.<sup>14</sup>

It is likely that degrees of presidential legitimacy matter. By definition, a president who wins in a runoff was not the first choice of most voters. Plurality advocates’ concern that, in a runoff, a runner-up may win merely because he or she is not the widely disliked first-round winner is correct. But presidents elected by a minority of voters and opposed by the majority pose even greater problems for democratic legitimacy.

### **Enabling Extremists or Encouraging Moderation?**

Runoff rules also have positive implications for avoiding ideological extremism. Under plurality, when there are three or more parties there is a risk that a candidate could win the presidency by “playing to his or her base”—a group comprising perhaps 30 to 40 percent of voters who may hold views outside the mainstream. By contrast, under runoff, a candidate must appeal to the majority and be positioned not too far from the political center.

The incentive for moderation under runoff was especially important in many Latin American countries whose third-wave democracies featured a well-established authoritarian right and a left with varying degrees of historical roots in Marxism. During the Cold War, Marxist parties had grown in many countries but were, for the most part, kept from power. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxist ideology was in

retreat. Yet the continuing debt crisis, with low economic growth and severe inequality in most Latin American countries, meant that Marxist political perspectives still proved compelling to some voters.

Evaluations by legislators of their countries' political leaders, gathered as part of the Parliamentary Elites of Latin American project (PELA), make it possible to determine how different electoral rules affected the ideological stances of contenders.<sup>15</sup> I analyzed PELA assessments of presidents and candidates who came close to the presidency (tallying within 5.0 points of the winner in the election in plurality countries or in the second round in runoff countries) over the years 2000–12, when surveys were relatively frequent. PELA data score leaders' ideologies from 1.0 (the furthest left) to 10.0 (the furthest right).<sup>16</sup>

These data provide robust evidence of a link between runoff and ideological moderation. Between 2000 and 2012, in four of the six plurality countries there was a president or presidential candidate within 5.0 points of the winner classified at the "extreme left" (1.0 through 3.2): Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (classified in the 2010 PELA survey after his ousting), Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico in 2006, Ortega in Nicaragua in 2006, and Chávez in Venezuela in 2000. In contrast, the only president or top presidential candidate classified at the extreme left among the runoff countries (perhaps incorrectly) was Mauricio Funes in El Salvador in 2009.

Presidents and top presidential candidates at the "extreme right" (8.0–10.0 on the PELA scale) were also more common under plurality than under runoff. Presidents at the extreme right were elected in three out of six plurality countries (Ricardo Maduro in Honduras in 2001, Enrique Bolaños in Nicaragua in 2001, and Ricardo Martinelli in Panama in 2009), but only in three out of eleven runoff countries (in Colombia, Alvaro Uribe in 2003; in El Salvador, Elías Antonio Saca in 2004; and in Guatemala, Oscar Berger in 2003 and Otto Pérez Molina in 2011).

Presidents or top presidential candidates at the "moderate left" (3.21 through 4.99), on the other hand, were rare in plurality countries but common in runoff countries. The only moderate left president or top presidential candidate under plurality was Fernando Lugo in 2008 in Paraguay (also arguably an incorrect classification; Lugo was a former liberation-theology priest with hard-left agrarian-reform proposals, who deemed Paraguay's democracy merely "formal" and the traditional parties "mafias"<sup>17</sup>). By contrast, in runoff countries there were many such candidates at the moderate left. These included, in Argentina, Néstor Kirchner in 2003; in Brazil, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in 2002 and Dilma Rousseff in 2010; in Chile, Ricardo Lagos in 2000 and Michelle Bachelet in 2006; in Costa Rica, Ottón Solís in 2006; in Ecuador, Lucio Gutiérrez's coalition in 2002 and Rafael Correa in 2006; in Guatemala, Alvaro Colom in 2007; in Peru, Ollanta Humala in 2011; and in Uruguay, Tabaré Vázquez in 2004 and José Mujica in 2009.

Of these moderate leftists, Lula, Colom, Humala, and Vázquez had previously been classified at the extreme left or had run for parties classified at the extreme left. But over the span of two or three elections, these four leaders appeared to decide that, if they were to win, they would need to shift toward the center.

