



## ANALYSIS

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# The quality of democracy in Paraguay: causes and challenges

## Calidad de la democracia en Paraguay: causas y desafíos

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes the causes of low democratic quality in Paraguay, a topic that has received limited scholarly attention despite its significance. Using a theoretical framework that distinguishes between the nature of democracy and its quality, the study focuses on three key dimensions: public support for democracy, the quality of governance, and socioeconomic performance. Drawing on data from Latinobarómetro, LAPOP, and The Economist Intelligence Unit, the analysis reveals persistent public dissatisfaction, deficiencies in governance indicators, and poor socioeconomic outcomes. The study identifies three main explanatory factors: Paraguay's socioeconomic structure, which has produced a fragmented and "invertebrate" society lacking collective actors; the pervasive influence of clientelist political parties; and low levels of social capital. While these structural constraints limit the prospects for improvement and hinder significant progress in the short term, the article argues that there remains potential for transformative collective action, which could create opportunities for strengthening democracy in the future.

**Keywords:** Democracy, quality, Paraguay.**Resumen**

Este artículo analiza las causas de la baja calidad de la democracia en Paraguay, un tema poco estudiado a pesar de su importancia. A partir de un marco teórico que distingue entre la naturaleza de la democracia y su calidad, el estudio se enfoca en tres dimensiones fundamentales: el respaldo público a la democracia, la calidad de la gobernanza y el desempeño socioeconómico. Basándose en datos de Latinobarómetro, LAPOP y The Economist Intelligence Unit, el análisis revela un persistente descontento ciudadano, deficiencias en los indicadores de gobernanza y un bajo rendimiento socioeconómico. El estudio identifica tres causas principales: la estructura socioeconómica de Paraguay, que ha producido una sociedad "invertebrada" y carente de actores colectivos; la influencia de partidos políticos clientelistas; y los bajos niveles de capital social. Aunque estas restricciones estructurales limitan las posibilidades de mejora y dificultan avances significativos en el corto plazo, el artículo argumenta que existe un margen para la acción colectiva transformadora, lo que podría abrir oportunidades para el fortalecimiento democrático en el futuro.

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## Introduction

The study of democracy in Latin America has been the subject of a prolific academic debate, focused primarily on the causes of democratic regime collapse (O'Donnell, 1973; Linz & Stepan, 1996), the factors explaining redemocratization (O'Donnell et al., 1986), the challenges of democratic consolidation (Mainwaring et al., 1992), and the comparative performance of democracies and authoritarian regimes (Przeworski et al., 2000). These pioneering discussions have been fundamental to understanding the processes of democratic transition and consolidation in the region within the context of the “democratic waves” that marked the end of the twentieth century. However, an equally crucial but less explored phenomenon—the quality of democracy—requires further study. This approach seeks to assess how well democracy functions in terms of legitimacy, governance, and socioeconomic performance.

The evaluation of the quality of democracy has gained relevance in Latin America, as it has highlighted the limitations of democratic systems in responding to citizens' demands, guaranteeing fundamental rights, and promoting inclusive development. Nevertheless, with the exception of Valdebenito (2022) and Tusell Collado (2023), existing studies were published in the first decade of this century and have focused on descriptive or comparative aspects, leaving aside the analysis of the underlying causes that explain variations in democratic quality. This gap in the literature is particularly problematic in countries such as Paraguay, where democracy, although consolidated in formal terms, faces significant challenges in terms of legitimacy, governance, and socioeconomic performance.

Paraguay represents a particularly relevant case study for addressing this issue. Despite having overcome the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner and having experienced more than three decades of democracy, the country continues to face deep structural limitations that affect the quality of its democratic system. These limitations are reflected in persistently low levels of satisfaction with and public support for democracy, deficient governance indicators, and socioeconomic performance that fails

to meet the needs of the population (Abente Brun, 2011).

