**The perils of personalism**

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**Abstract**

What impact does personalism, or presidential dominance of a weakly organized ruling party, have on the level of democracy? We argue that presidents who dominate their own weakly organized parties are more likely to seek to concentrate power, undermine horizontal accountability, and trample the rule of law than presidents who preside over parties that have an independent leadership and an institutionalized bureaucracy. Independent party leaders, we suggest, will often try to curb the excesses of the president in order to protect their own political prospects. We explore these hypotheses through a quantitative analysis of the determinants of the level of democracy in 18 Latin American countries from 1980-2015. We find that personalism has a consistently negative impact on the level of democracy in Latin America. We further find that ruling party organizational strength, rather than constitutional checks on the executive, is the most important condition for preventing presidential dominance.

**WORKING PAPER, PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION**

Democracy, by definition, is rule of the people. It is not rule of the person.Yet in Latin America and much of the developing world, it often seems that the president rules alone, typically to the determinant of democracy. Presidents like Hugo Chávez or Alberto Fujimori who dominate their own parties have been accused of destroying democracy or at the very least weakening it in some countries.Where the president has controlled a weakly organized ruling party, this party has typically stood by or even helped the president weaken democratic institutions and violate democratic practices.

Under what circumstances is the president likely to undermine democracy? And when will other political actors stand idly by and allow the president to do so? Curiously, the existing literature on democracy is mostly silent on these questions. Those works that do broach this topic have focused almost exclusively on the role played by formal institutional rules, such as the constitutional powers of the presidency, under the assumption that presidential systems will enable the abuse of those powers sooner or later. They neglect to analyze other, non-institutional factors that might constrain even constitutionally powerful presidents.

This study presents a more comprehensive investigation of the impact of presidential dominance on democracy. We argue that democracy deteriorates when presidents have excessive freedom of action. Presidents who can act without any external constraints have dire implications for any number of core democratic features, from civil liberties to the rule of law. Yet to present a full account of how an unrestrained presidency damages democracy, we must also investigate the circumstances that enable such latitude in presidential action. We focus on two competing, albeit not mutually exclusive, approaches to understanding presidential dominance. The first focuses on the constitutional rules that structure executive power. Presidential systems are not monolithic; they vary considerably in the kinds and amounts of power they grant the executive branch and the presidency. Most of the literature on presidentialism and democratic quality and survival pays little attention to this internal variation, instead focusing on differences between parliamentary and presidential systems generally. However, the basic objections to presidential systems strongly imply that, within that category, constitutionally powerful presidents should be worse for democracy than those who are more constrained. Yet we find that, at least in Latin America, variation in constitutional powers matters little. Constitutionally powerful presidents do not doom democracy any more readily than do relatively weak presidents.

An alternative approach to understanding presidential dominance would focus on the relationship between the president and the ruling party. We argue that ruling parties play the most crucial role in restraining the ambitions of the region’s presidents. Where the ruling party is not under the complete control of its leader, it can serve as an important check on the authority of the president. In these cases, rivals within the president’s own party will often seek to block him or her from concentrating power, subverting the rule of law, and bypassing or manipulating the legislature and other institutions of horizontal accountability. We suggest that strong parties can negate the damage of a dominant president, even one that has considerable constitutional powers. Furthermore, strong parties protect democracy by inhibiting presidents from becoming dominant in the first place. By contrast, weak ruling parties give the president free reign to concentrate power and ignore or attack democratic principles and institutions. We call this combination of dominant presidents and weak parties: personalism.

We focus on Latin America between 1980 and 2015 because this region and time period offer us a great deal of variation on our dependent variable: the level of democracy. The vast majority of Latin American nations, with the notable exception of Cuba, were democratic during most of this period, but the level of democracy varied considerably from country to country and year to year. Whereas some countries, such as Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, developed deep and vibrant democracies during this period, other countries failed to register much, if any, democratic progress. In still other countries, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, the level of democracy varied considerably over time, with notable advances made under certain presidents and significant setbacks registered under others. We argue that personalism can help explain this variance.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section discusses the existing literature on democratic deepening, pointing out that existing studies have paid insufficient attention to a key determinant of the level of democracy: the president. The second section defines personalism as a dominant president who leads a weakly organized party, and explains why personalistic presidents are likely to undermine the level of democracy. The third section outlines the difficulty in measuring personalism and discusses the results of an expert survey we conducted with 64 scholars of Latin American politics who rated 147 president/party dyads in 18 countries. We use Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to construct measures of the two dimensions of personalism: presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness.

The final section analyzes the role these variables play in democratic deepening. We also investigate the underlying mechanism of this relationship, focusing on competing theories that emphasize the president’s constitutional powers and ruling party weakness. Somewhat surprisingly, ruling party organizational weakness emerges as by far the most crucial factor. Dominant presidents do far more damage when unconstrained by strong parties, regardless of their constitutional powers. And weakly organized ruling parties allow presidential dominance much more readily; only when strong parties are present do constitutional powers exert any influence on the president’s capacity to dominate the political process. The conclusion discusses the theoretical and policy implications of this study.

**Explaining the level of democracy**

There is a large literature on the determinants of democracy worldwide, but this literature often fails to distinguish between democratization, democratic consolidation, and democratic deepening (Barro, 1999; Carles Boix, 2003; Burkhart & Lewis-Beck, 1994).[[1]](#footnote-1) This is problematic because these are distinct phenomena. Whereas democratic deepening refers to improvements in the level of democracy within a democratic regime, democratization implies a transition from authoritarian rule to a democratic or semi-democratic regime. Democratic consolidation, meanwhile, typically refers to the stabilization of a democracy—that is, the extent to which democracies are able to resist a regression to authoritarian rule.

Although many studies use the same explanatory factors to account for all three phenomena, democratization, democratic consolidation, and democratic deepening involve different actors and processes.[[2]](#footnote-2) Whereas democratization typically occurs when an authoritarian regime, often under duress, agrees to give up power and hold elections, democratic deepening usually occurs when an elected government extends greater civil liberties and political rights to the population and strengthens horizontal accountability and the rule-of-law. Democratic consolidation is more closely related to democratic deepening and, in fact, democratic deepening will often enhance democratic consolidation, but the stability of democracy is also affected by many factors, such as the international climate, that have little if anything to do with the level of democracy. Conversely, some forms of democratic deepening, such as the extension of civil liberties, may have little impact, if any, on the stability of a democracy or they may even undermine it.Thus, there is little reason to believe that the causes of these three different phenomena are identical.

Much of the literature on the determinants of democracy focuses on structural factors, typically of an economic or cultural nature, including economic development (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Carl Boix, 2006; Burkhart & Lewis-Beck, 1994; Gasiorowski & Power, 1998; Houle, 2009; Lipset, 1959; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997), religion (Fish, 2011; Wiarda, 1974), and ethnic diversity (Horowitz, 1985; Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972). Political-institutional factors have also been said to shape democratization or democratic consolidation. Scholars have argued, for example, that presidential democracies tend to be less stable than parliamentary democracies in large part because presidential systems have fixed terms and separate elections for president, which may lead to immobility and executive-legislative deadlock (Linz & Valenzuela, 1994; Stepan & Skach, 1993). Other studies have argued that democracies will be stronger in countries with institutionalized party systems because such party systems are better at resolving conflicts and spreading democratic values (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Pérez-Liñán & Mainwaring, 2010). Finally, some studies have argued that countries that have had lengthy past experience with democracy are more likely to democratize and less likely to experience regressions to authoritarian rule (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Pérez-Liñán & Mainwaring, 2010).

Some of the economic, cultural, and political-institutional factors that the democracy literature has identified as important, such as religion or presidentialism, are not particularly useful for explaining variance in the level of democracy within Latin America because these variables do not vary much, if at all, within the region. Other variables, such as socio-economic development, inequality, ethnic diversity, party system institutionalization, and past experience with democracy, may help explain variation in the level of democracy across countries within the region, but they cannot explain variance over time since the variables typically do not change much in the short to medium term. Thus, the existing literature cannot provide a comprehensive explanation for the variation in the level of democracy within Latin America over the last several decades.

