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# The Use of Impeachment in Latin America Between 1990 and 2023: Neither Congresses as Weak nor Presidents as Strong\*

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## Abstract

This study examines the use of impeachment in Latin America from 1990 to 2023 as a means of political control for the removal of the president of the Republic by the legislature. To achieve this objective, this study analyzed the early departures between the 125 heads of state elected in the region during the specified period, the reasons for the political crises, and the party and contextual variables involved. The findings indicate that Latin American presidents were not as stable or autonomous as congresses, particularly in situations of divided government and social crises. Additionally, the study reveals that Latin American legislatures can determine the stability of presidents through cooperation between opposition parliamentary groups, ultimately using impeachment as a vote of no confidence. Overall, the results of this study suggest that impeachment in Latin America serves as a mechanism of political control, allowing legislatures to remove presidents in situations of political instability and social unrest.

**Keywords:** Impeachment, parliamentary control, presidentialism, comparative political systems, presidential instability, divided government.

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## **El empleo del juicio político en América Latina entre 1990 y 2023: ni congresos tan débiles ni presidentes tan fuertes**

### **Resumen**

El presente artículo analiza el empleo del juicio político en América Latina entre 1990 y 2023 como medio de control político para la destitución del presidente de la República por parte del poder legislativo. Para ello, se analizan las salidas anticipadas de entre los 125 jefes de Estado elegidos en la región durante el período especificado, las razones de las crisis políticas y las variables partidaria y contextual. Los resultados indican que los presidentes latinoamericanos no fueron excesivamente estables ni autónomos de los congresos, particularmente en situaciones de gobierno dividido y crisis social. Por otro lado, el estudio revela que los congresos latinoamericanos tuvieron la capacidad de determinar la estabilidad de los presidentes a través de la cooperación entre los grupos parlamentarios opositores, utilizando en última instancia el juicio político como muestra de pérdida de confianza del legislativo ante situaciones de inestabilidad política y malestar social.

**Palabras clave:** juicio político, control parlamentario, presidencialismo, sistemas políticos comparados, estabilidad presidencial, gobierno dividido.

## **O recurso à destituição na América Latina entre 1990 e 2023: congressos não tão fracos, presidentes não tão fortes**

### **Resumo**

Este artigo analisa o uso do impeachment na América Latina entre 1990 e 2023 como meio de controle político para a destituição do presidente da República pelo Legislativo. Para isso, analisa as saídas antecipadas dos 125 chefes de Estado eleitos na região durante o período especificado, os motivos das crises políticas e as variáveis partidárias e contextuais. Os resultados indicam que os presidentes latino-americanos não foram excessivamente estáveis nem autónomos em relação aos congressos, sobretudo em situações de governo dividido e de crise social. Por outro lado, o estudo revela que os congressos latino-americanos foram capazes de determinar a estabilidade dos presidentes através da cooperação entre grupos parlamentares opostos, acabando por utilizar o impeachment como sinal de perda de confiança da legislatura em situações de instabilidade política e agitação social.

**Palavras-chave:** impeachment, controlo parlamentar, presidencialismo, sistemas políticos comparativos, estabilidade presidencial, governo dividido.

## **Introduction**

Between 1980 and 2000, most Latin American political regimes transitioned to democracy through the reinstatement of credible electoral processes, plural party competition, and alternation in the head of state in a reasonably orderly and predictable manner. However, as soon as the region experienced this period of democratization, some presidents began to face impeachment and strong political crises. This situation was not widespread in time or space, although an analysis of Latin American presidencies between 1990 and 2023 suggests a spatial prevalence and importance of the party system and the emergence of social crises as determinants, both in predicting how stable the presidential mandate will be developed and the causes that led to its departure and the ultimate use of impeachment by Congress. The results expand and qualify what has been exposed in the literature regarding the importance of coalition governments for presidential survival (Albala, 2009, 2016; Chasqueti, 2006), although they invite us to consider new variables of conjuncture and political ability of presidents for an updated period, as this research intends (Pérez-Liñán, 2009; Travers & Carneiro, 2017; Zicari, 2022).

