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Constitutional re-founding in South America: The Failed Case of Paraguay in Comparative Perspective

Refundación constitucional en Sudamérica: el caso fallido de Paraguay en perspectiva comparada

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Abstract

This article examines the reasons why Fernando Lugo's government in Paraguay (2008–2012) was unable to carry out a constitutional rewrite, unlike other political outsiders in the context of South America's leftist shift, such as Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), and Rafael Correa (Ecuador). Through a comparative case study, it examines the conditions that limited the prospects of a constituent process in Paraguay, despite debate on its feasibility. The article demonstrates that, although Lugo was an outsider with similarities to other South American cases, he faced greater constraints than his counterparts due to the lack of strong social protests in support of a constituent assembly in Paraguay. The study underscores the importance of social mobilizations and intra-party dynamics in shaping constitutional processes in the region.

***Keywords**: Constitutional reform, protests, parties, Paraguay, Fernando Lugo.*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las razones por las cuales el gobierno de Fernando Lugo en Paraguay (2008-2012) no pudo llevar a cabo una refundación constitucional, a diferencia de otros *outsiders* en el contexto del giro a la izquierda en América del Sur, como Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia) y Rafael Correa (Ecuador). A través de un estudio de caso en perspectiva comparada, se examinan las condiciones que limitaron la viabilidad de una constituyente en Paraguay, a pesar de que se discutió la posibilidad de llevarla a cabo. El artículo demuestra que, aunque Lugo fue un *outsider* con rasgos similares a otros casos de América del Sur, la falta de protestas sociales fuertes limitó la posibilidad de una constituyente en Paraguay. El trabajo subraya la importancia de las protestas sociales y las dinámicas intrapartidarias en procesos constitucionales en la región.

***Palabras clave**: Reforma constitucional, protestas, partidos, Paraguay, Fernando Lugo.*

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Introduction

"…had we convened a constituent assembly, the constitution would have been very similar to the one we have today, which favors the oligarchy and the traditional parties."

Fernando Lugo

President of Paraguay 2008–2012
Personal interview, August 8, 2014.

Constitutions are foundational documents in democratic regimes. They contain the basic set of rights, duties, and mechanisms that regulate the exercise of governmental power (Galligan & Versteeg, 2013). Due to their nature, constitutions are intended to endure, and in consolidated Western democracies, they have generally remained stable (Negretto, 2012). However, this has not been the case in South America, particularly since the election of left-leaning presidents beginning in 1999. Since Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1999, the ten most populous countries in South America shifted to the left at some point (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Quesada, 2022). In three of these countries, governments completely replaced their constitutions (Venezuela in 1999, Ecuador in 2008, and Bolivia in 2009). In the other seven, leftist presidents initiated actions or expressed the intention to do so but ultimately did not succeed (as in Argentina in 2003, Paraguay in 2008, Uruguay in 2008, Peru in 2011, Chile in 2014 and 2022, Brazil in 2015, and Colombia in 2022) (Figure 1).

This study explains the variation between successful cases of constitutional replacements in some countries and not in others, within the broader context of the regional left turn that began in 1999. The process through which the left consolidated power and proposed constitutional changes has continued to the present (as in the case of the current Chilean government that took office in 2022), highlighting the relevance of proposing a theory capable of explaining both the positive and negative cases of constitutional refounding. The focus on Paraguay in 2008 is also pertinent, since—although a constituent assembly did not take place—there were clear intentions at the time. As a key leader of the Lugo coalition, Camilo Soares, stated, the 2008 electoral victory opened the opportunity for constitutional reform because various social and political sectors arrived:

> "…united, [to] accumulate enough strength and later call for a constituent convention… [considering that] in all the countries of the region where sectors critical of the hegemonic neoliberal project were winning… they used the constituent assembly as a moment of refounding, reconnection, and the construction of a new national identity…"(Soares, personal interview, July 16, 2014).

Figure 1. South American countries, left turn, new constitutions (1999–2025).

The constitutional reform did not take place in Paraguay, and this study explains why. Although Paraguay represents a negative case—where the phenomenon of interest did not materialize—studying it comparatively is a justified methodological strategy because it strengthens an explanation of the necessary conditions for a constitutional refoundation to occur. Additionally, focusing on Paraguay is innovative: in the context of constitutional

replacements in South America, most of the literature has centered on the successful cases (Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador), not on the other cases where there was some degree of support for constituent processes but where these ultimately did not materialize.

The focus on the election of left governments in South America is also relevant because these political forces have become key actors in the region, often favored by recurring crises. From the late 1980s to the present, South American countries have experienced economic, political, and governance deterioration, and in response, the left has proposed new constitutions as a way to solve their societies' problems (Roberts, 2014). However, the success of these constitutional changes has not been uniform across cases, and this variation has not been adequately explained[2].