Another shortcoming of the existing literature is its relative lack of attention to the president. While other actors, such as the military, the business community, labor unions, and social movements, may play an important role in promoting or blocking democratization and maintaining or undermining democratic stability, the president is arguably the most important actor when it comes to democratic deepening. Presidents extend or retract democratic rights. The president and the institutions under his or her control may respect civil liberties and the rule of law or they may routinely violate them. Presidents may strengthen institutions of horizontal accountability, such as the legislature, the judiciary, and the ombudsperson’s office, or they may weaken, bypass or manipulate these institutions. Some studies have shown that characteristics of the president (such as the presence of a populist leader) can significantly alter the relationships between structural antecedents and political outcomes (Piñeiro, Rhodes-Purdy, & Rosenblatt, 2016). Thus, in order to understand why Latin American countries sometimes deepen democracy and at other times undermine it, it is essential to understand what factors shape the behavior of the president.

**The perils of personalism**

This study suggests that the extent to which the president dominates the ruling party is a key determinant of the impact of the president on democracy. Presidents who preside over personalist parties staffed with their friends and allies are much more likely to undermine democracy than presidents who must deal with ruling parties that have an independent leadership and an institutionalized bureaucracy. Before proceeding, a few comments regarding the definition of personalism are warranted. We concur with Kostadinova and Levitt (2014) that personalism is a bi-dimensional concept, involving two constitutive factors: presidential dominance (meaning the ability of the president to act decisively without consulting or appeasing other actors in his or her party) and ruling party organizational weakness (i.e., the absence of independent party leaders, a developed party bureaucracy, and institutionalized rules and decision-making procedures).

Critics of presidentialism have argued that the independent election of presidents and the winner-take-all nature of the presidency leads to the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual in a way that is not healthy for democracy (Linz, 1990).[[3]](#footnote-3) This is particularly the case where the president dominates the ruling party. Where the president controls the ruling party, a potential veto player and source of horizontal accountability is eliminated. Critiques of presidentialism often focus on the institutional rules that determine the president’s relative power, but an independent ruling party can also play an important role in curbing the excesses of the president. Members of the ruling party may use their political clout to persuade the president or other members of the administration to abort, rescind or modify policies that threaten democratic rights. Alternatively, they may use their control of key institutions, such as the legislature, governmental ministries or agencies or subnational governments, to block anti-democratic measures and ensure that democratic rights and the rule of law are upheld. The ruling party has not typically been thought of as one of the institutions of horizontal accountability, but it can serve in that role in important ways.

Independent party leaders have a number of incentives to prevent the president from undermining democracy. First, party leaders typically want to protect their own bastions of power. They will therefore often resist measures by the executive branch that weaken the legislature or other sources of horizontal accountability, and concentrate power in the hands of the president. Second, party leaders are responsible for protecting the party’s reputation on which their own political future typically depends. They do not want the president to act in a way that will hurt the image of the party in the eyes of the voters. Anti-democratic measures are not always politically unpopular, but they do frequently alienate important sectors of the electorate or influential actors, such as the media. Thus, independent party leaders will sometimes oppose such measures or at least attempt to soften them. Third and finally, party leaders typically have their own political ambitions. Indeed, they may hope to run for president or some other powerful political office one day. It is therefore in their interest to ensure that the president does not weaken the party or extend his or her hold on power indefinitely. These incentives come into play even when the president has substantial constitutional powers; parties may prevent presidents from issuing damaging legislation even if regime rules technically allow them to do so.

Where the ruling party is a personalistic electoral vehicle, however, it has no independent leadership or bureaucracy. Politicians often create personalist parties specifically to back their own political campaigns and they typically fill the party leadership with family members and friends. Their control over such parties is therefore often close to absolute. Politicians, moreover, are unlikely to relinquish control of their party when they become president. Indeed, presidents often use the powers of their office to strengthen their control over their party and to undercut or eliminate any potential rivals within the party. As a result, the leadership of personalist parties typically has neither the inclination nor the ability to block or restrain the president. To the contrary, the leaders of personalist parties will often seek to expand the powers of the president and extend his or her rule. Thus, they may help the president carry out policies that undermine democracy and the rule of law.

Although we analyze these issues in a more sophisticated manner later, a cursory glance at summary statistics of our measures of personalism[[4]](#footnote-4) show how damaging this type of relationship between president and party can be. To present information in an easily accessible way, we simply took the sum of both our dimensions of personalism, and then categorized as personalist any dyad that had a summary score of one standard deviation or more above the mean.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As **Table 1** shows, the election of a personalist dyad led to a subsequent decline in the Freedom House ratings in most countries. This is true for both left-wing and right-wing presidents. Personalist dyads led to an average decline in democracy of .278 (Freedom House) and .407 (Polity IV), while dyads that were not personalist led to average increases. (We reversed the Freedom House scores so that higher numbers represent more democratic regimes.) In the aggregate, nonpersonalist dyads added five points to regional Freedom House scores over the period between 1980 and 2015, and 43 points to the Polity IV score. Personalist dyads, by contrast, subtracted 7.5 points (Freedom House) and 11 points (Polity IV). In a period where the general regional trend was toward greater democracy, only two personalist dyads produced gains in Freedom House scores: Alarcón in Ecuador, and Fujimori’s 1996 term in Peru. And both of these gains represent not a democratic deepening, but a modest reversal of earlier (much more severe) backsliding by priorpersonalist dyads (Bucaram in Ecuador and Fujimori’s first term). In other words, not a *single* personalist president-party dyad has, at least by Freedom House scores, contributed in the slightest to the region’s democratic progress.

Personalist dyads were responsible for particularly pronounced declines in Peru after the election of Alberto Fujimori and in Venezuela after the election of Hugo Chávez. Fujimori carried out a self-coup, closing the legislature and suspending the constitution. Hugo Chávez, meanwhile, undermined Venezuela’s traditional institutions of horizontal accountability, restricted civil liberties, and weakened the rule of law. As we would expect, some of the personalistic presidents, including Chávez, Correa, Fujimori, and Uribe sought to extend their hold on power by revising their countries’ constitutions to allow them to run for re-election. They also sought to concentrate power by weakening the institutions of horizontal accountability and using the resources of the state to attack and undermine the opposition. Other personalist presidents, such as Bucaram, Collor, Gutiérrez, and Serrano, also sought to consolidate their power and aggressively attacked the opposition, but they were removed from office before they could significantly expand their authority or extend their hold on power.

**Table 1: Personalist president-party dyads**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | Personalism | | Change in level of democracy | |
| Country | Term year | President | Presidential dominance | Ruling party weakness | Freedom House | Polity IV |
| Argentina | 1990 | Menem | .745 | 1.558 | -1 | 0 |
| Argentina | 1996 | Menem | .765 | 1.709 | 0 | 1 |
| Argentina | 2004 | Kirchner | .959 | 1.605 | 0 | 0 |
| Argentina | 2008 | Fernández | .641 | 1.465 | 0 | 0 |
| Argentina | 2012 | Fernández | .680 | 1.616 | 0 | 1 |
| Bolivia | 1986 | Paz Estensorro | 1.366 | .780 | 0 | 0 |
| Bolivia | 1998 | Banzer | 1.109 | .826 | 0 | 0 |
| Brazil | 1990 | Collor | 1.145 | 2.383 | -.5 | 0 |
| Colombia | 2007 | Uribe | 1.015 | .826 | -.5 | 0 |
| Ecuador | 1985 | Febres Cordero | 1.358 | 1.001 | 0 | 1 |
| Ecuador | 1993 | Durán Ballén | 1.076 | .931 | -.5 | 0 |
| Ecuador | 1997 | Bucaram | 1.049 | 2.546 | 0 | -1 |
| Ecuador | 1998 | Alarcón | .663 | 1.628 | .5 | 1 |
| Ecuador | 2003 | Gutiérrez | 1.769 | 2.197 | 0 | 1 |
| Ecuador | 2007 | Correa | 1.622 | .222 | 0 | -2 |
| Ecuador | 2010 | Correa | 1.622 | .222 | 0 | 0 |
| Guatemala | 1991 | Serrano | .959 | 1.860 | -1 | 0 |
| Panama | 2010 | Martinelli | 1.844 | .722 | -.5 | 0 |
| Paraguay | 2009 | Lugo | .771 | .966 | 0 | 0 |
| Peru | 1986 | García | 1.399 | .513 | -1 | 1 |
| Peru | 1991 | Fujimori | 2.635 | 2.035 | -1 | -7 |
| Peru | 1996 | Fujimori | 2.617 | 1.907 | 1 | 4 |
| Peru | 2002 | Toledo | 1.301 | 2.174 | -.5 | 0 |
| Peru | 2012 | Humala | .706 | 2.395 | 0 | 0 |
| Venezuela | 1999 | Chávez | 2.288 | 1.977 | -1.5 | -1 |
| Venezuela | 2001 | Chávez | 2.321 | 1.930 | 0 | -2 |
| Venezuela | 2007 | Chávez | 2.402 | 1.582 | -1 | -8 |