Consequently, the following research question is based on the number of Latin American presidents removed through impeachment between 1990 and 2023 and what were the main causes of these early departures? Consequently, all the early departures that occurred in this period in the 18 Latin American states that held presidential elections, and of all of them, those that were the result of an effective impeachment process by the legislative branch. The motivations put forward by legislators, the relationship of party forces between the ruling party and the opposition, or the socioeconomic situation of the moment are highlighted, in line with what has been shown in previous research (Pérez-Liñán, 2009, 2016; Travers & Carneiro, 2017). Two research hypotheses are presented: the success of impeachment as a mechanism for presidential removal depended, for the period 1990-2023, on a marked parliamentary minority of the head of state, as well as on a context of social crisis that facilitated the coordinated action of opposition legislators and the legitimacy of their action.

Consequently, a second hypothesis is derived: the processes of early presidential departure that took place in the region between 1990 and 2023 through legal mechanisms reflected a parliamentarization of executive-legislative relations as a result of the absence of a pro-government majority in Congress and the mismanagement of the social crises that occurred during the outgoing president's term of government.

To this end, the main characteristics of the executive-legislative relationship under the presidential regime are first analyzed, as well as the importance of analyzing the party system to gauge how powerful and autonomous the presidential figure can be. The



controlling role of Congress in these political systems and the logic that should be followed by impeachment are explained below. Third, the data obtained from the analysis of the 125 presidents who succeeded each other between 1990 and 2023 in Latin America, early departures, and successful impeachment processes are presented. Finally, the motivations behind the presidential impeachment processes are discussed, as are the variables that seem to trigger their success, and the impact of the evidence obtained in the literature.

### **Latin American Presidentialism: A Heterogeneous Model Conditioned by the Relationship of Party Majorities in Congress**

The presidential system is based on the direct and separate election of the head of state and legislators by the people as well as on the primacy of the executive in the political system, at least symbolically, given the personification of the nation in the president in most legal systems. In this way, the executive obtains a marked separation from the other branches of government, also granting the presidential constitutional powers that do not exist in the parliamentary model, in the case of veto or observation, and generally, broad powers of decree. The direct election of the president of the republic fosters autonomy and separation of powers, since “winner takes all” and no real incentives are generated for the sharing of government or public policy to be followed during the newly constituted mandate (Linz & Valenzuela, 1994, 1997). It is worth noting, however, that the original model of the United States did not seek clear primacy of the executive, but rather a balance between powers with an autonomous executive, both from other institutions and from the people, which is different from what happened in Latin American presidentialism from its origin (Garrido & Nohlen, 2020; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994, 1997; López Velarde, 2018).

The executive is monist, adhering to the head of state and the direction of the government, and thus emphasizing leadership and personalization in a single person, especially if the vice-presidential figure did not exist, as in Chile and Mexico, among others. However, the figure of the vice president tends to be secondary in the political game, not exercising an important role, or having considerable constitutional powers beyond replacing the president in the event of resignation, dismissal, or temporary departure. It is important to underline that, precisely through impeachment, some vice-presidents reached the presidency, sometimes being the perpetrators of the dismissals of their superiors –Michel Temer against Dilma Rousseff– or achieving a more effective government than their predecessors Vizcarra with respect to Kuczynski. Beyond these conjunctural situations, vice-presidents do not stand out because of their prominence.

The terms of office are fixed, and elections for either the president or legislators can be brought forward, which shows certain rigidity and distances it from the relative flexibility of parliamentary regimes. It was precisely this inability to intervene in the composition of these powers in the event of an open blockade or clash, which was one of the great bases of Linzín's critique of presidentialism in the 1990s. In other words, the lack of a democratic trajectory in a large part of Latin America, coupled with the interventionist tradition of the military, together with the design of presidentialism, would provoke situations of risk for democracy in the future when the legislative and executive branches clashed, and there were no quick and simple constitutional mechanisms to resolve such disputes, unlike the motions of censure of parliamentarism (Linz, 1990, 2013; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994, 1997).

