

## THE CLOSENESS OF ELECTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

*Martin C. Needler*  
*University of New Mexico*

One of the curious features of recent Latin American politics has been the closeness of the results of presidential elections. As shown by tables 1 and 2, the median gap between the two principal contenders in presidential elections taking place around 1970 was 4.93 percent, compared to 15.39 percent in elections taking place around 1950. Over half of the 1970 elections resulted in a smaller winning margin than the *smallest* such margin around 1950.

Here I shall try to examine both the causes and the consequences of this phenomenon, paying special attention to a set of eight close elections (in which less than two percentage points of the total valid vote separated the winner from the runner-up) taking place in a recent ten-year period. Close elections, according to this definition, took place in about half of the Latin American countries holding presidential elections during the decade 1962–72: El Salvador, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay. The closeness of the vote was related to subsequent attempts to forestall the inauguration of the election victor in El Salvador and Chile, and to less far-reaching political disturbances in Uruguay and Colombia, and led directly to the military assumption of power of Peru in 1962.

Alfred Stepan has found that in Brazil a government has been more likely to be overthrown the smaller its margin of electoral victory.<sup>1</sup> The narrowness of an electoral victory seems to impair a government's legitimacy, thus making a military coup against it more likely, in two ways. Of course the mandate the government has received looks less than overwhelming; it carries less conviction. And at the same time it appears more likely that the electoral victory was due to fraud; even minor instances of fraud, which are likely to occur in any election, can more plausibly be regarded as having provided the margin of victory. Accusations of fraud, with at least some probable basis in fact, were made in the Salvadorean, Uruguayan, and Colombian cases, out of the eight cited, and provided the principal justification for the annulment of

the Peruvian elections of 1962,<sup>2</sup> although in that case the basis for the allegations was highly questionable.

Apart from sheer randomness, there seem, a priori, to be several possible reasons for elections to be close:

1. In an established two-party system, the incumbent party tends to alienate marginal supporters by some of its policies until it drops below majority support. However, the same process takes place when the opposition party comes to power, thus preventing the parties from moving very far from an approximately even division of the electorate. This is the classic situation in the British system and seems to be a factor in the Uruguayan and Costa Rican cases, of those cited.

2. In the latter two countries, the "minimum winning coalition" strategy is also a factor. Knowing the approximate division of the vote, the runner-up party makes deals with minor parties and dissidents from the majority party until it can put together a winning coalition, which is only slightly above the minimum necessary for victory since it does not wish to have to share the spoils of success more widely than absolutely necessary.

Thus in Costa Rica, the candidate of Liberación Nacional, Francisco Orlich, won in 1962 with 49.27 percent of the vote against a divided opposition whose leading candidate took 34.63 percent of the vote.<sup>3</sup> The principal opposition parties subsequently came to an agreement to put forward a single candidate for the 1966 elections, who was successful even though the defeated Liberación Nacional candidate in that election, Daniel Oduber, garnered almost exactly the same percentage of the vote that had enabled Orlich to win four years before.

In Uruguay, the switch of the Ruralista faction from the Colorados to the Blancos, between the 1954 and 1958 *colegiado* elections, reversed the relative party positions, bringing the Blancos from below 40 percent of the vote to about 50 percent and driving the Colorados from a 50 percent share of the vote to below 40 percent (other parties shared the remaining votes).<sup>4</sup>

A similar phenomenon occurred when the shift to support of Fernando Belaúnde Terry by the Christian Democrats and Communists, between the 1962 and 1963 elections in Peru, gave Belaúnde the additional few votes necessary to put him ahead of the APRA and over the 33- $\frac{1}{3}$  percent required to keep the election out of the legislature, where his forces were in the minority. Between the 1962 and the 1963 elections, Haya de la Torre dropped about 1 percent of the vote and Belaúnde picked up about 4 percent.