These patterns are not without drawbacks. The “center” is not synonymous with “good,” and ideological shifts can be problematic. Candidates who change their positions are likely to be perceived—with at least some basis in fact—as opportunistic by party militants. Especially drastic shifts can dismay voters; this was the case with Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador, elected in 2002 and ousted in 2005.

On the whole, a virtuous circle emerged in Latin American countries under runoff, involving lower barriers to entry, the requirement for majority support, and ideological moderation. Runoff rules were an advantage when it came to the key challenge of incorporating previously excluded leftist political leaders into the democratic political arena. When barriers to entry were lower, leftist leaders were more likely to gain respect for the democratic process and to moderate their positions. Entrenched parties, for their part, were less likely to resort to ugly tactics against leftist and other newcomers when they knew that that any new party would have to win 50 percent to gain power, a bar against extremism.

By contrast, a vicious circle emerged in most plurality countries. In Honduras until 2009 and Venezuela until 1993, duopolies (the Liberal and National Parties in Honduras and AD and COPEI in Venezuela) were entrenched; for decades, leftist parties struggled to emerge but failed. Similarly, the Colorado Party was entrenched in Paraguay until 2008 although it would likely have lost elections in 1993 and 2003 had there been a runoff rule. After AMLO’s very narrow loss in Mexico’s 2006 election, he blamed not only fraud but also plurality. Perceptions of exclusion and the temptation to play to political bases fueled the rise in the late 1990s and 2000s of the far-left contenders noted above.

In runoff countries, the trends under leftist presidents pointed to a more effective incorporation. Between 2000 and 2012, candidates classified at some point on the left in PELA surveys won elections in eight of eleven runoff countries (all but Colombia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic); none of these countries underwent a decline in levels of democracy during that president’s term. This was not the case for plurality countries. After the elections of Ortega in 2006 and Chávez in 1998, levels of democracy in Nicaragua and Venezuela plummeted. In Honduras and Paraguay—where elites were intensely nervous about the rise of leftist candidates—Zelaya was overthrown and Lugo was impeached. Levels of democracy fell in both countries. After the 2006 election result in Mexico, protested for months by AMLO, the level of democracy also declined.

Panama, the only plurality country that sustained high levels of democracy between 2000 and 2016, was an exception that to a certain extent proved the rule. Among the six plurality countries, it had the highest average number of parties; its political arena was relatively open to newcomers. Perhaps because of this relative openness, as well as Panama's stellar economic growth and the historical leftist credentials of its longstanding Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), no new leftist party was struggling to emerge.

### Controlling Party Proliferation

Several institutional innovations have emerged in response to concerns that runoff rules encourage a larger number of parties. The most promising of these innovations focus on legislative elections.

To date, the most commonly recommended measure is a reduced threshold (usually 40 or 45 percent rather than 50 percent) for a presidential victory in the first round. The two Latin American countries that recently adopted or modified a runoff rule—Bolivia in 2009 and Ecuador in 1998—chose a threshold of 40 percent with a 10-point lead.

Evidence about whether or not a reduced threshold will prove a felicitous compromise between majority runoff and plurality is limited. A reduced threshold has not been regularly applied in any country beyond Latin America, and in Latin America to date, only four countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Ecuador—have used a reduced threshold for more than one election. In Bolivia and Ecuador, relatively few elections have yet been held under the new threshold, and it is difficult to isolate its effects from those of the particular presidents who have been repeatedly elected—Evo Morales and Rafael Correa, respectively.

Argentina and Costa Rica are the two cases in which reduced thresholds have been in effect for extended periods, although Costa Rica's reduced threshold is anomalous because it does not include a requirement for a lead. In both countries the average number of parties was below that of Latin America as a whole. In Costa Rica, whose two longstanding parties were not widely deemed a duopoly, this threshold did not appear to raise excessive barriers to new entrants. In the 2002 election, amid disillusionment with these parties due to corruption scandals, a new party (the Citizen Action Party) finished a strong third, and it went on to win the election in 2014.