However, this rigidity in terms of the term of office is often accompanied by the limitation of the right to run for re-election in the presidency. Thus, in most presidential regimes, heads of state can only hold office for a maximum of two terms, sometimes having to be non-consecutive to exercise them (Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, among others).

For the election of the president and vice president, who usually go together on the ballot, a second round or runoff is generally established, seeking to contribute to a certain aggregation of interests, demands, and political options around the two final candidacies on which the final election will revolve. Although there are exceptions – Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Paraguay– runoff is widespread in the region, thus acquiring theoretical legitimacy for the head of state after winning with at least half plus one of the votes. These borrowed votes, however, can also facilitate the existence of divided governments, given that parliamentary coalitions are not always accompanied by electoral agreements for presidential elections, as exemplified by many countries in the region, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Peru.

On the other hand, congresses stand out for their preponderant legislative role, given their separation from the executive. For example, they have hardly any power of political control that can question the permanence of executives' offices. The existence of the motion of censure against members of the cabinet is not contemplated, with certain exceptions –Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay– the interpellation is not unanimous in all regimes –Mexico– and it cannot even be said that the congresses of the region stand out for a reactive or obstructionist attitude towards the executive. This does not mean that they are powers subject to the executive or that there is a predominance of hyper-presidentialism or empowered executives, since, in general, there is a certain balance between powers, at least from a normative point of view (García Montero, 2009; Santos et al., 2014).

For this reason, when analyzing any political system in the region, it is imperative to study the party variable, since the game of majorities in Congress is necessary for the president to be able to deploy his constitutional powers or even for his own continuity, especially in situations of scarce social support and poor economic performance. As shown in previous studies. In this sense, the persistence of the divided government has led to executives needing to negotiate with Congress (Pérez-Liñán, 2016; Zícarí, 2022), either in search of stable coalitions or for specific agreements in the chambers, as well as interrupted presidencies, as discussed below. Several authors (Albala, 2009, 2016; Chasquetti, 2001; Mainwaring, 1993b, 1993a; Shugart & Carey, 1992) have highlighted the importance of analyzing the party system to analyze, from different perspectives, the operationalization of presidentialism in practice, which is equally relevant as a predictor of governability during a mandate. In other words, beyond the separation established by presidentialism between the executive and the legislature, the party system's influence is vital both for the effective scope of the president's powers and for his or her own permanence in office, especially under certain environments of factionalization, polarization, and divided governments. Finally, it should be noted that there are as many presidentialisms as there are presidential regimes, especially when variables related to the political situation or leadership of the main actors adhere to the institutional analysis.

For an approximation of the different configuration of presidential regimes in Latin America, see table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Main organic characteristics of presidential regimes in Latin America

Country	Term of office	Reelection	Runoff	Vice presidency	Separate head of government	Motion of censure	Dissolution of Congress	Legislative
Argentina	4 years	Yes, continued	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	No	bicameral
Bolivia	5 years	Yes, continued	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	No	bicameral
Brazil	4 years	Yes, continued	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	No	bicameral
Chile	4 years	Yes, not continued	Yes	No	No	No	No	bicameral
Colombia	4 years	No	Yes	Yes, one	No	Yes, to ministers	No	bicameral
Costa Rica	4 years	Yes, not continued	Yes	Yes, two	No	No	No	Single chamber
Ecuador	4 years	Yes, continued	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	Yes	Single chamber