Because of miscalculation, sometimes the putative minimum

winning coalition becomes in fact a maximum losing coalition; of course, this also means a narrow election victory, although not for the party which thought it would win. This occurred during the 1970 elections in Chile. Six years previously, the Nationalists had supported the Christian Democratic candidate, Eduardo Frei, believing that only thus could they defeat the left-wing nominee, Salvador Allende. With their hero, former president Jorge Alessandri, able to run again in 1970, the Nationalists believed that this time they could win the election on their own. They narrowly failed to do this, and the split in the antisocialist forces enabled Allende to win a close victory.

The crucial role played by the division of the anti-Allende vote and the number of candidates running is shown by the fact that Allende won in 1970 with a smaller percentage of the vote than he had when he lost in 1964; and Alessandri lost with a larger percentage than he won with in 1958.

3. In the third type of case, an opposition party wins the election, or comes close to winning it, because it is partaking in a long-term secular trend of increase in its support, as a result of the expansion of participation to include hitherto excluded groups, or because of its differential success in recruiting new voters or converting old voters. In this case, closeness in the election results, other things being equal, is a process confined to a limited time period in which the ascendant party passes, or almost passes, the one in decline. The Salvadorean, Colombian, and Venezuelan cases are at least partly of this character, with the Christian Democrats growing in strength in El Salvador and Venezuela, and the ANAPO in Colombia. It may be that a regroupment and reorganization of the government forces following a defeat or narrow victory can prevent a permanent shift to a new majority, especially if the party in the ascendant has already reached the crest of its wave, as seems to be the case with the Venezuelan Christian Democrats and ANAPO, both of which have fared relatively worse in subsequent elections than they did at their peaks in the years listed in table 3.

4. The closeness of the election may be due to the fact that the government party, so as not to make the rigging of the election too blatant, committed only the minimum amount of fraud necessary to keep the opposition party out of power. This was apparently the case in El Salvador; but in Colombia and Uruguay, the other countries in which fraud sufficient to affect the election results apparently occurred, the magnitude of the additions to the vote totals seems to have been the cumulative result of individual decisions taken at the local level, rather than a deliberate government strategy.

5. Finally, if there were no significant differences among the

parties and the candidates, support might be distributed among them randomly, resulting in an approximately even division of the vote. This appears not to be applicable to any of the cases discussed here, though it might be a factor in some United States elections, at least among new voters.

Why have these effects been more visible in recent elections than in those of previous periods? The principal reason is probably that as Latin America has developed politically, elections have become more competitive and less simply a device to ratify the continued possession of power by those who currently hold it.<sup>5</sup> This may also imply that where fraud is employed it cannot be so blatant and therefore may not lead to such large margins of victory. Moreover, once a tradition of competitive elections involving permanently organized parties is established, it becomes possible to calculate relative party strengths and play "minimum winning coalition" games. Finally, where such a tradition of competitive elections leads to effective alternation in power, the normal atrophy of government support serves to prevent a governing party from winning by large margins.

The phenomenon of an increasing incidence of close elections, then, may be explicable in part on the basis of the principles developed above. However, it should be remembered that, while close elections may be regarded as a sign of political health in a firmly established highly competitive polity such as that of Costa Rica, for most Latin American countries a close election still leads to dissidence; accusations of fraud, founded or not; postelection revolts; and a weakening in the authority and legitimacy of the government issuing from the election.

TABLE 1 *Margins of Victory; Gap between Two Leading Presidential Candidates in Elections around 1950\**