This article aims to contribute to the debate on the quality of democracy in Paraguay. The research is grounded in the conceptual framework developed in a working paper by Abente Brun (2007), which introduces the concept of an “invertebrate society” as a central element for explaining the country's political and social dynamics. However, this study expands the temporal scope of the analysis to cover the period 2007–2024, broadens the literature review, and confirms the robustness of the theoretical argument by replicating it in a more recent context.

The article is structured into four sections. First, a review of the literature is presented that contextualizes the problem, highlights the main theoretical contributions to the study of the quality of democracy, and distinguishes its nature and key dimensions: legitimacy, governance, and socioeconomic performance. Second, the available indicators of the quality of democracy in Paraguay are examined, using data from Latinobarómetro, LAPOP, and The Economist Intelligence Unit. Third, three causal linkages that explain the limitations of Paraguayan democracy are analyzed: structural factors, such as the socioeconomic matrix; institutional factors, such as the persistence of political clientelism; and social capital, understood as trust in institutions and actors. Finally, the conclusions are presented, synthesizing the findings and discussing their theoretical and public policy implications.

At a time when democracy faces significant challenges worldwide, this study seeks not only to understand the causes of low democratic quality in Paraguay, but also to contribute to a broader debate on the conditions necessary to strengthen democracy in Latin America and in other similar contexts.

### **The quality of democracy as an object of theoretical inquiry**

The systematic study of the quality of democracy as an object of analysis merits re-evaluation in light of the processes of democratic erosion and autocratization characterizing the current decade. Most of the most influential studies have either become relatively

obsolete or have been replaced by new research agendas. The volume titled *La calidad de la democracia: teoría y aplicaciones* (O'Donnell et al., 2004) and the collection edited by Diamond and Morlino (2005), *Assessing the Quality of Democracy*, marked the beginning of this discussion. Subsequently, Levine and Molina (2011) further advanced the study of the subject. For their part, Diamond and Morlino (2005) developed a list of five procedural and three substantive indicators of democratic quality, applied to the comparative analysis of cases in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

However, while most of these studies have focused on conceptual elaboration (O'Donnell, 2004; Diamond & Morlino, 2005) or on comparing the quality of democracy across countries (Hagopian, 2005; Levine & Molina, 2011), this study focuses on the factors that explain low democratic quality and on the conditions under which significant transformations may occur.

In the case of Paraguay, the few but in-depth studies by Barreda and Bou (2011), Pérez Talia (2017), and Bourscheid and Stumpf González (2019) have focused on describing its characteristics rather than analyzing its causes.

To address this issue, it is crucial to begin by clarifying what is meant by the quality of democracy, a still contested concept, and by distinguishing between two different but intertwined notions: the nature of democracy (what democracy is) and its quality (how good it is).

A democracy cannot be more or less democratic, but it can be of higher or lower quality. The definition of democracy is binary, or at most ternary if so-called "hybrid" regimes are included. This analysis assumes the existence of democracy in that sense and proposes to examine the quality of the democratic system once a country surpasses the threshold separating democratic from authoritarian regimes. For the purposes of this article, the study of democratic

quality will focus on three variables that reasonably encompass all the dimensions mentioned above, namely: (1) levels of public support for the system (or legitimacy); (2) quality of governance (understood as good government and, therefore, effectiveness); and (3) socioeconomic performance (which implies efficacy).

The first variable is analyzed using data generated by Latinobarómetro and LAPOP. The second variable, which is more difficult to operationalize, draws on basic indicators of good governance, regardless of the ideological orientation of the regime, and is based on data from The Economist Intelligence Unit. The third variable, socioeconomic performance, is measured through four indicators: the level of poverty, inequality, GDP per capita growth, and the Human Development Index.

### **The quality of democracy in Paraguay**

Available indices of satisfaction with democracy and support for it display low figures. Both Latinobarómetro and LAPOP measurements show persistent dissatisfaction with democracy. The Latinobarómetro data included in table 1 indicate that over the last five-year period, and on average, only 19% of the population reported being satisfied with democracy, and only 42% supported it as a system of government.