The administrations of Carlos Andrés Pérez and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela make a revealing comparison. Pérez was elected president in 1988 with the support of a strong party, Acción Democrática (AD), which he did not control. Indeed, much of AD’s leadership had supported another candidate for the party’s presidential nomination. Once in office, Pérez did not seek to undermine democratic institutions in Venezuela, but he did carry out sweeping market-oriented reforms, which undermined the legitimacy of the political system and generated a backlash that included major urban riots and two coup attempts. The leadership of AD, which was concerned with the party’s reputation and future prospects, sought to restrain Pérez by declining to grant him special powers, criticizing his ministers, and scrutinizing or even blocking his reform proposals in the legislature (Corrales, 2000, p. 135; Naim, 1993, pp. 52-54). Pérez refused to back down, however, and he also became embroiled in several corruption scandals that undermined his popularity. As Pérez’s popularity declined, the leadership of the AD took further steps to undermine him, demanding the resignation of Pérez’s economics cabinet and ultimately voting to temporarily remove him from office so that he could be put on trial (Corrales, 2000, pp. 135-136; Pérez-Liñán, 2007, pp. 156-158). In this way, AD’s leaders were able to prevent an unpopular president form undertaking measures that they believed were not in the interest of themselves, their party or the country. However, it was too little too late; Pérez’s rapid about-face on structural adjustment (along with the harsh response to the resulting waves of contention) fundamentally undermined public faith in representative democracy in Venezuela.

Hugo Chávez, by contrast, came to the presidency not as the head of a strong institutionalized party, but rather as the leader of a weak electoral vehicle, the Movimiento Quinta República (MVR), that he controlled. Chávez, who had led one of the military coup attempts against President Pérez, founded the MVR in 1997 in order to support his candidacy in the presidential elections the following year. From the outset, the party was stacked with Chávez’s supporters, including many people who had participated in the 1992 coup attempt. According to López Maya (2011, p. 217), “the MVR was a vertical, centralized electoral structure serving the Chávez candidacy…The concentration of power in the hands of Chávez produced a marked asymmetry between him and other leaders.” Chávez had no interest in developing a strong and independent party bureaucracy.[[6]](#footnote-6) Like other populists, he sought to establish a direct relationship with his supporters that was unmediated by parties or other institutions (Martínez, 2014, pp. 24-25). As he said in one interview:

“[Parties] should be the channels of participation and influence of the organized popular movement, but they cannot exercise hegemony. If they don’t work, they should be swept aside. Parties for me are like trial runs” (López Maya, 1999).

Because Chávez controlled the MVR, the party did little to restrain him even when he undertook actions that undermined Venezuelan democracy. Shortly after taking office, the Chávez administration convened a Constituent Assembly that dissolved congress and drafted a new constitution that expanded the powers of the president. He weakened horizontal accountability in Venezuela by stacking the Supreme Court, the National Electoral Council and the Comptroller’s Office with his supporters (Corrales, 2010, pp. 30-33). He also repeatedly revised his own constitution to enable him to run for reelection and he attacked independent media, labor unions and civil society organizations, even declining to renew the license of the most popular television channel in Venezuela. He used state employment and resources to reward his supporters and punish his opponents, going so far as to dismiss government employees who had opposed him (Corrales & Penfold, 2015, pp. 41-46). Finally, he sought to undermine civil society by coopting or replacing autonomous organizations (such as labor unions), and encouraging the creation of dependent civil society organizations such as the communal councils (Hawkins, 2010; Hawkins & Hansen, 2006; Rhodes-Purdy, 2015). All of these measures weakened Venezuelan democracy considerably, leading many scholars and institutions to categorize the Chávez administration as an authoritarian regime.

The MVR and its successor, the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), actively supported Chávez in these actions. The party even continued to support Chávez when his popularity dipped considerably during the 2002-04 economic and political crises. These crises led to massive demonstrations against Chávez, a sharp drop in his approval ratings, a major work stoppage against his administration, a coup attempt, and a recall referendum. Nevertheless, Chávez maintained tight control over his own party throughout this period, which helped him to maintain his policies and survive efforts to dislodge him.

Thus, presidential dominance of the ruling party seems to be inimical to democracy. Presidents who dominate their own parties may be more likely to violate democratic procedures, and their parties will be more likely to permit them to do so.

**Methods and operationalization**

In order to test the personalism hypothesis more rigorously, we carried out a series of cross-sectional time-series analyses on the determinants of the level of democracy in Latin America between 1980 and 2015. We included all Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries in the region in the analysis, except for Cuba, which was an authoritarian regime throughout the period covered. Because the study focuses on the determinants of democratic deepening, rather than democratization, countries are included in the sample only after they become democratic or semi-democratic. Thus, Brazil is only included in the sample beginning in 1985 and Chile beginning in 1990. We used the Mainwaring, Brinks and Pérez-Liñán (2001) data set, henceforth referred to as the MBP index, to identify the year in which a country became democratic (or semi-democratic), but included countries in the sample only after the start of the democratically-elected president’s term. If the president’s term started after July 1, that country would be included in the sample only beginning in the subsequent year. Because we are trying to explain the deterioration of democracy as well as its deepening, countries remain in the sample even if their democracies deteriorate. Thus, Peru is included in the sample throughout the Fujimori years and Venezuela is included during the Chávez and Maduro years.

We used the Freedom House and Polity IV indices to measure the level of democracy for each country year.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the case of the Freedom House index, we inverted the scores so that 1 represents the least democratic country and 7 the most democratic. The Polity IV variable is scored on a scale of -10 to 10 with the latter score representing the most democratic countries. These sources emphasize different aspects of democracy and they have contrasting strengths and weaknesses, but taken together they capture the most fundamental aspects of democracy.

There is considerable controversy over the best way to estimate the parameters of panel data wherein some variables do not have within unit variance (i.e. do not change over time) while others do. This is especially challenging for our purposes, as our dependent variable and our independent variable of greatest interest (personalism) do vary over time. This means we must account for both within- and between-panel variation. We present here the findings from random effects estimator, implemented via Stata version 13, although our analyses also held up when using alternative Generalized Least Squares estimators with heteroscedasticity across panel and within-panel autocorrelation (see the appendix for details).

**Measuring personalism**

Following Kostadinova and Levitt (2014), we conceptualize personalism as the combination of presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness. Neither of these are easy to measure; they involve actual political practices that are rarely coded or measured in standard datasets. Qualitative analysis of all the presidential terms of interest would be prohibitively time consuming and expensive. We therefore use an expert survey to draw on the expertise of scholars who have already studied these countries and issues. The survey included all presidential term-party dyads from 1980 – 2015, excluding those years prior to each country’s third-wave transition to democracy, resulting in 64 experts evaluating 147 dyads.[[8]](#footnote-8) For each presidential term, we asked the experts to what extent they agreed or disagreed, on a five-point Likert scale, with each of the following six statements about the president and his or her party:

**Q1**. The president was able to successfully pursue policy goals or take administrative actions without consulting party leaders.

**Q2**. There were important and powerful party leaders who were somewhat independent (in terms of power base, access to resources, influence on party platforms, etc.) of the president.

**Q3**. The president controlled or controls the nomination of the party's candidates for the legislature or other important political offices.

**Q4.** The president could count on a high level of party discipline among the party's legislators.

**Q5.** The party had well-established procedures for selecting and promoting party leaders, and for establishing policy platforms.

**Q6.** The party had important professional staff and operational bodies.

Two of these questions (Q1 and Q3) deal explicitly with presidential dominance, and two (Q5 and Q6) with ruling party organizational strength or weakness. The remaining questions (Q2 and Q4) explicitly reference the interaction of presidents and their parties, and thus are influenced by both dimensions of personalism.

This raises the question: how best to convert these responses into aggregate measures of presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness? The problems of expert surveys come into play here. Even when the issues involved are factual, expert surveys require judgement calls (if they did not, more traditional data collection methods would suffice), and experts may not have sufficient knowledge to make completely accurate assessments. In short, expert surveys are likely to contain a substantial degree of measurement error. Recognizing this, we use Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to construct our measures. CFA assumes that the concept one is trying to measure is not observed, and in many cases, is not observable. This concept (called a latent variable or factor) is assumed to influence a number of observed variables (called indicators), but these indicators are also influenced by random measurement error (Bollen, 1989). The resulting model can, with some standard assumptions, be estimated using Maximum Likelihood (MI) estimators.