Country	Term of office	Reelection	Runoff	Vice presidency	Separate head of government	Motion of censure	Dissolution of Congress	Legislative
El Salvador	5 years	Yes, continued*	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	No	Single chamber
Guatemala	4 years	No	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	No	Single chamber
Honduras	4 years	Yes, continued	No	Yes, three	No	No	No	Single chamber
Mexico	6 years	No	No	No	No	No	No	bicameral
Nicaragua	5 years	Yes, indefinite	No	Yes, one	No	No	No	Single chamber
Panama	5 years	Yes, not continued	No	Yes, one	No	No	No	Single chamber
Paraguay	5 years	No	No	Yes, one	No	No	No	bicameral
Peru	5 years	Yes, not continued	Yes	Yes, two	Yes	Yes, to the whole cabinet**	Yes	Single chamber
Dominican Republic	4 years	Yes, continued	Yes	Yes, one	No	No	No	bicameral
Uruguay	5 years	Yes, not continued	Yes	Yes, one	No	Yes, to ministers	Yes	bicameral
Venezuela	6 years	Yes, indefinite	No	Yes, one	No	No***	No	Single chamber

Source: Authors' own creation.

Note: \*Allowed following the ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice. \*\*Includes the President of the Council of Ministers. \*\*\* No, and neither impeachment is possible.

## Political Control in Presidentialism and the Ability of the Chambers to Achieve Presidential Impeachment

Political control exercised by the legislature over the executive is undoubtedly one of the constitutional foundations of the liberal state and, as previously noted, one of its great functions in the political system. Likewise, given the capacity of congresses to represent different sectors and interests of society, especially minorities, legislatures carry out eminent political control, which does not necessarily have to rest on clear indications of legal irregularity (Aragón Reyes, 2002; Mora-Donatto, 2015). This political charge, sometimes manifestly partisan, is shown in the subjectivity and variability of justifications for which congresses can initiate various actions.



Consequently, and leaving aside the debate on which instruments correspond to political control<sup>1</sup>, we can highlight, *broadly speaking*, the legislative procedure; the revision of executive decrees; budgetary control; sharing in the task of electing senior administration officials; the formation of thematic and investigative commissions; and the diverse set of mechanisms that can lead to the appearance of officials before the authorities. chambers or the assumption of political responsibilities itself. The latter group has traditionally been the most appropriate for the exercise of parliamentary political control, given its ability to generate early departures from office or to lead to legal consequences for civil servants. They can be highlighted, from parliamentary questions and interpellations to members of the executive branch to the government’s appearances in the legislature and motions of censure and confidence, as well as impeachment. Something to highlight is the “voluntary nature of these measures, being based on reasons of expediency and implying that, rather than control of parliament, they are measures of control in parliament” (Aragón Reyes, 2002, p. 187).

**Table 2.** Main mechanisms of political control in presidentialism and parliamentarism

Mechanism	Existing in Presidentialism	Existing in parliamentarism
Parliamentary Questions	Yes	Yes
Control over decrees	Yes	Yes
Presidential veto or observation	Yes	No
budgetary control	Yes	Yes
Commissions of Inquiry	Yes	Yes
Annual Report to the House	Yes	Yes
Interpellation to the Government	No*	Yes
Investiture to the Council of Ministers	No*	Yes
Motion of censure	No*	Yes
Impeachment	Yes	No

Source: Authors’ own creation.

Note: \*Figures are recognized in some legal systems, such as Peru and for ministers in Colombia and Uruguay.

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1. Since, as several authors point out, the political control carried out by parliament should not be understood only as that derived from certain procedures, but that all legislative action presupposes, to one extent or another, control of the executive power (Mora-Donatto, 2015).

Several authors have highlighted the ability of Latin American congresses to influence the government's agenda (Alcántara Sáez, 2022; Jones, 2002; López Velarde, 2018), executive stability (Dargent Bocanegra & Rousseau, 2021; García Marín, 2024), and its powers of obstruction when necessary (García Marín, 2023; Santos et al., 2014). Along with other studies on the constitutional and autonomy capacities of congresses (Alcántara Sáez et al., 2005; Siavelis, 2018), it can be said that the region's legislatures are neither weak nor generally passive before the executive, especially in situations of a divided government and marked fragmentation of the party system, as noted above (Albala, 2009; Chasquetti, 2006, 2008; Reniú & Albala, 2012). Consequently, there is a plethora of political systems with balanced powers, presidents with a certain dependence on the existing majorities in the legislature, and factors that can condition their permanence in office if the situation is not propitious.