The argument of this research is that the characteristics of the elected parties and the presence of massive protests preceding presidential elections are the strongest explanatory factors. According to this argument, new constitutions are adopted when presidents leading outsider parties are elected in contexts of crises triggered by strong social protests. Outsider parties are understood as newly created, weakly institutionalized parties centered around a dominant political figure (Flores-Macías, 2012). Strong social protests refer to episodes of anti-government mobilization powerful enough to force sitting presidents out of office. The capacity to topple a government is crucial to signaling the strength of a social protest movement.

The relationship between outsiders and protests is explained as follows: because outsider parties do not impose substantial intra-party constraints on their own presidents (Carreras, 2012) and protests reduce institutional barriers on executive power (by weakening actors such as the congress, courts, rival parties, and other checks on presidential authority), outsider presidents have the necessary room for maneuver to push for constitutional refounding. However, in cases where outsider presidents are elected after weak protests, these presidents lack the social support needed to overcome institutional barriers; thus, outsiders end up operating within the existing constitutional framework. Similarly, in cases where strong protests occur but presidents from insider parties—i.e., institutionalized parties within the political order (Flores-Macías, 2012)—are elected, intra-party constraints prevent presidents from transforming their constitutions, as they lack sufficient room for maneuver. Table 1 summarizes the theoretical argument.

Table 1. Theory and cases in the left turn.

		Social protest[2]	
		Strong	***Not strong***
Type of elected party[1]	***Outsider***	*New constitutions* Venezuela (1999), Bolivia (2006), Ecuador (2007)	*No new constitutions* Paraguay (2008), Perú (2011, 2021), Ecuador (2017), Colombia (2022), Chile (2022)
	Insider	*No new constitutions* Argentina (2003)	*No new constitutions* Uruguay (2005, 2010, 2015), Brazil (2003, 2011, 2015, 2023), Chile (2000, 2006, 2014), Argentina (2007, 2011, 2018)

Notes: 1) Years refer to the inauguration of left presidents. Reelections of outsider presidents are not included. 2) Strong social protests are those capable of toppling presidents.

Methodology

This research seeks to demonstrate its argument through a case study focused on Paraguay, examined from a comparative perspective. The analysis centers on Lugo's rise to power in 2008 and includes interviews with elites, a review of newspaper archives, and relevant bibliographic analysis to examine the conditions under which *luguismo* evaluated the possibility of a constituent assembly yet ultimately did not pursue it. Among the cases of outsiders elected after crises with weak protest during the left turn, the case of Lugo is selected because, according to Negretto's (2012) coding, the constitutional-type crisis preceding Lugo was closer in time than the gap between crisis and election for other outsiders

[2] Many studies on constituent processes have focused on regime transitions, shifts in the balance of power, and political crises as factors that lead to full constitutional reforms (Elster, 1995; Negretto, 2012). While these variables largely account for constitutional processes, some countries experienced shifts in the balance of power, tremendous political crises, and regime transitions (such as Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, and Chile), yet they have not adopted new constitutions.

(Humala and Castillo in Peru in 2011 and 2019, or Petro in Colombia in 2022)[3].

Within this comparative framework, this study proposes a theory that conceives constitutions not as neutral norms but as "strategic instruments of power" (Hirschl, 2013, p. 163), capable of distributing power unevenly (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Therefore, presidents consider constitutional reforms because they see in them the possibility of advancing political projects that may benefit their bases and allies.

Among the range of possible constitutional changes, from partial amendments to complete reforms, this study focuses exclusively on full constitutional rewritings, understood here as radical constitutional reform strategies. Furthermore, the origin of a new constitution is considered radical when a democratically elected constituent assembly drafts the constitution with full powers, or plenipotentiary power, over other state institutions. According to Negretto and Sánchez-Talanquer (2021), a constituent assembly signals a clear separation between constituent and constituted power, facilitating its democratic legitimacy and even leading these assemblies to form by usurping the power of the legislature. Because of this differential importance, this study does not focus on amendments, partial constitutional reforms, or new constitutions drafted by a regular congress or a constitutional convention without supremacy over other governmental institutions.

Within constituent processes, this study pays attention to the decision-making processes in which presidents evaluate undertaking a radical constitutional reform based on cost–benefit calculations. In this sense, it assumes as a premise that, *ceteris paribus*, left-wing presidents will tend to pursue constituent processes for various reasons, since new constitutions may expand social and economic rights, increase the importance of government over the market, and alter the balance of power with respect to conservative rivals.

Another premise of this study is that when unchecked, all politicians (regardless of ideological orientation) seek to accumulate and strengthen their power to the greatest extent possible (Ibarra del Cueto, 2023). In this respect, constitutional reforms may contribute to the centralization of power in the executive, extend presidential terms, weaken the strength of horizontal accountability institutions, and reinforce links between presidents and their voters (Brinks et al., 2015). However, presidents do not always succeed in implementing constitutional reforms because—as previously noted—they face counterweights to their power, such as intraparty and institutional constraints.