Our model has a few complications. First, typically each indicator is only influenced by one factor. In our model, two questions are influenced by both factors. This makes identification of the model more complicated; however, the side-by-side method developed by Reilly and O'Brien (1996) allows us to conclusively identify the model. The other complication is our data structure: we need to generate factor scores at the dyad level, but our unit of observation is expert respondents. As such, we specify a multilevel CFA, with coders nested within dyads. A graphic representation of the model can be found in the appendix.

Details of the measurement model estimation are presented in the appendix for brevity. Here it is sufficient to note that all parameter estimates and fit statistics indicate that this model approximates our data very well. Furthermore, having only a single latent factor substantially reduced the fit of the model (see the appendix for details). In other words, personalism cannot be measured accurately with a single dimension; one must take into account both presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness, although the concepts are closely related. To produce a measure for our analyses, we obtained factor scores (the predicted value of each latent variable) for each dyad. We then standardized these variables, to have a mean of zero and variance of one, in order to make comparison of their effect magnitudes more intuitive.

**Control variables**

We included a number of other variables in the analysis to control for factors that might have shaped democracy in the region, including the level of economic development, the inflation rate, party system institutionalization, prior experience with democracy, and the constitutional powers of the president. We also included a measure of the strength of the president’s party in the legislature on the grounds that the president’s partisan powers is an alternative source of presidential strength that could shape the level of democracy. Our approach concurs with the general assumption underlying the presidentialism literature that investing excessive power in the chief executive is dangerous for democracy. However, we disagree on the most effective source of executive restraint. The presidentialism literature suggests that the president’s constitutionally specified powers (or more accurately, limits on them) are what prevent presidents from becoming too powerful. Our argument holds that constitutional limits only matter if actors abide by them, and that other political actors who have an interest in ensuring compliance with both constitutional limits and more informal norms are therefore a more likely trammel to executive overreach. To measure executive power, we use the normalized score from Doyle and Elgie (2016) analysis of president’s constitutional powers, which draws from a number of different sources.

We measure economic development using data on gross domestic product per capita and inflation, which were taken from the World Bank’s databank of indicators. Wecontrol for a country’s prior experience with democracy by calculating the number of years each country has been democratic since 1900 using the MBP index (we count each year of democracy as 1 and each year of semi-democracy as 0.5.). We also included a one-year lagged version of the dependent variable in the analysis under the assumption that the level of democracy in any given year is correlated with the level of democracy in the previous year.[[9]](#footnote-9) We control for the degree of party system institutionalization using the Database of Political Institutions’ (DPI) party age variable. We also included a dummy variable from the DPI, which is coded 1 if the president’s party controls all houses of parliament.

Some scholars have argued that ethnic fragmentation and inequality can undermine democracy. The principal disadvantaged groups in the region are indigenous people and Afro-Latinos, which suffer from widespread discrimination and have much lower standards of living than the rest of the population (Hall & Patrinos, 2006). We therefore use the size of the indigenous and Afro-Latino population in each country as our measure of ethnic inequality, drawing on census data from Madrid’s dataset on ethnicity in Latin America (Madrid, 2016). Data on racial and ethnic self-identification are not available in yearly time series, but this is less of a problem than it would be with other types of data because racial and ethnic self-identification typically changes only slowly over time.

In addition, we include a dummy variable to control for those instances when the same party remains in power even after the transition to democracy (or semi-democracy). This occurred in Mexico from 1988-1999, Nicaragua from 1984-1989, and Paraguay from 1989-2008. We hypothesize that democracy will remain weak as long as the traditionally authoritarian party remains in power.

**Models and Findings**

We begin by estimating the influence of personalism’s dimensions on democratic deepening. We use both Freedom House and Polity IV scores as dependent variables in separate analyses. We hypothesize that both elements of personalism will have a negative effect on democracy, but that this effect will be interactive. Weak presidents will be too ineffectual to do considerable damage even where they have weakly organized parties, and dominant presidents will be constrained by well-organized parties. In other words, we specify a moderated relationship where presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness each intensify the negative influence of the other on democratic quality.[[10]](#footnote-10) Results are presented in Table 2, below.

**Table 2: The Determinants of Level of Democracy in Latin America, 1980-2015**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Freedom House | | | Polity IV | | |
| Effect on democracy | Est. | SE | P value | Est. | SE | P value |
| Presidential dominance | -.019 | .017 | .288 | -.087 | .049 | .075 |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | -.020 | .017 | .232 | -.030 | .045 | .509 |
| Interaction (dominance\*weakness) | -.027 | .014 | .061 | -.133 | .040 | .001 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Constitutional powers of the president | .017 | .015 | .271 | -.063 | .043 | .143 |
| Ruling party control of legislature | .007 | .033 | .840 | -.086 | .094 | .363 |
| Democracy lag | .915 | .018 | .000 | .829 | .022 | .000 |
| Years of democracy | -.001 | .002 | .526 | -.001 | .006 | .858 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | -.001 | .001 | .154 | -.003 | .002 | .042 |
| Authoritarian continuity | -.079 | .068 | .245 | -.337 | .188 | .073 |
| Average party age | .000 | .000 | .202 | -.001 | .001 | .180 |
| Log of GDP per capita | .060 | .031 | .053 | .173 | .081 | .031 |
| Inflation | .000 | .000 | .562 | .000 | .000 | .357 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intercept | .002 | .237 | .993 | .075 | .653 | .908 |

Moderated relationships can be difficult to interpret using parameter estimates; graphical representations are often more intuitive. We have therefore included graphs of the effect of presidential dominance (left) and ruling party organizational weakness (right) on both Freedom House and Polity IV scores in Figure 1. For each graph, the x-axis is the effect, or instantaneous rate of change, of the listed independent variable on level of democracy; in other words, it represents the average change in level of democracy for a unit change in the listed independent variable. Because we specify a moderated relationship, the effect is not constant, but instead varies depending upon the value of the moderator. The y axis arrays different values of the listed moderator variable (i.e. the variable by which the independent variable is multiplied), and thus each point on the graph represents the effects of the independent variable at a specific value of the moderator variable. The dashed lines represent the confidence interval of the effect at any given point, while the vertical line represents zero, or a null effect.

**Figure 1: Moderated effects of presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness on the level of democracy**

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The results of these estimations, which are presented in Table 2, are consistent with the hypothesis that personalism has a negative impact on the degree of democracy in the region and they highlight the interactive effect of presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness. As can be seen in Figure 1, presidential dominance has no significant influence on the level of democracy when the president’s party is not weakly organized. Likewise, weakly organized ruling parties have no significant negative influence on democracy unless they are dominated by the president. However, when the president dominates a weakly organized party, the consequences for democracy are significantly negative, regardless of how one measures democracy.

Effect magnitudes are difficult to gauge with interactive models like these, but pointing out how changes in the independent variables can produce a change in the expected level of democracy can be helpful. For both measures of democracy, the lowest predicted scores (holding all variables except the dimensions of personalism at their means) were found where presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness were both at high levels (defined as two standard deviations above the mean). Changing from the configuration most propitious for democracy[[11]](#footnote-11) to the configuration least propitious to democracy (i.e., high levels of both dimensions of personalism) produced an average decrease in the level of democracy of about .28 for Freedom House and about 1.5 for Polity IV. These declines may seem modest, but one must keep in mind that these variables usually change slowly over time; the average yearly change for Freedom House was .005 during this time, and .06 for Polity IV. In other words, personalism was capable of producing declines in democracy more than an order of magnitude greater than average.

By contrast, the constitutional powers of the president seem to have no effect at all on the level of democracy, at least when controlling for personalism. Nor do there appear to be any contextual factors under which constitutional powers would matter: allowing the president’s constitutional powers to interact with presidential dominance and ruling party organizational weakness did not produce significant interactions. Thus, statistical analyses of the level of democracy in the region indicate that personalism has a strong negative impact on the level of democracy in the region, especially when both elements of personalism are present, but the formal powers of the president appear to matter not at all.

**Cause, symptom, or both? Personalism and democracy**

The preceding analysis demonstrated the dangers of personalism for democracy; yet we cannot conclude that the organization of the ruling party is the most important constraint on Latin American presidents without analyzing two major challenges to our party-centric argument. Although differing in detail, both challenges hold that presidential dominance of ruling parties, while exerting an important influence on democratic quality, is itself caused by something other than weak party organization. Should either challenge be sustained, it would cast serious doubt on our argument.