However, these conjunctural determinants should not, *a priori*, transform the use of impeachment into a sort of motion of censure, typical of parliamentary regimes. Indeed, this aggravated procedure is aimed at the assumption of political responsibilities only when "crimes or serious breaches of the constitution have apparently been committed in the exercise of public office" (Eguiguren Praeli, 2008, p. 113) by senior officials, including heads of state. For this reason, although it is a legislative procedure that requires political majorities, it rests on the logic of grounds that support the accusation and, therefore, not on parliamentary confidence in the government, although the configuration tends to be ambiguous and without specificity in most Latin American legal systems.

Impeachment has two antecedents in Europe. On the one hand, the *impeachment* from the English order of the Middle Ages and, on the other hand, the Castilian residency trial, which was also in force during the colonial era, had little effect on the viceregal authorities. In American terms, the most direct precedent is found in the constitution of the United States, included in Articles 2, section 4 and which served as a reference for the Latin American presidentialism that emerged in the nineteenth century (Garrido Lastra et al., 2019).

Generally, impeachment begins in the lower house, where a qualified majority must be gathered in approval under the grounds that would enable the initiation of the procedure, as well as the presentation of allegations and evidence against the accused. On some occasions, the country's own constitutional court has had to review the suitability of the accusation to the assumptions included in the legal system<sup>2</sup>. At this stage, there may already be a suspension of the high-ranking official as well as the initiation of criminal investigations

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2. The most recent precedent being the pronouncement of the Constitutional Court of Peru in the face of the vacancy carried out in November 2022.

by the ordinary justice system, which in turn implies the removal of immunity or pre-trial proceedings for the accused. It is important to highlight the importance of the game of parliamentary majorities since a dominant ruling party, or at least with the capacity to weave coalitions, would *a priori prevent* the initiation of the presidential impeachment procedure in the commission in charge. Likewise, in some regimes, such as Peru, the chamber can impose political sanctions beyond impeachment, going so far as to establish temporary penalties for suspension and disqualification (Eguiguren Praeli, 2008, p. 127).

After this first phase of investigation and initiation of the procedure, the accusation goes to the upper house, although in unicameral legislatures, this differs, which acts as a jury and final decision-maker. In the Senate, officials will be able to testify before legislators try to change the direction of the vote and achieve exoneration. After that, the chamber will have to vote on the fate of the accused, so political content is maintained, even though it is generally a public hearing and has formal limitations. The decision, if negative for the senior official, may again concern his dismissal, disqualification, or suspension as well as give rise to subsequent judicial proceedings.

However, it is interesting to note that in some legal systems such as Argentina (Article 53 of the Civil Code), Brazil (Article 85 of the Civil Code), Colombia (Article 174 of the Civil Code), Mexico (Article 110 of the Code of Civil Procedure), and Peru (Articles 99 and 100 of the Code of Civil Procedure), there are grounds that could give rise to greater use and justification for the use of impeachment by the legislature. In addition to being interpretable and ambiguous, this procedure enables a variety of situations, especially in environments of high party fragmentation, social crises, and pro-government minorities in the chambers. It indirectly facilitates, from the normative configuration itself, an assumption of the executive's political responsibility before Congress and, with it, a certain parliamentarization in executive-legislative relations in terms of the use and effects of the mechanisms of political control.

### **Analysis of presidential impeachment processes in Latin America between 1990 and 2023. How stable were presidents, and what determined their early departure?**

An analysis of presidential stability in 18 Latin American states between 1990 and 2023 shows that executives have not been so stable, nor was their departure solely due to the use or threat of impeachment. In fact, as shown in table 3, in these 33 years of democratic governments, there were 24 early departures of elected presidents under heterogeneous conditions, both in their causes and in time and space, representing 19.2% of the total.