The election of Fernando Lugo (2008) was selected because it allows for the study of a progressive president leading an outsider party (Patriotic Alliance for Change, APC). Although the APC included a traditional party within it, it exhibited characteristics of a typical outsider party, being a new, weakly institutionalized organization created for short-term electoral purposes and highly dependent on a dominant political figure[4]. Additionally, Lugo is of interest because he came to power after a period of constitutional crisis (1999–2006), from the fall of President Cubas Grau in 1999 to the mobilization of 2006, similar to the conditions that induce constitutional replacements (Negretto, 2012). Since this context may have favored a constituent process and the possibility was internally debated within *luguismo*, this study aims to explain why it was not carried out.

Key Variables of this Study

The first explanatory variable refers to the types of parties that attain presidential power. This is important because internal party constraints are limitations imposed on their main leaders, such as presidential

[3] Regarding the recent failed attempt to approve a new constitution in Chile, it was not included in the analysis because the constituent process was initiated (2020) during the administration of Sebastián Piñera, a right-wing president, and this study prioritizes comparing constituent processes initiated (or debated for initiation) by left-wing governments. In Ecuador in 2017, a left-wing outsider, Moreno, also came to power, but a constituent assembly had already taken place previously in 2007/08.

[4] The APC was a coalition of parties and political movements that included the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (PLRA), a traditional party within the Paraguayan political establishment. For the purposes of this study, the APC fits into the category of an outsider party due to its organizational characteristics. The coalition was created only months before the elections, was weakly institutionalized, did not impose significant constraints on Lugo, and had incentives to radically reform government institutions that were perceived as intrinsically linked to economic elites and the Colorado Party. In fact, sectors of the PLRA expressed support for a constitutional reform, as will be discussed later in this study.

candidates. Leaders do not always dominate their parties at will and face different levels of constraints depending on the type of party. This study considers two types of parties: insider parties and outsider parties.

Insider parties develop gradually over time. Their members hold positions across various levels of public service, acquire experience in governance, and learn to negotiate multiple interests (Flores-Macias, 2012). These parties are often considered part of the political establishment. Internally, insider parties tend to be well institutionalized, with internal factions that both compete and cooperate for control of the party, and party activists are not fully subordinate to their leaders.

Outsider parties, on the other hand, emerge from outside the political establishment. They often arise to challenge traditional political elites and existing institutions (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). They grow rapidly, generally near an election. They lack governance experience and have no vested interest in the institutional order (Flores-Macías, 2012). They tend to see existing institutions as controlled by the political establishment (Zulianello, 2018) and therefore disregard or ignore the constitutional rules of the political game.

Internally, outsider parties are weakly institutionalized. Even when they include diverse social groups and are sites of intense internal debate, these parties lack strong internal factions. Their decision-making mechanisms are typically centralized in the hands of a dominant authority figure for whom reaching internal agreements is not costly. Thus, in times of crisis, outsider presidents have both the latitude and the incentives to connect with social demands for change, remove their political rivals from government institutions, and create new institutions they can control. In short, outsider parties do not impose intraparty constraints on their presidents, unlike insider parties.

The second explanatory variable considered by this study concerns social protests. Protests are important because presidents also face institutional barriers to their political projects, and social protests influence whether these barriers weaken. Institutions that limit presidents include congress, courts, electoral institutions, rival parties, and others involved in approving constitutional reforms. Actors such as military and economic elites may also restrict executive action (Pérez-Liñán, 2007). Therefore, even if left-wing presidents are inclined to seek radical constitutional changes, if institutional barriers are strong, presidents will avoid reforms. However, institutional constraints are not fixed, and social protests can play a key role in reducing these barriers in favor of presidents.

A central point of this research is that presidents will take advantage of favorable contexts to maximize their political and institutional power. In this sense, moments of crisis are crucial because they weaken checks on presidential power. Crises delegitimize political and economic elites (de la Torre & Burbano de Lara, 2020), affect the role of courts (Basabe-Serrano, 2012), facilitate the emergence of populist leaders, and signal the failure of regime institutions (Moffitt, 2016). For these reasons, crisis contexts have been seen as factors that may temporarily weaken institutional constraints and facilitate constitutional reforms (Corrales, 2018; Elster, 1995; Negretto, 2012). This aligns with Helmke's (2002) suggestion that judges make strategic decisions and rule against outgoing governments if they are weak.

In these contexts, the strength of protests is crucial because it alters the opportunities and incentives for institutional reforms (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The logic is simple: as social protests grow stronger, they change the power relations underpinning existing institutional arrangements. Massive protests weaken institutional authorities, courts, congress, and the actors defending the status quo. Moreover, protests may empower populist actors opposed to institutions designed to check executive power (Landau, 2013; Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). As protests intensify, maintaining the status quo becomes burdensome, resistance to change tends to weaken, and radical institutional reforms become more likely. For these reasons, protests reduce institutional constraints against constitutional reforms. However, when mobilizations are weak, institutional constraints remain high, and leaders tend toward moderation and preservation of the *status quo*.