The Latinobarómetro data are consistent with those from LAPOP, which present the results shown in table 2.

With regard to governance indicators, this study uses the government functioning indicators of The Economist Intelligence Unit, which place Paraguay in a low position, albeit broadly in line with other countries in the region, as shown in table 3.

Finally, the indicators of socioeconomic performance are also low, as shown in table 4.

**Table 1.** Indices of satisfaction with and support for democracy, 2020–2024.

Country	Satis 2020 %	Satis 2023 %	Satis 2024 %	Satisf Avg %	Sup 2020 %	Sup 23 %	Sup 24 %	Sup Avg %
Paraguay	15	19	24	19.33	44	40	43	42.33
Ecuador	10	12	19	13.67	33	37	42	37.33
Bolivia	26	22	10	19.33	54	51	47	50.67
Perú	11	8	10	9.67	46	50	44	46.67
Colombia	17	17	20	18	43	48	48	46.33
Brazil	21	31	28	26.67	40	46	45	43.67
Venezuela	15	14	19	16	69	57	60	62
Chile	18	28	39	28.33	60	58	61	59.67
Argentina	20	37	45	34	55	62	75	64
Uruguay	68	59	63	63.33	74	70	70	71.33

**Notes:** The data presented in this table were taken directly from the Latinobarómetro 2024 Report: Resilient Democracy. Satis = Satisfaction with Democracy. Sup = Support for Democracy. **Source:** Latinobarómetro (2024, pp. 34, 42).

**Table 2.** Support for and satisfaction with democracy in Paraguay.

Year	% Satisfied with democracy	% Supporting democracy
2006	21	*
2008	22	64
2010	52	61
2012	50	69
2014	47	60
2016	36	52
2019	45	51
2021	34	52
2023	34	51

**Note:** \* No value reported for 2006. **Source:** The AmericasBarometer by LAPOP takes the pulse of democracy in Paraguay (LAPOP Lab, 2023, p. 12, Figure 1.5).

**Table 3.** Governance Indicators (Excluding the Rule of Law) for South American Countries.

Country	Overall score	Regional ranking	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of Government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties
Paraguay	5.92	13	8.33	5.36	6.67	1.88	7.35
Ecuador	5.24	16	8.75	5	5.56	1.88	5
Bolivia	4.26	20	4.33	3.93	5.56	1.88	5.59
Perú	5.69	14	8.75	5.71	5	2.5	6.47
Colombia	6.53	11	9.17	5.17	6.11	3.13	7.65
Brazil	6.49	10	9.58	5	6.11	5	6.76
Venezuela	2.25	23	0	10.7	5	3.13	2.06
Chile	7.83	3	9.58	7.86	6.67	5.63	9.41
Argentina	6.51	9	9.17	5	6.11	3.75	8.53
Uruguay	8.67	1	10	9.26	7.78	6.88	9.41

**Note:** The overall score is calculated on the basis of five dimensions: (I) Electoral Process and Pluralism, (II) Functioning of Government, (III) Political Participation, (IV) Political Culture, and (V) Civil Liberties. **Source:** The Economist Intelligence Unit (2024).

**Table 4.** Average Socioeconomic Performance Indicators for the Period 2020–2023.

Country	Avg Poverty	Avg Gini coefficient	Avg GDP growth	Human development index (HDI)
Paraguay	21.0	43.83	2.97	0.73
Ecuador	32.07	46.2	6.13	0.75
Bolivia	16.25	42.25	4.27	0.69
Perú	36.13	41.37	5.17	0.76
Colombia	38.6	54.47	6.23	0.76
Brazil	23.53	51.27	3.57	0.76
Venezuela	38.8	44.7	-3.9	0.69
Chile	7.3	45	4.53	0.86
Argentina	12.57	41.93	4.7	0.84
Uruguay	6.77	40.53	3.57	0.82