Likewise, of the 125 presidents that existed in the region, 29 (23.2%) were not elected to the position, occupying the head of state on an interim basis or to finish the current presidential term. It can be added that, on average, every year and half, there has been an early presidential departure. Similarly, if the authoritarian regimes of Peru, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are excluded, the values hardly vary, with 19.37% of elected presidents leaving office early and 17.48% of non-elected presidents holding office. Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Uruguay were the only states in which there were no early presidential departures during the study period.

**Table 3.** President-elect, removed, and substitutes, 1990-2023

Country	Presidents-elect*	Interrupted presidencies	Unelected Presidents
Argentina	7	3	2
Bolivia	6	3	4
Brazil	6	2	2
Chile	8	0	0
Colombia	7	0	0
Costa Rica	9	0	0
Ecuador	9	5	4
El Salvador	7	0	0
Guatemala	10	2	3
Honduras	8	1	1
Mexico	6	0	0
Nicaragua	4	0	0
Panama	7	0	0
Paraguay	8	2	3
Peru	6	3	6
Dominican Republic	6	1	0
Uruguay	7	0	0
Venezuela	4	2	4
Total	125	24	29

Source: Authors' own creation.

Note: \*Presidents elected in non-democratic processes are included, as in Nicaragua (2012), Peru (1993-2000) and Venezuela (2013-2023).

However, although there is a certain heterogeneity in terms of presidential crises in the region, two major variables can be identified as triggers: political party and economic social. On the part of the first, the case of Peru should be highlighted, where five presidents (PPK, Mercedes Aráoz, Manuel Merino, Martín Vizcarra and Pedro Castillo) left office early in just four years and with varied motivations, although always with a marked minority in the chamber. In the case of a semi-presidential regime, both in practice and *de jure*, the strong pro-government minority and the absence of an institutionalized party system have played against the permanence and control of the legislature by executives. It is also worth highlighting the higher turnover of ministers in Latin America, high party volatility, and weakness with which presidents face their mandates (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023). Thus, of the three presidents-elects who had to resign, all suffered the threat of impeachment or vacancy, with PPK preemptively leaving office to avoid it. Vizcarra, elected as vice president, replaced PPK, and was later ousted by Congress. Aráoz and, to a lesser extent, Merino, did not have institutional and social recognition and the support of most of the chambers, which led them to fleeting presidencies. Castillo was an outlier, as he challenged the democratic order by attempting a coup d'état like the one Fujimori achieved in 1992. Fujimori himself was also forced to leave power in a hurry in 2000, following a succession of corruption scandals, human rights violations, and growing opposition to systematic electoral fraud.

Brazil and Paraguay each had two presidents removed by impeachment, all of whom shared the same pattern: divided government, difficulties in building stable parliamentary coalitions, and increasing clashes with the legislature, especially if Rouseff was excluded. As in the cases of Serrano and Pérez Molina in Guatemala, Balaguer in the Dominican Republic, and Zelaya in Honduras, he also highlighted the hostile and obstructionist attitude of the opposition, more adept at personalizing the political crisis in the presidential figure and achieving qualified majorities that would successfully lead Congress to force his early departure. A separate case could be the early departure of Evo Morales in 2019, as the growing suspicions of electoral fraud, as well as the control of the judiciary with which he managed to bypass the constitutional limitations on re-election, laminating his public image to the point of abandoning power due to social, military, and institutional pressure.