Social protests play a fundamental role in this study. Since the late 1980s in South America, protest movements have acted against authoritarian regimes, unpopular presidents, market reforms, inequality, corruption, and ethnic exclusion (Arce, 2010; Pérez-Liñán, 2007; Rossi & Silva, 2018). Protests have marked historic political moments in the region—from the *Caracazo* in Venezuela in 1989, the *Marzo Paraguayo* in Paraguay in 1999, the *Argentinazo* in Argentina in 2001, the Water War in Bolivia in 2003, to the 2019 social uprising in Chile. A common feature of these mobilizations has been the demand for radical changes to improve the quality of government performance, which led several political leaders to propose constitutional reforms capable of addressing popular demands. However, as will be seen in the Paraguayan case, protests were weak and did not provide social support for a potential constituent process during Lugo's government.

Results and Discussion

Fernando Lugo: Emergence, Victory, and the Prospect of Constitutional Reform

The period immediately preceding Lugo's rise to power occurred during the presidency of Colorado leader Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003–2008). Duarte Frutos's maneuvers to concentrate power generated significant public discontent. His challenge to the Constitution—having been elected president of the ANR while still serving as president of the Republic—and his announced ambition to seek presidential reelection made him the focal point of opposition resistance in Paraguay. Thus, on 29 March 2006, a crowd of 40,000 people gathered in Asunción under the slogan *Dictatorship Never Again*. Although all opposition parties were present, attention centered on Bishop Fernando Lugo (Abente, 2007), a religious figure who had gained national political relevance (Nickson, 2008).

Lugo was an outsider in politics. He served as a Catholic bishop from 1994 to 2005 and consistently stood apart from the conventional conservative elite of the Paraguayan Church. He taught liberation theology at the Catholic University, chaired the National Social Pastoral of the Catholic Church, and represented the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference (CEP). He cultivated connections throughout the country, worked with social movements, supported territorially based ecclesiastical organizations, and interacted with leaders and activists across the political spectrum (Martínez Escobar, 2013). He also extended his influence beyond the Church, aligning himself with left-wing parties and social movements, leading a campaign against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and strongly advocating for peasant and labor rights. As a result, Lugo became known as Paraguay's "red bishop" (Gott, 2008, p. 48).

In late 2006 (less than two years before the presidential elections), Lugo resigned from his position in the Catholic Church and decided to run for president after several social movements submitted a petition with 100,000 signatures urging him to do so (*Última Hora*, 2006). His religious background set him above partisan conflict, making him the non-political candidate capable of unifying a broad coalition against the Colorado Party. As Lugo himself explained, he emerged in a context of "institutional and judicial crisis... along with a fragmented political class lacking cohesive leadership" (Lugo, personal interview, 8 August 2014).

In 2007, Lugo launched a political campaign known as *Ñemongueta Guasú*—or "great dialogue" in Guaraní—designed to incorporate popular demands into an electoral platform. The campaign fueled public enthusiasm surrounding his candidacy. Lugo coordinated effectively with peasant movements, labor unions, and left-wing parties. He later strengthened ties with the PLRA (Authentic Radical Liberal Party), which ultimately agreed not to run its own presidential candidate in exchange for securing the vice presidency for a liberal (ABC Color, 2007).

Bringing together the PLRA along with other center-left and left-wing parties, Lugo built the Patriotic Alliance for Change (APC). Outside this structure, he supported unions, peasant movements, and other left-wing parties in forming the Social and Popular Bloc (BSP) and the Patriotic Socialist Alliance (APS) (Martínez Escobar, 2013).

However, Lugo's broad coalition lacked formal and institutionalized decision-making mechanisms. As a result, decisions generally depended on Lugo's own

initiative, which was not without difficulties. For instance, Lugo managed to overcome pressures from the left to run exclusively with left-wing allies. He also avoided holding internal primaries to select a single opposition candidate—an idea supported by several center-right parties and sectors of the PLRA. Ultimately, Lugo skillfully neutralized potential rivals within the opposition, incorporating numerous organizations into the APC and related alliances, while consistently remaining the central political figure.

With this broad support base, Lugo won the presidential elections on 20 April 2008. The APC obtained 41% of the vote, while the Colorado Party received 30%. In the Senate, the APC won 17 of 45 seats (38%), and in the Lower House, 32 of 80 seats (40%). Although Lugo's coalition lacked the numbers to pass legislation independently (the ANR remained the largest force), the APC had enough strength to establish a *"legislative shield"* (Pérez-Liñán, 2007, p. 12) to prevent impeachment proceedings—although this shield collapsed in 2012.