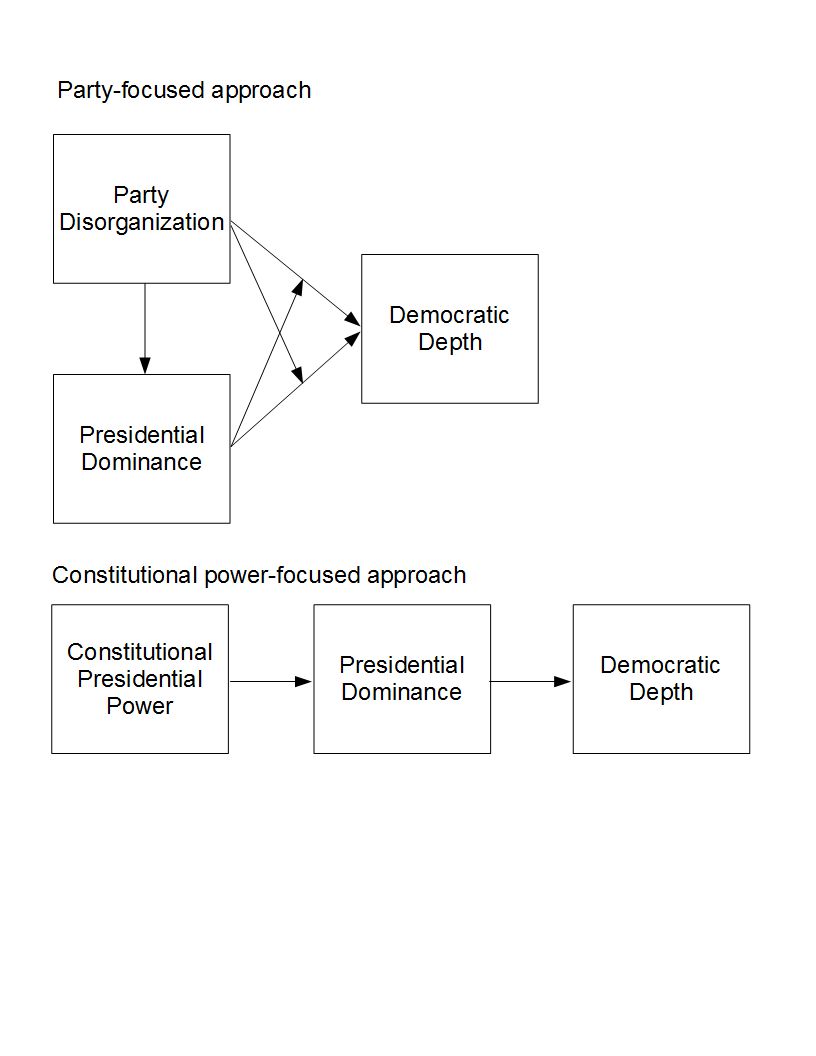
The first potential objection is that presidential dominance is as much a symptom as a cause of democratic decline. In other words, the association of presidential dominance and democratic quality may be due to the fact that presidents can run amok only in democracies which are already ailing. The prior analysis, which included a democracy lag, shows that presidential dominance does influence democratic quality, but the reverse might be true as well. Indeed, there are several reasons why we might expect poor quality democracies to foster the rise of personalist leaders. First, democratic deficits tend to encourage the development of anti-party attitudes. Such attitudes lend themselves to cooptation by outsiders who generally avoid established (i.e., well-organized and institutionalized) parties (Bélanger, 2004). Antisystem outsiders often build support by appealing to those who feel excluded and alienated from the political system and the traditional parties; these appeals are much more likely to be successful in states with institutions that are formally democratic but are nevertheless elitist and unresponsive to the general public (Rhodes-Purdy, 2017a, 2017b). Ambitious leaders in polities marked by a lack of perceived democratic legitimacy can activate latent resentments over political exclusion and other forms of unaddressed inequality in order to bypass existing political parties and take power for themselves (Piñeiro et al., 2016). In other words, ailing democracies tend to generate antipathy toward regime institutions, including established political parties and parliaments.

In short, while personalists clearly (as shown in early analyses) do democracy no favors, such actors rarely come to power in truly healthy democracies. Instead, they tend to rise when democracy is already in decline or outright crisis. Such a finding would not invalidate our argument that presidential dominance of the ruling parties harms democratic quality because it was controlled for in earlier analyses by including a democracy lag. Yet it does raise concerns that poor democratic quality leads presidents to dominate both the political system as a whole and their own parties. If democratic quality alone can explain presidential dominance, with party organization rendered irrelevant, our argument would be invalidated.

The second objection relates to the proposition, inferred from debates about presidential and parliamentary systems, that constitutionally powerfully presidents are incompatible with democratic depth. Although constitutional powers did not exert any significant influence on democratic quality, there is a very reasonable possibility that their influence is real, but indirect: constitutionally powerful presidents, with little need for legislative backing, may be able to dominate even well-organized parties, and thus harm democracy.

In other words, while our earlier analysis produced strong evidence that personalism harms democratic health, we cannot stop there. Our approach proposes that weakly organized ruling parties are an important mechanism by which presidents escape horizontal constraints. Democratic quality and constitutional power are alternative mechanisms for explaining presidential dominance of their parties. If ruling party organizational weakness were shown not to influence presidential dominance of the ruling party when controlling for these factors, it would be inconsistent with our argument. Figure 2, below, includes a chart of the relationships described above.

**Figure 2: Relationship chart**



To better understand the complex relationship between democratic health, party organizational weakness, and constitutional power, we present analyses in Table 3 with presidential dominance as the dependent variable. We include ruling party organizational weakness and the constitutional powers of the presidency in the model with a moderated (interactive) relationship, based on the notion that constitutional powers may be more relevant when parties are strong, for the reasons discussed below.

**Table 3: The Determinants of Presidential Dominance**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Freedom House | | | Polity IV | | |
| Effect on presidential dominance | Est. | SE | P value | Est. | SE | P value |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | .464 | .047 | .000 | .444 | .045 | .000 |
| Constitutional powers of president | .103 | .076 | .172 | .033 | .077 | .672 |
| Interaction (weakness\*powers) | -.129 | .038 | .001 | -.112 | .038 | .003 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ruling party control of legislature | .197 | .085 | .020 | .094 | .088 | .284 |
| Level of democracy (one-year lag) | -.144 | .058 | .014 | -.101 | .022 | .000 |
| Years of democracy | .007 | .007 | .281 | .013 | .007 | .058 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | -.003 | .005 | .484 | -.005 | .005 | .335 |
| Authoritarian party continuity | .322 | .212 | .129 | .101 | .215 | .638 |
| Average party age | -.004 | .002 | .008 | -.004 | .002 | .027 |
| Log of GDP per capita | -.120 | .144 | .406 | -.164 | .142 | .250 |
| Inflation | .000 | .000 | .003 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| Intercept | 1.935 | 1.210 | .110 | 2.275 | 1.209 | .060 |

As Table 3 indicates, our findings are consistent with the overall thrust of our argument that parties are more important than constitutional powers for explaining presidential dominance.

Figure 3 shows that the constitutional powers of the presidency only influence the level of presidential dominance when the president’s party is well organized. For most values of party organization, constitutional powers do not have a statistically detectable relationship with presidential dominance. Moreover, the constitutional powers of the president only matter when using Freedom House as the lagged measure of democracy; when Polity IV is used, constitutional powers have no impact at all.[[12]](#footnote-12) By contrast, ruling party organizational weakness always facilitates presidential dominance, regardless of how much or how little power the president is granted by the constitution. And although democratic quality does significantly influence presidential dominance of the ruling party, consistent with the “vicious cycle” approach discussed earlier, its influence does not nullify that of party organization.

**Figure 3: Moderated effects of ruling party organizational weakness and the constitutional powers of the president on presidential dominance[[13]](#footnote-13)**



Earlier in this article, we invoked the case of Venezuela to contrast how Pérez, despite some personalist ambitions, was ultimately unable to break free of party control, while Hugo Chávez was able to govern according to his own whims, without any organizational discipline. This case also illustrates the point made by the results presented in Table 3. Chávez did not come to power in an ideal democracy, but one that was already in severe crisis due to corruption, economic decline, and the collapse of legitimacy. In short, Chávez did not precipitate the democratic crisis in Venezuela, but he did accelerate and deepen an ongoing process of democratic decline. The constitutional limits on the powers of the Venezuelan president were unable to prevent Chávez from undermining the country’s democracy; indeed, what limits did exist on presidential power were repeatedly relaxed under Chávez’s rule by his allies in the legislature. These findings show that when a president comes to power in an ailing democracy at the head of an inchoate party, constitutional rules are paper tigers. Without a strong ruling party to challenge the president, there are few actors capable of making the executive follow the rules, regardless of what the rules may be.