The remaining cases in the region are placed in the second bank of economic and social causes. For example, Ecuador had three presidents (Bucaram, Mahuad, and Gutiérrez) left office in a hurry between 1997 and 2005 because of strong social protests, economic crises, and significant military pressure. In this sense, Congress did not always play a primary role, but rather a reactive one, since the demands of some social actors, the



weakness of presidents in the face of a difficult situation, and the *fait accompli* in some situations led legislators to facilitate the assumption of substitute presidents. We should not forget the illegal dissolution of the Constitutional Court by Gutiérrez or the criticism that the Inter-American Commission poured out on his government for its weak respect of the Democratic Charter (Inter-American Commission 2005). Finally, Lasso precipitated both his early departure and the dissolution of the legislature with the call for extraordinary elections in 2023 through what is popularly known as *cross death* (art. 5, Organic Law of the Legislative Function) due to the growing social and security crisis that devastated the country but was again accompanied by a pro-government minority in Congress and the opposition's attempt to remove him through impeachment.

Argentina followed a pattern similar to the Ecuadorian case, since De la Rúa, Saá, and Duhalde were brief presidents of the republic amid a notable economic and social crisis that only eased after the 2003 electoral process and gradual improvement of the macroeconomic situation. Of course, the discredit of the population towards the political class and the minority of the ruling party in the chamber increased the weakness of the presidents alluded to, deriving from it an unprecedented political crisis in the democratic stage of the country.

However, these causal differences must also be considered. Both the economic and political presidential crises were characterized by a preeminence of the divided government and even a confrontation between the head of state and his caucus, with the president coming out of the loser. In other words, the party system tended to play a fundamental role in the evolution of executives, thus reaffirming the importance of congresses in Latin American political systems and the need to generate coalitions and agreements on the part of the ruling party. The separation of powers that presidentialism establishes in its design does not prevent executives from establishing consensus and agreements with the chamber, as well as a certain share of the government agenda, so that governability is not put at risk in situations of economic crisis, or bridges can be built against presidents who seek to overcome parliamentary blockades unilaterally. Consequently, it is far from possible to speak of legislative powers that are subject to or are secondary in the political game.

Similarly, social upheaval played an important role in many presidential crises, being decisive in many cases but also occasionally spurred by opposition for partisan purposes. In this way, the non-official parliamentary groups were able, on numerous occasions, to use social discontent and the loss of confidence and legitimacy of executives to bring about a change in the head of state. Here, the cases of Ecuador, Argentina, and Bolivia in the pre-Morales era are highlighted.

**Table 4.** Early departures of presidents in Latin America (1990-2023)

Year	Country	President	Main causes	Social crisis	Party Scenario	Result
1992	Brazil	Collor de Mello	corruption, lack of legislative support	Not noteworthy	Pro-government minority	Successful Impeachment
1993	Guatemala	Jorge Serrano	Failed self-coup attempt	Yes, mass protests	Pro-government minority	Early Resignation
1993	Venezuela	Carlos Andres Perez	corruption, political instability	Yes, mass protests	Pro-government minority	Successful Impeachment
1996	Dominican Republic	Joaquín Balaguer	electoral fraud, authoritarianism	Yes, there is a lack of legitimacy	Pro-government minority	Early Resignation
1997	Ecuador	Abdala Bucaram	corruption, lack of legislative support, social pressure	Yes, mass protests	Pro-government minority	Irregular impeachment by Congress
1999	Paraguay	Raul Cubas	lack of support, alleged violence	Yes, mass protests	Isolation President	Early Resignation
2000	Ecuador	Jamil Mahuad	economic crisis, social protest, military	Yes, mass protests	Pro-government minority	Departure due to social and military pressure
2000	Peru	Alberto Fujimori	corruption, lack of social support	Yes, mass protests	Pro-government minority	Impeachment after null and void resignation
2001	Argentina	Fernando De la Rúa	Economic crisis, social protest	Yes, against the political class	Isolation President	Early Resignation
2001	Argentina	Rodriguez Saa	Economic crisis, social protest	Yes, against the political class	Isolation President	Early Resignation
2003	Argentina	Eduardo Duhalde	Economic crisis, social protest	Yes, against the political class	Isolation President	Early Resignation
2003	Bolivia	Sanchez de Lozada	Economic crisis, social protest	Yes, against the political class	Pro-government minority	Early Resignation
2005	Ecuador	Lucio Gutierrez	corruption, social protest, military, attack on the Court	Yes, against the political class	Pro-government minority	Departure due to social and military pressure