Lugo's rise marked a crucial transformation in Paraguay's political landscape, ending six decades of uninterrupted Colorado rule. It also symbolized the unprecedented ascent of the left to the pinnacle of executive power (Martínez Escobar, 2013). However, this development was met with considerable unease among the Paraguayan elite.

Lugo and his coalition were fully aware of the challenges they faced in attempting to initiate structural and institutional transformations in a country known for corruption and inequality (Irala et al., 2019). The judiciary, congress, and other government institutions were dominated by the Colorado Party. Economic elites resisted any alteration of the status quo. Meanwhile, the parties within Lugo's coalition lacked experience managing governmental institutions.

Additionally, several progressive movements, academic groups, left-wing parties, and social organizations argued that the 1992 Constitution hindered changes to the country's economic, judicial, and political institutional framework (Martens et al., 2010). While the Constitution recognized rights and freedoms that had previously not existed in Paraguay (Cerna Villagra & Villalba Portillo, 2019), it also imposed substantial constraints. For example, constitutional limitations made it difficult to insulate the judiciary from political influence, establish mechanisms for public participation (such as referendums), and implement agrarian reform (Lezcano Claude, 2005). The latter issue was especially important for peasant movements, which deeply influenced Lugo's sociopolitical vision. Lugo recognized that a comprehensive agrarian reform—capable of restructuring unequal land ownership patterns and reducing large unproductive estates—would require constitutional revision (Gallego-Día, 2009).

Faced with the perception that constitutional reform was necessary to implement profound societal changes, various political factions within Lugo's coalition proposed convening a constituent assembly as a strategic move. As Camilo Soares (quoted at the beginning) indicated, one of the PLRA's leaders, Blas Llano, stated:

> If you're thinking about major transformations, significant structural changes, you must begin with the matrix that establishes the State's legal, political, and institutional framework, which is the National Constitution… [for this reason] At the first meeting we held here at the Palacio de López [seat of the executive], I was the political leader who suggested to the president [Lugo] the need for constitutional reform within no more than 180 days (Llano, personal interview, 23 June 2014).

This strategy sought to capitalize on the momentum generated by the historic 2008 victory and the resulting destabilization of the Colorado Party. Many saw a constituent process as an opportunity to strengthen their political position, inspired by the successes of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999) and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007), both minority presidents who used constituent assemblies to consolidate their popularity (Corrales, 2018).

However, despite broad recognition of the need to reform the constitutional framework, Lugo's trajectory

in Paraguay diverged from the paths taken in Venezuela and Ecuador, where outsiders reached power and rewrote their constitutions. In Paraguay, the process toward a new constitution never even began.

As previously discussed, this study's theory holds that two variables are essential for a radical constitutional reform (requiring a constituent assembly): the emergence of outsider parties and a crisis context marked by powerful social protests. This dynamic was evident in Venezuela (1999), Bolivia (2006), and Ecuador (2007), where crises driven by massive protests weakened institutional barriers to presidential power, while presidents—mostly outsiders—faced few internal party constraints. In contrast, the left turn in Paraguay presented a different context. Although Lugo was an outsider who emerged from outside the political establishment, his rise was neither triggered nor accompanied by protests strong enough to erode institutional constraints and facilitate a successful constituent process.

For comparison, Figure 2 illustrates anti-government protests in Argentina, Ecuador, and Paraguay between 1990 and 2020, and marks the arrival of left-wing presidents. It is important to recall that in Argentina and Ecuador, social protests played a decisive role in toppling several governments (one president in Argentina in 2001 and three presidents in Ecuador between 1997 and 2003). In Paraguay, although a president fell during the 1999 *Marzo Paraguayo* amid social protests, the scale of the mobilization never matched that of other countries[5].

In sum, Lugo had some favorable conditions to pursue a radical strategy of constitutional change, but they proved insufficient. Even after winning the elections, his popularity soared to 93% (ABC Color, 2008). Moreover, he was elected in a context of strong anti-establishment sentiment—stronger even than in some cases with more intense social protests (Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador) and prior to their leftward shifts (Figure 3). However, these advantages were not enough to overcome the institutional constraints on executive authority, which ultimately prevented a constitutional transformation.