**Note:** Poverty levels are presented according to the international poverty line of USD 5.50 per day for the years 2020, 2021, and 2022, with an average calculated for the three years; these figures come from the World Bank. According to Paraguay's National Institute of Statistics, the poverty rate in 2022 was 22.7%. The Gini coefficient is also sourced from the World Bank and is presented for the same three-year period, with its corresponding average. GDP growth rates for 2021, 2022, and 2023 also come from the World Bank. Finally, the Human Development Index (HDI), which combines indicators of health, education, and per capita income, is taken from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and reported for 2020, 2021, and 2022, along with its average. In cases where data for all years are unavailable, only the most recent available figure is included. **Source:** For poverty, Gini coefficient, and GDP growth: World Bank (2024a), Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP); HDI: UNDP (2024). Human Development Report 2023–24: *Breaking the Stalemate – Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World*.

### Toward an Explanation: Structure and Agency

This dataset on the quality of democracy in Paraguay raises a number of important questions. First, why does the performance of Paraguayan democracy—belonging to the same “wave” as its regional counterparts—remain so far below the general pattern of the region? More specifically, why has Paraguay performed so poorly compared to the rest of South America? Is it possible to isolate the variables that explain such differences? Addressing this last question is the task this article undertakes.

To answer these questions, this study explores the impact of three variables: structural factors, institutional factors, and the level of institutional social capital. Structural variables concern the

socioeconomic matrix insofar as it shapes the nature of the actors in play. Institutional variables include: (a) the nature of the party system and the historical rules of the game. The social capital variable refers to interpersonal and institutional trust, rather than political culture in the traditional sense.

### Structural Factors: The Socioeconomic Matrix and the “Invertebrate Society”

Socioeconomic variables are important because they structure the types of actors participating in the political game and influence the nature of political transactions. The key importance here does not lie strictly in the existence, size, or organization of particular social classes—especially the proletariat (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992) or the middle class (Lipset, 1959)—which are assumed to embody democratic values or pressure for democratic opening. From the perspective of this study, the importance of the socioeconomic structure lies in its capacity to facilitate the emergence of collective actors with shared interests and, therefore, in its potential to organize the political game around programmatic issues and the provision of public goods.

In general, two types of socioeconomic matrices can be distinguished. Traditional structures are characterized by the predominance of an agro-export economy, a large rural population, a small industrial sector, and a limited administrative, commercial, and education sector oriented to the domestic market, on which the middle class develops. In this type of structure, the most powerful sector tends to be the landowning elite, while the largest sector is a fragmented and disorganized peasantry.

Modern structures imply a larger industrial sector, with the consequent development of a significant working-class base, and a broader subsidiary sector of administration, commerce, and services, which demands a more skilled workforce and generates another class base.

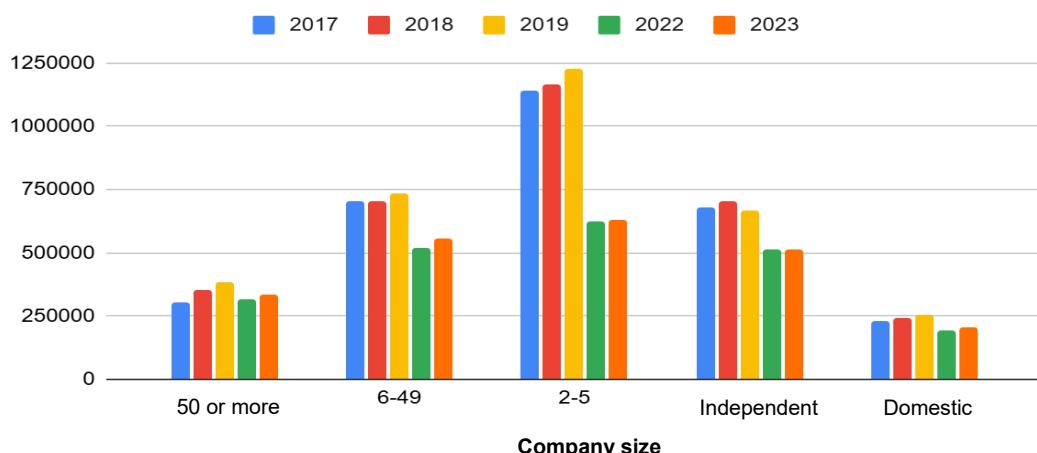
It is true that the deindustrialization process experienced by some countries in the 1990s due to the implementation of certain neoliberal reform models altered this panorama. In Paraguay, however,