Country	Year	Winner's Vote	Runner-up	Margin of Victory	
Argentina	1951	55.85	44.15	11.70	
Bolivia	1951	42.92	32.01	10.91	
Brazil	1950	46.63	28.38	18.25	
Chile	1952	46.64	27.73	18.91	
Colombia	1946	41.43	32.30	9.13	
Costa Rica	1948	55.28	44.72	10.56	
Cuba	1948	45.81	30.42	15.39	
Dominican Republic	Elections not competitive				
Ecuador	1952	43.04	33.04	10.00	
El Salvador	1950	56.45	43.55	12.90	
Guatemala	1950	63.24	17.86	45.38	
Haiti	Elections not competitive				
Honduras	1954	48.10	30.85	17.25	
Mexico	1952	74.32	15.88	58.44	
Nicaragua	Elections not competitive				
Panama	1952	62.46	36.62	25.84	
Paraguay	Elections not competitive				
Peru	Elections not competitive				
Uruguay**	1950	52.61	38.54	14.07	
Venezuela	1947	74.37	22.04	52.33	
				Mean	22.07
				Median	15.39

Sources: Kenneth Ruddle and Philip Gillette, eds., *Latin American Political Statistics* (Los Angeles: Latin American Center, UCLA, September 1972), p. 80; Martin C. Needler, ed., *Political Systems of Latin America*, 2d. ed. (Princeton Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970); Institute for Comparative Study of Political Systems Electoral Factbooks; *Diario Las Américas*.

\*Given in percentages of total vote cast.

\*\*Colegiado elections; vote for Partido Nacional Independiente included in Blanco total.

TABLE 2 *Margins of Victory; Gap between Two Leading Presidential Candidates in Elections around 1970\**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Winner's Vote</i>	<i>Runner-up</i>	<i>Margin of Victory</i>
Argentina	No elections held			
Bolivia	1966	61.71	12.46	49.25
Brazil	No popular elections held			
Chile	1970	36.53	35.19	1.34
Colombia	1970	40.34	38.76	1.58
Costa Rica	1970	52.58	39.51	13.07
Cuba	No elections held			
Dominican Republic	1970	54.66	21.64	33.02
Ecuador	1968	32.87	30.99	1.88
El Salvador	1972	43.2	41.9	1.30
Guatemala	1970	36.66	31.73	4.93
Haiti	No elections held			
Honduras	1971	49.84	45.08	4.76
Mexico	1970	84.64	13.83	70.81
Nicaragua	1967	70.31	29.12	41.19
Panama	1968	54.70	41.75	12.95
Paraguay	1968	71.14	21.63	49.51
Peru	No elections held			
Uruguay	1971	41.2	40.4	0.80
Venezuela	1968	28.9	28.11	0.79
			Mean	19.15
			Median	4.93

Sources: Same as table 1.

\*Given in percentages of total vote cast.

TABLE 3 *Close Presidential Elections, 1962–72\**

Country	Year	Victor		Runner-up	
El Salvador	1972	Molina	43.2	Duarte	41.9
Costa Rica	1966	Trejos	49.3	Oduber	48.42
Venezuela	1968	Caldera	28.9	Barrios	28.11
Peru	1962	Haya	32.98	Belaúnde	32.13
Chile	1970	Allende	36.53	Alessandri	35.19
Colombia	1970	Pastrana	40.34	Rojas	38.76
Uruguay	1971	Bordaberry	41.2	Ferreira	40.4
Ecuador	1968	Velasco	32.87	Córdova	30.99

Sources: Same as table 1.

\*Given in percentages of votes cast.

TABLE 4 *Chilean Election Results: 1958, 1964, 1970\**

Candidates	Right-Wing	Radicals	Christian Democrats		Left-Wing
			Victor	Runner-up	
1958	ALESSANDRI	Bossay	Frei	Allende	
1964	_____	Durán	FREI	Allende	
1970	Alessandri	_____	Tomic	ALLENDE	

\*Given in percentage of total vote. Victor's name capitalized.

## NOTES

1. Alfred Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 80.
2. See Martin C. Needler, "Peru since the Coup d'Etat," *The World Today*, February 1963.
3. Kenneth Ruddle and Philip Gillette, eds., *Latin American Political Statistics* (Los Angeles: Latin American Center, UCLA, September 1972), p. 80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
5. See Ronald H. McDonald, "Electoral Fraud and Regime Controls in Latin America," *Western Political Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (March 1972).