**Conclusion**

This study has shown that presidents that dominate their parties in a personalistic and authoritarian manner are likely to run their countries in a similar fashion. Where the party of the president has an independent leadership and strong bureaucracy, the president is likely to face some internal constraints on his or her use of power. Where presidents entirely dominate their own parties, however, they are able to act upon their most authoritarian impulses, even if constitutional rules would normally prohibit such actions.

Does this mean that one powerful person can destroy democracy? The results presented here suggest that the answer to this question is a qualified “yes.” Personalistic leaders are certainly bad for democracy but healthy democracies with stable, institutionalized party systems rarely allow such would-be authoritarians a foot in the door. However, if the democracy is already teetering, personalistic leaders are much more likely to rise to power and then are more than capable of giving the democracy the shove that leads to its fall.

This finding is important not only because of what it means for the academic literature on democratic deepening, which has not paid sufficient attention to the relationship between the president and his or her own party, but also because of its implications for voting behavior in the region. Latin American voters should be wary about presidential candidates who control their own parties, especially those who create their own parties to run for president. These candidates have frequently used their distance from the traditional parties to their advantage, wooing support by vigorously criticizing the traditional parties as corrupt and undemocratic institutions. Far from being the saviors of democracy, however, personalistic leaders often lead the country in the wrong direction.

Similarly, in designing electoral laws and other institutional reforms policymakers should consider whether such measures will facilitate or deter the rise of personalistic leaders. For example, measures that strengthen parties and require them to have broad-based leadership and developed organizational structures might be preferred to reforms that impose few regulations on parties and allow them easy access to the ballot. And policymakers should not be lulled into a false sense of security by simply placing limits on the power of the executive branch. Such limits, it turns out, are woefully insufficient unless parties can force presidents to abide by them.

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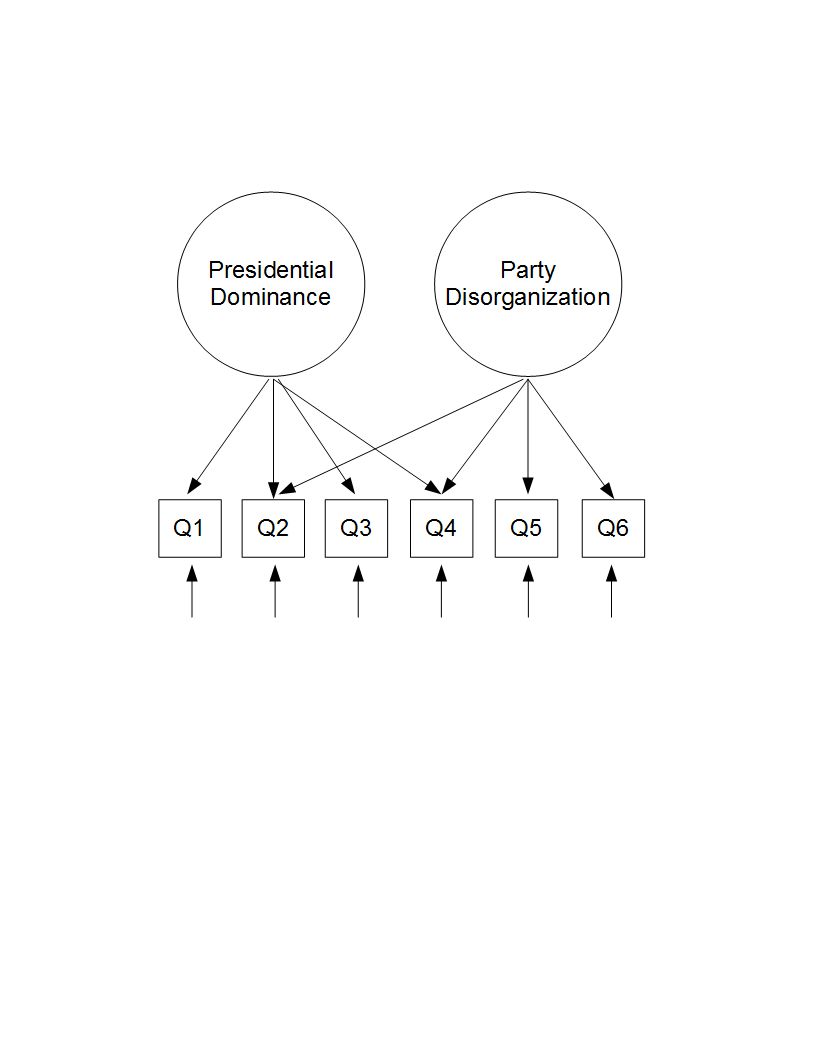
Appendix

A1. Details and results of CFA of expert survey measurement model.

See the main document for a description of the questions and survey methodology. The data was composed of 688 responses to six questions regarding presidential dominance and organizational weakness of the ruling party. Respondents were allowed to evaluate multiple president/party dyads, which results in a hierarchical data structure, with multiple respondents nested within dyads. Two questions which directly address the interaction of presidents and parties we allowed to load on both factors; no model with a complexity of one had good fit. The equations specifying the measurement model and a graph of the model are included below

Where *i* is the *i*th respondent evaluating the *j*th dyad on question *h*. *vh* represents the between-dyad intercept for the *h*th question, is the within-dyad error for the *i*th respondent on the *h*th question, and is the between-dyad error for the *j*th dyad on question *h*.

Figure A1: Measurement model graph



Estimation of the measurement model was carried out using MPLUS Version 7.2. Missing data were handled using maximum likelihood with missing values techniques, which build the likelihood function observation-by-observation, using whatever information is available for each observation (Allison, 2012). Predicted scores were obtained using MPLUS’s Save function.

Table A1: Measurement model analysis results

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Factor Loadings (n=688)** | | |  |  |  |  |
|  | Presidential dominance | | | Weak party organization | | |
| Indicator | Est. | SE | p-value | Est. | SE | p-value |
| Question 1 | *1.000* | - | - | - | - | - |
| Question 2 | .422 | .151 | .005 | *1.000* | - | - |
| Question 3 | 1.219 | .191 | .000 | - | - | - |
| Question 4 | .962 | .173 | .000 | -.455 | .176 | .010 |
| Question 5 | - | - | - | 2.639 | .644 | .000 |
| Question 6 | - | - | - | 1.903 | .364 | .000 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Residuals and intercepts** | | | |
|  | Residuals | |  |
| Indicator | Coder-level | Dyad-level | Intercepts |
| Question 1 | .953 | .085 | 3.570 |
| Question 2 | 1.222 | .174 | 2.430 |
| Question 3 | .754 | .083 | 3.127 |
| Question 4 | .648 | .270 | 3.481 |
| Question 5 | .277 | *.000* | 3.076 |
| Question 6 | .751 | .012 | 2.885 |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fit statistics | Est | p-value |
| Chi-square | 22.609 | 0.047 |
| RMSEA | 0.033 | - |
| CFI | 0.987 | - |

**Discussion**

These results indicate our model is appropriate. All loadings are substantively large and statistically distinguishable from zero and substantively large. The significant loadings on Questions 2 and 4 on both dominance and disorganization support the proposition that these indicators are influenced by both factors, as does the fact that no model with a complexity of one had good fit. The fit statistics further support the appropriateness of our model. The Chi-square statistic is very close to insignificance. The relatively large number of observations (688) is likely the reason for the significant chi-square, as the statistic tends to be inflated as the number of observations increase. Both the RMSE and CFI statistics are well within typical rules of thumb for good fitting models (under .05 and above .98, respectively).