a particular process occurred. On one hand, the agricultural sector underwent rapid modernization with the introduction of large-scale soybean cultivation and advanced livestock farming. However, the historic *latifundium–minifundium* dichotomy not only persisted but strengthened. On the other hand, in the absence of an industrial sector capable of absorbing labor, rural migration concentrated in peripheral areas and the informal sector.

This scenario shapes a different kind of political game. As Garretón Merino (2003, p. 14) argues, “it could be said that by ‘modernity’ we understand the principle of asserting the capacity of individual and collective actors for historical action... the absence of ‘modernity’ is the absence of actors.” Even without

equating the existence of actors with modernity, as long as elite actors remain omnipresent over time, only the transformation of subordinate sectors into collective actors will expand the dimension of agency from the individual to the collective level.

A detailed examination of the workforce reveals how small the formal sector capable of building organizations is. According to the latest World Bank report (2024b, p. 18), only one-third of the labor force is in the formal sector. Thus, two-thirds of the labor force cannot be considered “working class” from a sociological perspective. Data from the National Institute of Statistics point in the same direction, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Occupational Structure in Urban Areas of Paraguay.

**Note:** Employed population aged 15 and over in their main occupation by year, according to area of residence, company size, and years of schooling (2017–2019); employed population aged 15 and over by year and non-agricultural informal occupation, according to company size (2017, 2022, and 2023) (National Institute of Statistics, 2024).

## Institutional Factors: Political Parties and Rules of the Game

### Political Parties

The specialized literature has emphasized that the number of political parties and the degree of polarization between them influence the stability or instability of democracies, and that electoral rules help shape these systems. However, one factor that is less frequently discussed in contemporary literature and that affects the quality of democracy is the type of parties.

This issue concerned many classical theorists. Max Weber (2019) distinguished between clientele parties and worldview (i.e., ideological) parties; Maurice Duverger (1954) differentiated between cadre parties and mass parties; Otto Kirchheimer (1966) highlighted the tendency of mass parties to become “catch-all” parties; and Angelo Panebianco (1988) noted their tendency to evolve into bureaucratic and professional parties.

In Paraguay, as in most Latin American countries, political parties emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century and could best be characterized as

“notable” parties, i.e., loosely organized around the leadership and prestige of certain personalities.

A key institutional development was that the 1870 Constitution established universal suffrage. The only debate concerned the minimum voting age: 17 or 18 years. The two traditional parties were established in 1887, seventeen years later, preceded by a series of political clubs that can be considered proto-parties—born under already established rules of the game, which pushed them to incorporate as many people as possible into their ranks. As Pierson’s path-dependence analysis (2004) shows, the sequence of events has long-term consequences, and this case was no exception. It was “rational” for parties to socialize the broadest possible segment of the population within their ranks. And that is precisely what they did, evolving rapidly from notable parties to clientelist parties.

To consolidate their identity and strengthen their base, they resorted to nineteenth-century political marketing strategies, including the adoption of a party color, anthem, polka, a mythic founding hero, and a pantheon of party saints. Party members began calling one another “co-religionaries”, i.e., people who share the same faith (Abente Brun, 1995; Lachi & Rojas Schefer, 2018).