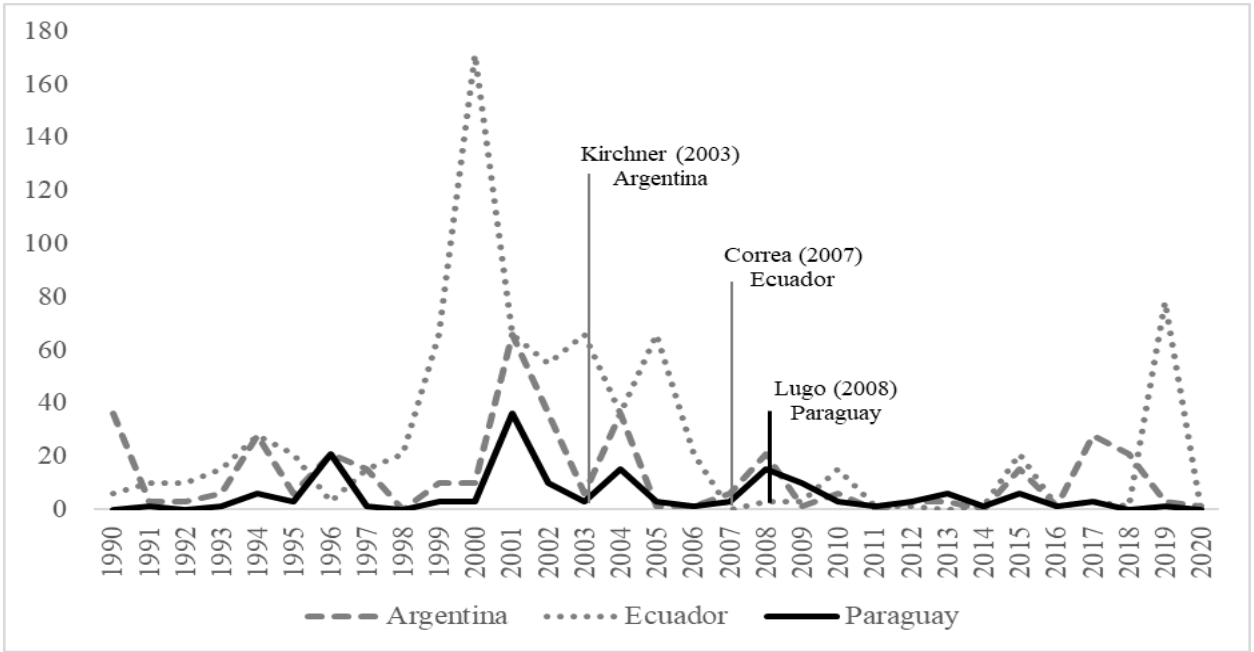

Figure 2. Anti-government protests in Argentina, Ecuador, and Paraguay (1990–2020). **Source:** Clark and Regan (2019).

[5] It is essential to clarify that this source only includes protest events with more than 50 participants, which means it does not capture the full magnitude of each mobilization. A closer examination shows that in the case of Ecuador, prior to the electoral victory of the left, five protests with more than 100,000 participants were recorded between 1999 and 2003. Argentina, for its part, experienced two massive mobilizations with more than 1,000,000 participants in the year 2000. In contrast, Paraguay did not experience any event with more than 15,000 participants during the decade preceding the election of Fernando Lugo, according to this source's records (Clark & Regan, 2019).

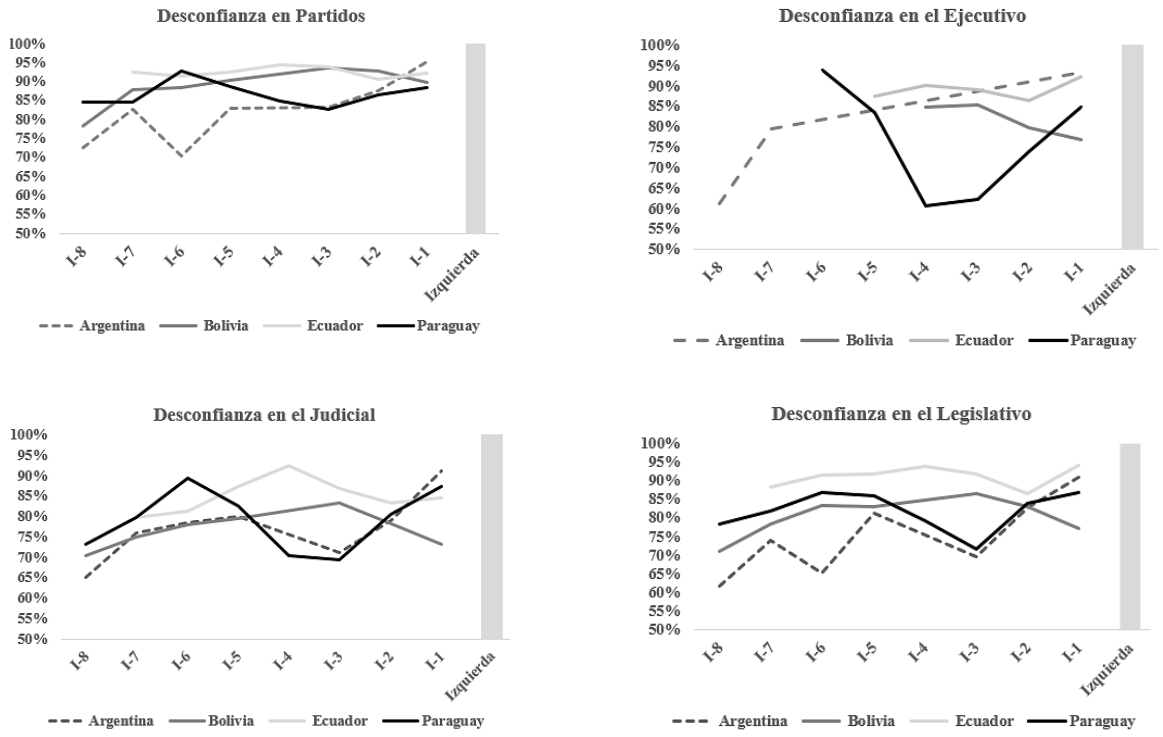

Figure 3. Distrust in parties and institutions before the leftward shift.