A2. List of dyads with personalism scores and number of responses

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country | Term Year | President | Dominance | Organization |
| Argentina | 1984 | Alfonsín | -1.107 | -.510 |
| Argentina | 1990 | Menem | .745 | 1.558 |
| Argentina | 1996 | Menem | .765 | 1.709 |
| Argentina | 2000 | De La Rua | -2.096 | .908 |
| Argentina | 2003 | Duhalde | -.477 | 1.535 |
| Argentina | 2004 | Kirchner | .959 | 1.605 |
| Argentina | 2008 | Fernández | .641 | 1.465 |
| Argentina | 2012 | Fernández | .680 | 1.616 |
| Bolivia | 1983 | Siles | -1.176 | 1.314 |
| Bolivia | 1986 | Paz Estensorro | 1.366 | .780 |
| Bolivia | 1990 | Paz Zamora | .861 | .199 |
| Bolivia | 1994 | Sánchez De Lozada | .814 | .210 |
| Bolivia | 1998 | Banzer | 1.109 | .826 |
| Bolivia | 2002 | Quiroga | .081 | .850 |
| Bolivia | 2003 | Sánchez De Lozada | .263 | .373 |
| Bolivia | 2006 | Morales | -.802 | -.940 |
| Bolivia | 2010 | Morales | -1.229 | -.626 |
| Brazil | 1985 | Sarney | -1.892 | 1.128 |
| Brazil | 1990 | Collor | 1.145 | 2.383 |
| Brazil | 1992 | Franco | -1.634 | .791 |
| Brazil | 1995 | Cardoso | -.612 | -.045 |
| Brazil | 1999 | Cardoso | -.494 | .187 |
| Brazil | 2003 | Lula | .543 | -1.463 |
| Brazil | 2007 | Lula | .577 | -1.219 |
| Brazil | 2012 | Rousseff | -.945 | -1.486 |
| Brazil | 2015 | Rousseff | -.945 | -1.486 |
| Chile | 1990 | Aylwin | -.663 | -1.742 |
| Chile | 1994 | Frei | -.306 | -1.428 |
| Chile | 2000 | Lagos | -.385 | -1.567 |
| Chile | 2006 | Bachelet | -.976 | -1.591 |
| Chile | 2010 | Pinera | -.953 | -.893 |
| Chile | 2014 | Bachelet | -1.379 | -1.440 |
| Colombia | 1980 | Turbay | -1.164 | .454 |
| Colombia | 1983 | Betancur | -1.364 | .176 |
| Colombia | 1987 | Barco | -.626 | .350 |
| Colombia | 1991 | Gaviria | -.953 | .083 |
| Colombia | 1995 | Samper | -1.959 | .210 |
| Colombia | 1999 | Pastrana | -1.614 | .327 |
| Colombia | 2003 | Uribe | .050 | .652 |
| Colombia | 2007 | Uribe | 1.015 | .826 |
| Colombia | 2011 | Santos | -1.215 | .257 |
| Colombia | 2015 | Santos | -1.215 | .257 |
| Costa Rica | 1980 | Carazo | -.485 | 1.988 |
| Costa Rica | 1982 | Monge | -.492 | -1.056 |
| Costa Rica | 1986 | Arias | .091 | -.371 |
| Costa Rica | 1990 | Calderón | -.252 | -.998 |
| Costa Rica | 1994 | Figueres | -.085 | -.359 |
| Costa Rica | 1998 | Rodríguez | -.598 | -.882 |
| Costa Rica | 2002 | Pacheco | .068 | -.312 |
| Costa Rica | 2006 | Arias | -.299 | .048 |
| Costa Rica | 2010 | Chinchilla | -.929 | .187 |
| Costa Rica | 2014 | Solis | -1.033 | .571 |
| Dominican Republic | 1980 | Guzmán | -.751 | .210 |
| Dominican Republic | 1983 | Blanco | -.629 | -.394 |
| Dominican Republic | 1987 | Balaguer | 1.084 | -.161 |
| Dominican Republic | 1991 | Balaguer | .404 | -.138 |
| Dominican Republic | 1995 | Balaguer | -.265 | .408 |
| Dominican Republic | 1997 | Fernández | -1.236 | -.777 |
| Dominican Republic | 2001 | Mejía | -.310 | .245 |
| Dominican Republic | 2005 | Fernández | -.265 | .408 |
| Dominican Republic | 2009 | Fernández | -.265 | .408 |
| Dominican Republic | 2013 | Medina | -.492 | .071 |
| Ecuador | 1980 | Roldos | -.208 | .733 |
| Ecuador | 1981 | Hurtado | -.075 | -.580 |
| Ecuador | 1985 | Febres Cordero | 1.358 | 1.001 |
| Ecuador | 1989 | Borja | -.240 | -1.161 |
| Ecuador | 1993 | Durán Ballén | 1.076 | .931 |
| Ecuador | 1997 | Bucaram | 1.049 | 2.546 |
| Ecuador | 1998 | Alarcón | .663 | 1.628 |
| Ecuador | 1999 | Mahuad | -.113 | 1.140 |
| Ecuador | 2000 | Noboa | -.426 | .408 |
| Ecuador | 2003 | Gutiérrez | 1.769 | 2.197 |
| Ecuador | 2007 | Correa | 1.622 | .222 |
| Ecuador | 2010 | Correa | 1.622 | .222 |
| Ecuador | 2014 | Correa | 1.759 | -.057 |
| El Salvador | 1985 | Duarte | -.563 | -.545 |
| El Salvador | 1989 | Cristiani | .618 | -.742 |
| El Salvador | 1994 | Calderón Sol | .009 | -.940 |
| El Salvador | 1999 | Flores | .252 | -1.207 |
| El Salvador | 2004 | Saca | .383 | -1.103 |
| El Salvador | 2009 | Funes | -1.054 | -.673 |
| El Salvador | 2014 | Ceren | .761 | -.998 |
| Guatemala | 1986 | Cerezo | -.062 | -.371 |
| Guatemala | 1991 | Serrano | .959 | 1.860 |
| Guatemala | 1996 | Arzu | .085 | .071 |
| Guatemala | 2000 | Portillo | -1.088 | -.510 |
| Guatemala | 2004 | Berger | -.553 | 1.140 |
| Guatemala | 2008 | Colom | -.475 | -.057 |
| Guatemala | 2012 | Molina | .782 | .524 |
| Honduras | 1982 | Suazo | .516 | .292 |
| Honduras | 1986 | Azcona | -.160 | .187 |
| Honduras | 1990 | Callejas | .588 | .141 |
| Honduras | 1994 | Reina | .166 | .048 |
| Honduras | 1998 | Flores | .025 | .234 |
| Honduras | 2002 | Maduro | -.718 | -.127 |
| Honduras | 2006 | Zelaya | -.653 | .210 |
| Honduras | 2010 | Micheletti | -.641 | -.208 |
| Honduras | 2011 | Lobo | .408 | -.161 |
| Honduras | 2015 | Hernández | .477 | .048 |
| Mexico | 1989 | Salinas | 1.738 | -.382 |
| Mexico | 1995 | Zedillo | .211 | -.452 |
| Mexico | 2001 | Fox | -1.258 | -.440 |
| Mexico | 2007 | Calderon | .001 | -.417 |
| Mexico | 2013 | Nieto | .107 | -.231 |
| Nicaragua | 1985 | Ortega | -.383 | -1.207 |
| Nicaragua | 1990 | Chamorro | .030 | -.022 |
| Nicaragua | 1997 | Alemán | .980 | -.649 |
| Nicaragua | 2002 | Bolanos | -1.393 | .036 |
| Nicaragua | 2007 | Ortega | 1.004 | -.812 |
| Nicaragua | 2012 | Ortega | 1.004 | -.812 |
| Panama | 1990 | Endara | -1.180 | .361 |
| Panama | 1995 | Pérez Balladares | -.334 | -.742 |
| Panama | 2000 | Moscoso | -.608 | -.022 |
| Panama | 2005 | Torrijos | -.359 | -.649 |
| Panama | 2010 | Martinelli | 1.844 | .722 |
| Panama | 2015 | Varela | -.532 | .327 |
| Paraguay | 1989 | Rodríguez | -.906 | -.719 |
| Paraguay | 1994 | Wasmosy | -.753 | -.708 |
| Paraguay | 1999 | Cubas | -.671 | -.127 |
| Paraguay | 2000 | Macchi | -.111 | -1.149 |
| Paraguay | 2004 | Duarte | .600 | -.684 |
| Paraguay | 2009 | Lugo | .771 | .966 |
| Paraguay | 2013 | Franco | -1.021 | -1.672 |
| Paraguay | 2014 | Cartes | .328 | -.626 |
| Peru | 1981 | Belaunde | -.189 | .850 |
| Peru | 1986 | Garcia | 1.399 | .513 |
| Peru | 1991 | Fujimori | 2.635 | 2.035 |
| Peru | 1996 | Fujimori | 2.617 | 1.907 |
| Peru | 2001 | Paniagua | -.986 | .989 |
| Peru | 2002 | Toledo | 1.301 | 2.174 |
| Peru | 2007 | García | -.301 | -.754 |
| Peru | 2012 | Humala | .706 | 2.395 |
| Uruguay | 1985 | Sanguinetti | .397 | -.882 |
| Uruguay | 1990 | Lacalle | -.412 | -.754 |
| Uruguay | 1995 | Sanguinetti | -.156 | -.405 |
| Uruguay | 2000 | Batlle | -.340 | -.115 |
| Uruguay | 2005 | Vázquez | -.257 | -1.440 |
| Uruguay | 2010 | Mujica | -.608 | -1.056 |
| Uruguay | 2015 | Vázquez | -.312 | -.719 |
| Venezuela | 1980 | Herrera | -.720 | -1.718 |
| Venezuela | 1984 | Lusinchi | -.980 | -1.823 |
| Venezuela | 1989 | Pérez | -1.687 | -1.254 |
| Venezuela | 1993 | Velásquez | -2.404 | -1.056 |
| Venezuela | 1994 | Caldera | -.287 | 1.384 |
| Venezuela | 1999 | Chávez | 2.288 | 1.977 |
| Venezuela | 2001 | Chávez | 2.321 | 1.930 |
| Venezuela | 2007 | Chavez | 2.402 | 1.582 |
| Venezuela | 2013 | Maduro | -.097 | 1.117 |

A3. Model equations.