None of these institutional factors, nor the strategies adopted by parties to adapt to them, would have been so successful without favorable socioeconomic conditions. At the time, Paraguay was a homogeneous mestizo country, without significant ethnic divisions threatening the emerging elite. Moreover, its productive structure consisted of two basic systems: extensive livestock farming and subsistence agriculture.

The livestock system was based on extensive cattle ranching over large tracts of land, with a small labor force of peons, dependent on the landowners (“estancieros”). Meanwhile, peasants, owners of small plots or mere occupants, engaged in subsistence agriculture. Labor-intensive commercial agriculture did not develop. Some peasants produced export crops, such as tobacco, cotton, and petitgrain oil, sold to intermediaries who channeled them to import-export houses in Asunción, mostly owned by

European immigrants or first-generation Paraguayans.

This latifundium–minifundium economic model created a fragmented, low-density social environment ideal for the development of clientelist ties, as wealthy ranchers, produce intermediaries, and store owners could easily establish asymmetrical, dyadic clientelist relationships disguised as partisan loyalty.

With access to political power, these vertical ties were further reinforced, as patrons acquired the ability to facilitate their clients’ dealings with the judiciary and state bureaucracy. The absence of an import-substitution industrialization process and the modest expansion of the agro-export economy led to very slow socioeconomic and demographic changes, allowing the survival of traditional parties well into the twentieth century.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a surge of state intervention led to the growth of the state and unprecedented development of state-based clientelism. During Alfredo Stroessner’s dictatorship, the system was perfected through the near-total fusion of party and state, granting significant power to local party organizations, the “seccionales”, which channeled both the needs of the poorest sectors and the aspirations of the less poor. With the advent of democracy, these clientelist practices persisted (Setrini, 2025; Dosek, 2023).

By treating the state as a dispenser of benefits, parties reinforce rent-seeking behavior among other powerful socioeconomic actors. In general, the organized business sector talks about the free market and eliminating government intervention at every opportunity. However, in practice, it constantly seeks state intervention in its favor.

In sum, politics is organized around two main axes: the patron-client axis (on which the party structure rests) and the rentier corporations–state axis (where parties act as mediators). In both cases, demands are essentially distributive and resolved at the expense of the state. Parties become intermediaries in the distribution of goods, and since the funds belong to the state, they can afford to be generous.

Thus, we have a state that is simultaneously predator

and prey. In one way or another, ordinary citizens end up as powerless victims and witnesses of the functional equivalent of a “tragedy of the commons” (Ostrom, 1990), in which the common resource—a weak central state—becomes a hunting ground for predators and risks slowly collapsing.

Table 5 illustrates the distinction between these ideal types of clientelist and ideological (or worldview) parties, as defined by Weber (2019), in terms of the nature of their social support base, their political leanings or biases, and their identity profile.

### Social Capital

A number of important studies have emphasized the significance of a culture of interpersonal and institutional trust as key to understanding the existence and quality of democratic systems (Putnam,

1993; Fukuyama, 1995). Conversely, its absence can be detrimental both to the development of democracy and to its quality.

Data for Paraguay show very low levels for both dimensions. For the period 1996–2024, only 12% of the population considered it possible to trust most people, below the Latin American average of 15% (Latinobarómetro, 2024, p. 58). Similarly, findings for average institutional trust are also low, as shown in Table 6. This indicates a profound social distrust.

However, while the data demonstrate a correlation between this variable and the quality of democracy, they do not answer the question of causality. Is low trust influencing the poor quality of democracy, or is the poor quality of democracy generating skepticism and distrust?