Note. The horizontal axis refers to the years prior to the leftward shift in each country (L = Left). They were coded this way to enable comparison, since the elections of left-leaning presidents took place in different years. Each graph seeks to show the level of trust in institutions one year before the election of the left-leaning president (L-1), then two years before (L-2), and so on. Source: Latinobarómetro Corporation (2025).

Abstention from a Constitutional Reform in Paraguay

Paraguay's outsider, unlike his counterparts in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, refrained from advancing a radical constitutional reform because he was not elected in an environment of widespread and intense protests. The 2006 march that launched Lugo's political career was carefully organized by opposition leaders who saw an opportunity to unite forces against the ANR. The event was not a massive social uprising capable of weakening the institutional checks on executive power.

The decline of labor and peasant movements prior to Lugo's term, coupled with the absence of strong left-wing parties or other civil society actors capable of mobilizing against the political establishment, distinctly characterizes the leftward shift in Paraguay. Although there were localized peasant protests in rural areas, they did not escalate to the level of the massive rural and urban uprisings seen elsewhere.

Essentially, Lugo's rise to power was not driven by a popular revolutionary mandate to restructure the country. Instead, he emerged as a unifying political figure focused mainly on defeating the Colorado Party, as described by Esperanza Martínez, Minister of Health under Lugo (Martínez, personal interview, July 28, 2014). While leftist parties and movements—particularly those linked to the peasantry—sought radical institutional changes, the main concern of urban and middle-class sectors was "political alternation," as noted by Soares (personal interview, July 16, 2014). Thus, Lugo was seen as an opportunity for a change in leadership in Paraguay rather than a force aiming to refound the entire system.

Social movements were in decline by 2008. Eladio Flecha, leader of the Federación Nacional Campesina (FNC), Paraguay's main peasant organization, indicated that the influence of the FNC had already peaked by the time Lugo emerged: thanks to the FNC's struggle for land, "from 1994 to 2004 we acquired 290,000 hectares of land… after 2004 we

stopped occupying land" (Flecha, personal interview, June 13, 2014). He explained that this decline resulted from the fall in cotton production, rural migration to urban centers, and increasing government repression, which led to the "lumpenization of the peasant class, weakening the entire movement" (Flecha, personal interview, June 13, 2014). Union leaders shared a similar view. The vibrant unionism that had characterized resistance to Stroessner and the transition to democracy had significantly faded (Coronel Prosman, 2021).

An important effect of coming to power in a context of low mobilization is that it discourages proposals for radical institutional changes and creates doubts about an outsider's chances of success against opponents. Canese illustrates this point:

> Despite Lugo's victory, there was some enthusiasm, but the labor movements were exhausted and the peasant movement was in decline… If we had initiated a constituent assembly, and if Lugo had not been removed, we probably would have ended up with a constitution inferior to the one we have today (Canese, personal interview, August 3, 2014).

Despite their diminished mobilization capacity, social movements attempted to push their causes. Immediately after Lugo's electoral victory, more than 100 organizations from various sectors of society—including peasant and Indigenous groups, unions, women's rights advocates, NGOs, grassroots church movements, and progressive government reformists—formed the Frente Social y Popular (FSP), a collective platform advocating changes related to land tenure and the judicial system (Levy, 2013). In November 2008, the FSP organized a demonstration of two thousand protesters demanding the resignation of Attorney General Candia Amarilla (aligned with the ANR) and all members of the Supreme Court of Justice (Última Hora, 2008). However, the police repressed the event, and despite its efforts, the FSP eventually fragmented and dissolved.

Lugo's strategies often failed in situations requiring him to exert pressure on institutions outside the executive branch. One notable incident occurred in 2011, when a land dispute involving a 157,000-hectare property owned by the powerful soybean producer Grupo Favero became contentious. Responding to a request from local landless peasants, the government initiated a judicial review in September 2011 to investigate the legitimacy of land titles in the area. Army engineers from the Military Geographic Institute were sent to conduct land surveys and determine state-owned properties held by the landowning elite. During this process, peasant movements led a series of land occupations claiming those properties. In a revealing sign of the weakness of both social movements and Lugo's administration, not only were the landless peasants evicted by landowners, but the latter also blocked the mission of the army engineers. The Supreme Court intervened, ruling that future land assessments would be supervised by a local judge, thereby marginalizing the executive branch (Ezquerro-Cañete & Fogel, 2017). The episode demonstrated the government's inability to fulfill its agrarian reform promises in the face of a hostile judicial system and weak social protests.