Control variables are excluded for simplicity; see main document for a list of these variables.

A4. Estimation results without democracy lags

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Freedom House | | | Polity IV | | |
| Effect on democracy | Est. | SE | P value | Est. | SE | P value |
| Presidential dominance | -.086 | .031 | .006 | -.389 | .084 | .000 |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | -.180 | .034 | .000 | -.238 | .090 | .008 |
| Interaction (dominance\*weakness) | -.070 | .028 | .014 | -.285 | .076 | .000 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Constitutional powers of the president | -.153 | .055 | .006 | -.845 | .136 | .000 |
| Ruling party control of legislature | -.085 | .060 | .156 | -.913 | .160 | .000 |
| Years of democracy | -.013 | .005 | .006 | .032 | .012 | .009 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | -.004 | .005 | .407 | -.019 | .009 | .036 |
| Authoritarian continuity | -1.029 | .144 | .000 | -3.755 | .373 | .000 |
| Average party age | .000 | .001 | .801 | .004 | .003 | .201 |
| Log of GDP per capita | .370 | .109 | .001 | .279 | .253 | .270 |
| Inflation | .000 | .000 | .865 | .000 | .000 | .064 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intercept | 2.551 | .917 | .006 | 5.599 | 2.131 | .009 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Effect on presidential dominance | Est. | SE | P value |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | .475 | .044 | .000 |
| Constitutional powers of president | .107 | .073 | .141 |
| Interaction (weakness\*powers) | -.122 | .037 | .001 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Ruling party control of legislature | .218 | .084 | .009 |
| Level of democracy (one-year lag) | .015 | .007 | .026 |
| Years of democracy | -.003 | .005 | .516 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | .484 | .199 | .015 |
| Authoritarian party continuity | -.004 | .002 | .009 |
| Average party age | -.201 | .140 | .151 |
| Log of GDP per capita | .000 | .000 | .006 |
| Inflation |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Intercept | 1.725 | 1.181 | .145 |

A5. Estimation results using GLS with between-panel heteroscedasticity and within-panel autocorrelation.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Freedom House | | | Polity IV | | |
| Effect on democracy | Est. | SE | P value | Est. | SE | P value |
| Presidential dominance | -.011 | .015 | .463 | -.030 | .025 | .227 |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | -.023 | .014 | .110 | -.012 | .018 | .526 |
| Interaction (dominance\*weakness) | -.024 | .013 | .080 | -.029 | .024 | .223 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Constitutional powers of the president | .010 | .012 | .397 | -.022 | .033 | .499 |
| Ruling party control of legislature | -.002 | .028 | .938 | -.005 | .036 | .880 |
| Democracy lag | .928 | .017 | .000 | .882 | .021 | .000 |
| Years of democracy | -.001 | .002 | .439 | -.001 | .003 | .678 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | -.001 | .001 | .155 | -.002 | .001 | .114 |
| Authoritarian continuity | -.046 | .047 | .324 | -.037 | .172 | .831 |
| Average party age | .000 | .000 | .227 | .000 | .001 | .512 |
| Log of GDP per capita | .053 | .025 | .034 | .133 | .056 | .018 |
| Inflation | .000 | .000 | .861 | .000 | .000 | .008 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intercept | -.003 | .180 | .988 | -.129 | .426 | .761 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Freedom House | | | Polity IV | | |
| Effect on presidential dominance | Est. | SE | P value | Est. | SE | P value |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | .506 | .036 | .000 | .490 | .036 | .000 |
| Constitutional powers of president | -.039 | .074 | .604 | -.034 | .074 | .649 |
| Interaction (weakness\*powers) | .024 | .028 | .397 | .027 | .028 | .338 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ruling party control of legislature | .183 | .062 | .003 | .166 | .063 | .008 |
| Level of democracy (one-year lag) | .003 | .055 | .954 | -.038 | .022 | .083 |
| Years of democracy | .008 | .009 | .384 | .014 | .009 | .145 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | -.005 | .004 | .201 | -.005 | .003 | .103 |
| Authoritarian party continuity | .676 | .216 | .002 | .570 | .214 | .008 |
| Average party age | -.001 | .001 | .321 | -.001 | .001 | .307 |
| Log of GDP per capita | -.111 | .116 | .340 | -.105 | .114 | .355 |
| Inflation | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intercept | .899 | .963 | .351 | 1.134 | .938 | .227 |

A6. Multilevel model specification for presidential dominance model

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Freedom House | | | Polity IV | | |
| Effect on presidential dominance | Est. | SE | P value | Est. | SE | P value |
| Ruling party organizational weakness | .483 | .075 | .000 | .461 | .075 | .000 |
| Constitutional powers of president | .049 | .089 | .580 | .034 | .089 | .703 |
| Interaction (weakness\*powers) | -.039 | .060 | .513 | -.044 | .060 | .462 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ruling party control of legislature | .338 | .172 | .050 | .294 | .179 | .101 |
| Level of democracy (one-year lag) | .041 | .097 | .670 | -.024 | .042 | .574 |
| Years of democracy | .025 | .012 | .036 | .024 | .012 | .038 |
| Size of Afro-Latino and Indigenous population | -.003 | .004 | .387 | -.004 | .004 | .313 |
| Authoritarian party continuity | .590 | .400 | .140 | .433 | .410 | .291 |
| Average party age | -.004 | .002 | .133 | -.004 | .002 | .117 |
| Log of GDP per capita | -.399 | .187 | .033 | -.354 | .177 | .046 |
| Inflation | .000 | .000 | .017 | .000 | .000 | .018 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intercept | 3.015 | 1.451 | .038 | 3.059 | 1.413 | .030 |

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1. For exceptions, see Houle (2009) and Lupu and Murali (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These studies typically use the degree of democracy as their dependent variable and examine both authoritarian regimes as well as democracies (Barro, 1999; Carles Boix, 2003; Burkhart & Lewis-Beck, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Critics of presidentialism have also argued that the fixed terms of presidents and separate election of presidents and legislatures lead to rigidity and deadlock, which undermine democracy (Linz, 1990; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994; Stepan & Skach, 1993). Some studies, however, have questioned whether presidential regimes are, in fact, more prone to deconsolidation (Cheibub & Limongi, 2002; Shugart & Mainwaring, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We measure personalism using CFA analysis of data collected from an expert survey. The methodology underlying these measures is discussed in a later section. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This would not be a sound measurement strategy for analysis of relationships, as it assumes that personalism increases in linear fashion and that each dimension is equally important. These statistics are intended only to facilitate simple presentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chávez dissolved the MVR in 2007, choosing to replace it with another personalist party, the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. We are interested in the quality or depth of democracy. While the MBP index provides excellent measures of whether a country is democratic or not, its trichotomous indicators are not appropriate for our purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A table of these dyads, with their scores on each of our personalism measures and the number of experts who coded each term, is included in the appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Excluding these lags did not substantively alter our conclusions; See the appendix for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the appendix for the equations that specify these models. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interestingly, this configuration for both democracy measures is for dominance at two SDs below the mean and ruling party organizational weakness at two SDs above the mean. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As a robustness check, we treated the data as multilevel, with presidential terms nested within countries, rather than as panel data. In these analyses, ruling party organizational weakness was still an important predictor of presidential dominance, but the constitutional powers of the president had no detectable effect. See the appendix for more details. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This graph presents results using Polity IV scores as a lagged level of democracy control variable. A graph using Freedom House was virtually identical and is thus omitted for brevity. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)