**Table 5.** Types of parties and their correlations with social structures and political biases.

Correlates	Social Support Base	Political Bias	Identity Profile
Ideological Parties	Collectives	Redistributive	Progressive, pro-labor; or conservative, pro-business
Clientelist Parties	Individuals	Distributive	Populist, conservative, personalist

**Table 6.** Citizen Trust in Public Institutions in Paraguay (2006–2023).

Year	Armed Forces	Municipality	National Congress	Supreme Court of Justice	President	Political Parties
2006	42	43	20	19	19	18
2008	36	35	13	13	12	12
2010	52	48	25	25	51	22
2012	44	45	27	27	41	21
2014	54	48	28	28	42	20
2016	58	49	18	27	28	17
2019	53	47	22	26	42	21
2021	52	45	25	25	43	20
2023	51	41	25	24	23	17

Source: *The Americas Barometer by LAPOP, Taking the Pulse of Democracy in Paraguay* (LAPOP Lab, 2023, p. 34, Figure 2.7).

## Conclusions

The main finding of this study is that, in Paraguay, the level and pattern of socioeconomic development have produced and continue to produce an “invertebrate society.” This is a society without collective actors for themselves (although one could argue that the peasantry functions as a collective actor). In such environments, vertical relationships prevail, power is exercised within a patrimonial or clientelist framework, and politics revolves around the pursuit and

distribution of individual rewards. Party clientelism is simply a “rational” response to this context.

A closer examination reveals the role of the institutional dimension. The early expansion of suffrage made nineteenth-century parties more “popular” and therefore more resilient. Combined with the absence of significant new socioeconomic actors, this has allowed them to remain strong more than a century after their founding. Traditional parties began as structures to protect privileges—as parties of

notables—but over time, as suffrage expanded, they evolved into clientelist power-seeking machines. These types of parties possess characteristics that contribute to the low quality of democracy, and given the current socioeconomic structure, they are unlikely to change significantly in the near future.

The transition from small-base parties of notables to broad-base clientelist parties can be seen as the functional equivalent of the transformation of modern parties into bureaucratic and professional parties. Unlike those cases, however, the Paraguayan transition vividly illustrates the democratic dilemma: on one hand, these parties inherently contribute to low-quality democracy; on the other, the current socioeconomic framework leaves little room for rapid or meaningful change. This low-quality democracy is certainly much better than the Stroessner dictatorship but falls short of reasonable standards of institutional quality.

Turning to shortcuts, resorting to messianic solutions leads to authoritarianism and dictatorship. The choice between authoritarianism or low-quality democracy is a dilemma akin to being “between a rock and a hard place.”

A possible escape from this trap is the emergence of a unifying consensus for change, as occurred with the election of former President Fernando Lugo. Whether the democratic opposition will resolve the dilemmas carried over since 1993 remains to be seen. One dilemma is that structured parties lack winning candidates, and winning candidates lack solid party platforms; the other is the ruling party’s strategy of encouraging divisive candidacies.

So far, it has been observed that, “in the realm of losses,” vulnerable populations cling to the limited benefits offered by the clientelist structure, adopting a politically risk-averse behavior and only shifting to a higher-risk approach when perceiving a hope for radical improvement framed in millenarian terms.

A second set of issues concerns the theoretical implications of this case study. Do these findings have relevance beyond Paraguay? Four key implications can be drawn for other contexts:

1. The importance of structural factors in addressing

the quality of democracy is generalizable and carries significant theoretical and practical implications.

2. The nature of parties transcends the Paraguayan case; it is not only the party system but also the type of parties that matters.

3. The role of the rules of the game as triggers or brakes for change is equally evident.

4. Perhaps the most important conclusion is that returning to a structural paradigm for studying democratic quality is not only theoretically necessary but also politically useful. Social and political moments are characterized by accelerated rhythms, unique timing, and greater uncertainty than usual. Short-term calculations, good decisions, and mistakes—*virtù vince fortuna*—play a significant role. While the contingent, agency-based paradigm has proven useful in moments that opened space for redemocratization or authoritarian regression, over time the force of social and economic reality reasserts itself. Once the moment passes, structural factors play a much larger role, as is the case for the quality of democracy.

Policy implications are also significant. Given the structural conditions, improving democratic quality can only realistically come from the complex construction of coalitions among parties, since, as Weber would say, politics resembles the slow polishing of a hard piece of wood.

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