Lugo also faced an uphill battle in his attempts to counter the entrenched partisan capture of the judiciary, another case that shows his difficulty in overcoming institutional barriers. When he took office in 2008, the influence of the ANR was clear, with six of the nine Supreme Court justices affiliated with the party (USAID, 2009). During his term, Lugo had the opportunity to replace only one Supreme Court justice, and despite this opening, he was unable to appoint his preferred candidate. The combined effect of the ANR's entrenched presence in the judiciary, congress, and other institutions turned the courts into formidable obstacles to Lugo's reform agenda (Schuster, 2013).

The fragility of Lugo's administration was also evident during the 2011 attempt to advance a constitutional amendment allowing presidential re-election. For most leftist parties, the strategy involved capitalizing on Lugo's high approval ratings in 2011. To that end, the Frente Guasu worked to mobilize citizens in support of the initiative, claiming to have collected more than 100,000 signatures in favor of the amendment. However, in response, the Colorado Party passed a resolution opposing the amendment

(ABC Color, 2011a). The media and economic elites also joined forces against the proposal (ABC Color, 2011b). Yet the president's popularity did not translate into significant mobilization capable of pushing the proposal forward and shielding it from potential veto players. This absence of a "popular shield" (Pérez-Liñán, 2014, p. 34) meant that the proposal did not even reach the congressional floor for consideration. This stands in stark contrast, for example, to Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007), who managed to push forward a referendum to approve a constituent assembly despite having no party representation in congress, thanks to the context of massive protests demanding change.

A final example of the lack of political strength derived from weak protest movements supporting radical change was Lugo's removal from office in 2012. As Lugo approached the fourth year of his term, a tragic clash between peasants and the police in the district of Curuguaty acted as a catalyst for impeachment proceedings that led to his removal. The Paraguayan congress swiftly initiated the process, accusing Lugo of poor performance in office. The speed of the proceedings—completed in just two days—led to criticism of the constitutionality of the impeachment both domestically and internationally (Marsteintredet et al., 2013). Critics argued that Lugo did not have adequate time to prepare his defense, making the process resemble a parliamentary coup rather than a genuine constitutional procedure.

Former APC allies, politically sidelined by Lugo's decisions during his administration, seized the moment and joined the ANR to overthrow Lugo and elevate the Liberal vice president to the presidency. Social sectors were unable to counter the impeachment, and no mass uprising emerged in Lugo's defense, as occurred, for example, with the mobilizations that restored Hugo Chávez to the presidency after the 2002 coup. As Soares commented in 2012: *"to reverse the impeachment, we would need an organized popular uprising, which is not happening"* (Fierro, 2012, para. 7).

The evidence underscores that, despite expressions of support for more radical strategies of institutional change—including the idea of a constitutional reform—the reality was that the necessary social mobilizations were absent. Stefanoni offers a comparative perspective: *"Paraguay was far from resembling Ecuador, where Rafael Correa had the social support to dissolve congress and call for a constituent assembly, or Bolivia, where Evo Morales had an enormous Indigenous-popular base with a broad mobilization capacity"* (Stefanoni, 2012, para. 2). The weakness of social forces generated uncertainty about the coalition's prospects in a hypothetical constituent assembly and culminated in the fragile political position that ended Lugo's presidency. This context explains Lugo's response when asked why he did not follow the radical paths of leaders such as Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, or Correa in Ecuador:

> I don't think the comparison is logical, because our victory, on the one hand, was the result of the accumulation of forces from the 1980s and 1990s, but without the necessary power to support a constituent process. If we had called a constituent assembly, the constitution would likely have been very similar to the one we have today, which favors the oligarchy and the traditional parties (Lugo, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Ultimately, the decision to enact a new constitution is among the most far-reaching strategic decisions political leaders can make. Such a move represents a significant departure from existing institutions and can shape a country's political, social, and governance trajectory for generations. This study has offered a nuanced understanding of how different contexts shape political decision-making and outcomes. While in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador strong social protests directly influenced leftist presidents to push for successful constituent processes, Paraguay was different. In this case, despite political incentives for constitutional reform, the absence of a robust social force to push such an agenda played a crucial role in preventing it from happening.

The decline of labor and peasant movements prior to Lugo's rise, combined with the lack of significant mobilization from the left or the middle class, meant

that the Paraguayan outsider lacked the strength to pursue a radical strategy of constitutional change and was compelled to operate within the restrictive parameters of existing institutions. The absence of massive social protests meant that institutional barriers could not be easily bypassed or weakened.

In retrospect, Lugo's rise and eventual removal serve as a compelling reminder of the intricate interplay between institutional and partisan constraints, social protests, and the possibilities for political and institutional change in each country..

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