The Argentinian case, however, shows that reduced thresholds can make barriers to entry too high and put presidential legitimacy at risk. A new democratic left emerged in the form of the Front for a Country in Solidarity (Frepasso) during Argentina's 1995 election, when widespread concerns about corruption cast a shadow on incumbent president Carlos Menem's bid for reelection, but ultimately the political space proved too narrow. Argentina was the only runoff country in which a

party dominant before the third wave—the Peronist Party, a cartel party with an authoritarian past—was even more dominant during most of the third wave.

In Argentina and Costa Rica, the reduced threshold prevented a runoff in four elections. In two cases—Argentina’s 1995 and 1999 votes—the likely result of a second round was uncertain and a runoff would have enhanced presidential legitimacy. A serious legitimacy deficit emerged after Argentina’s 1999 election, which the Radical Party’s Fernando de la Rúa won due to divisions within the Peronist Party. De la Rúa was poorly positioned to cope with the financial crisis that wracked Argentina, and he resigned two years into his term. Amid economic and political turmoil that led to a three-point plummet in Argentina’s Freedom House score, the 1999 Peronist runner-up became president.

The outcomes of several recent elections make evident the risk of legitimacy deficits with a reduced threshold. When a former guerrilla commander tallied 49 percent in the first round of El Salvador’s 2014 election, the country was polarized; majority support in the runoff helped to firm up his legitimacy. In Argentina in 2015, Peru in 2016, and Ecuador in 2017, the first-round winners earned vote shares just shy of 40 percent in the first round, yet two of the three first-round winners lost in the runoff. Legitimacy deficits would almost certainly have emerged had these first-round winners become president.

Further, since presidential-election rules are only one factor influencing a country’s number of parties, the effectiveness of reduced thresholds is limited. Despite the introduction of a reduced threshold in Ecuador for the 2002 election, neither in that contest nor in the 2006 or 2007 votes did the number of parties fall below 5.5. On the other hand, several countries using majority runoff—in particular the Dominican Republic and El Salvador—had small numbers of parties and seemingly high barriers to entry.

Strategies that focus on the legislative election appear more promising. The president’s party usually fares less well in midterm or other legislative elections that are not concurrent with the presidential vote. Accordingly, some Latin American countries have adopted concurrent scheduling of legislative and presidential elections (often through the elimination of midterm elections) to reduce the likelihood of gridlock.

Currently, most legislative elections are scheduled to take place at the time of the first round of the presidential race. They could, however, instead be scheduled *after* the first round, with the expectation that citizens will favor parties that fared well in the presidential vote. In good part for this reason, France since 2002 has scheduled legislative elections after the presidential election—an arrangement that appears to have yielded momentum for the new president’s party in 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017.

Another promising recommendation is a threshold requiring parties

to win a certain percentage of votes in order to secure a seat in the legislature. Thresholds between 2 percent and 5 percent have been established in various Latin American countries. Yet parties have found ways

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***The experience of Latin America during the third wave shows the benefits of runoff for bringing key actors into the political arena—and convincing them, once there, to play by democratic rules.***

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to circumvent these rules, usually by lobbying their allies in electoral commissions for exceptions or postponements, and often the threshold requirements have not been enforced. Greater attention to these rules from the media and from national and international institutions would likely help to prevent such occurrences.

In recent decades, educational levels have risen and social media have expanded; larger numbers of people now understand and take an interest in politics. Power is more diffuse. When one or two entrenched parties that are unresponsive to the majority's concerns dominate presidential elections, the validity of these elections is called into question. Democratic institutions must adapt. Although no electoral rule is a panacea, runoff has been a successful adaptation in Latin America. Greater openness in the electoral arena has facilitated the defeat of longstanding parties that had lost majority support but retained their political bases. Presidents have been enticed toward the political center and, after winning electoral majorities, have not suffered legitimacy deficits. Although runoff does foster a larger number of parties, institutional innovations can offset the resulting problems. Despite some difficulties, the experience of Latin America during the third wave shows the benefits of runoff for bringing key actors into the political arena—and convincing them, once there, to play by democratic rules.

## NOTES

1. Nils-Christian Bormann and Matt Golder, "Democratic Electoral Systems Around the World, 1946–2011," *Electoral Studies* 32 (June 2013): 360–69.

2. Author's calculation using [www.electionguide.org](http://www.electionguide.org) and, if necessary, national constitutions. Classifications by region and as "electoral democracies" follow those of Freedom House. The figure for Latin America excludes several countries with a reduced threshold; the figure for sub-Saharan Africa includes several countries that also have a territorial distribution requirement.

3. John M. Carey, "Presidentialism and Representative Institutions," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Michael Shifter, eds., *Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 14–15; Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, "Evaluating Presidential Runoff Elections," *Electoral Studies* 25 (March 2006): 129; Juan J. Linz, "Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does It Make a Difference?" in Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela, eds., *The Failure of Presidential*



*Democracy: Comparative Perspectives*, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 21–22; Scott Mainwaring and Matthew S. Shugart, “Juan Linz, Presidentialism, and Democracy: A Critical Appraisal,” *Comparative Politics* 29 (July 1997): 467–68; Arturo Valenzuela, “Latin America: Presidentialism in Crisis,” *Journal of Democracy* 4 (October 1993): 8. Countervailing views appear in Josep M. Colomer, *Political Institutions: Democracy and Social Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Rafael Martínez, “Conclusiones,” in Rafael Martínez, ed., *La Elección Presidencial Mediante Doble Vuelta en Latinoamérica* (Barcelona: Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, 2004), 539–62.

4. Matthew Soberg Shugart and John Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 213.

5. Craig M. Burnett and Vladimir Kogan, “Ballot (and Voter) ‘Exhaustion’ Under Instant Runoff Voting: An Examination of Four Ranked-Choice Elections,” *Electoral Studies* 37 (March 2015): 41–49.

6. V-Dem Dataset 7.1, [www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net). A perfect score is 1.00 and the nadir 0.

7. Because the relationship between ENPP and levels of democracy was nonlinear, I also introduced a quadratic (squared) term of ENPP. To account for potential unobserved heterogeneity, I used a random effects linear model.

8. See Allen Hicken and Erik Martínez Kuhonta, “Shadows from the Past: Party System Institutionalization in Asia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44 (May 2011): 572–97.

9. For further explanation, see McClintock, *Electoral Rules and Democracy* (forthcoming), ch. 3.

10. See Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7 (December 2009): 753–56.

11. See McClintock, *Electoral Rules*, ch. 3. Among the scholars making the “cartel” classifications are Michael Coppedge, Gary Hoskin, Mark P. Jones and Wonjae Hwang, Daniel Levine, Steven Levitsky, Juan Pablo Luna, and Michelle Taylor-Robinson.

12. Javier Corrales, “Latin America’s Neocaudillismo: Ex-Presidents and Newcomers Running for President . . . and Winning,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 50 (Fall 2008): 1–35.

13. Marc F. Plattner, “From Liberalism to Liberal Democracy,” in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democracy: A Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 60.

14. Examples are Carlos Menem in 2003 and Daniel Scioli in 2015 in Argentina; Oscar Iván Zuluaga in 2014 in Colombia; Alvaro Noboa in 2006 in Ecuador; and Ollanta Humala in 2006 and Keiko Fujimori in 2016 in Peru.

15. *Series temporales* and *eliteca* at <http://americo.usal.es/oir/elites/index.htm>. The project is directed by Manuel Alcántara at the University of Salamanca.

16. The surveys used were generally conducted a few months after the election, with some exceptions. The closest survey after Ecuador’s 2006 election dates to 2009, that after Brazil’s 2002 election to 2005. For both Brazil and Ecuador after elections in 2002, data were available not for the incoming president but only for his party or coalition.

17. Fernando Lugo in an address hosted by George Washington University and the Washington Office on Latin America, Washington D.C., 18 June 2007. On land reform, see McClintock, *Electoral Rules*, ch. 4.