Year	Country	President	Main causes	Social crisis	Party Scenario	Result
2009	Honduras	Manuel Zelaya	Institutional clashes, social protest	Yes, against the political class	Isolation President	Irregular impeachment by Congress
2012	Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	Strong parliamentary opposition	Not noteworthy	Pro-government minority	Successful Impeachment
2015	Guatemala	Perez Molina	Corruption, social protest	Yes, against the political class	Pro-government minority	Exit due to threat of impeachment
2016	Brazil	Dilma Rousseff	corruption, lack of legislative support	Yes, but not decisive	Pro-government minority	Successful Impeachment
2018	Peru	Pedro Pablo Kuczynski	corruption, lack of legislative support	No	Strong pro-government minority	Exit due to threat of impeachment
2019	Bolivia	Evo Morales	corruption, electoral irregularities, military	Yes, massive	pro-government majority	Early Resignation
2019	Peru	Mercedes Aráoz	Lack of recognition	increasing	Strong pro-government minority	Departure after 24 hours
2020	Peru	Manuel Merino	Lack of legislative support	increasing	Strong pro-government minority	Departure after a week
2020	Peru	Martín Vizcarra	Strong parliamentary opposition	Yes, Against Congress	Strong pro-government minority	Successful Impeachment
2022	Peru	Pedro Castillo	Lack of legislative support	Yes, against the political class	Pro-government minority	Successful Impeachment
2023	Ecuador	Guillermo Lasso	Lack of legislative support, social crisis	Yes, against insecurity	Pro-government minority	Extraordinary Calling of Legislative and Presidential Elections

Source: Authors' own creation, partially based on Garrido and Nohlen (2020).

Now, through what procedures was the early departure of institutionalized presidents? Predominantly, resignation or impeachment, although the former is not explained in most cases, without the latter. In fact, of the 24 president-elects who left office precipitously, 12 did so directly through impeachment, and of the remaining nine,

eight had a minority in the chamber, even with open confrontation with their caucus. It is worth highlighting the arguments used by the opposition to proceed with the impeachment trial because, as previously highlighted, common patterns can be identified in the region throughout the study period.

In 7 of the 12 early impeachment proceedings, the main reason given by the congresses was presidential corruption or open authoritarianism (Collor de Mello, Bucaram, Gutiérrez, Molina, Rouseff, Kuczynski and Vizcarra); in 2 the inability to govern (again Bucaram and Lugo); and in 3 cases, the legislature acted in the face of alleged unilateral attempts to impose a political order that was not constitutional or contrary to the existing institutions in the country (Fujimori, Zelaya and Castillo). It is interesting that in the case of Fujimori, action was only taken against him once he resigned from abroad and under the decomposition of the ruling party. Finally, Raúl Cubas was dismissed when confronting his political group, specifically his vice-president Argaña, and for accusing him of promoting his assassination.

**Table 5.** Successful impeachment processes in Latin America (1990-2023)

Year	Country	President	Causes of action
1992	Brazil	Collor de Mello	corruption
1997	Ecuador	Abdalá Bucaram	corruption, economic crisis, moral incapacity
1999	Paraguay	Raul Cubas	Involvement in political violence
2000	Peru	Alberto Fujimori	An attack on democracy
2005	Ecuador	Lucio Gutierrez	corruption, social protest, authoritarianism
2009	Honduras	Manuel Zelaya	re-election, authoritarianism
2012	Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	Inability to govern
2015	Guatemala	Perez Molina	corruption
2016	Brazil	Dilma Rouseff	corruption
2018	Peru	P.P. Kuczynski	corruption, buying of legislators
2020	Peru	Martín Vizcarra	corruption
2022	Peru	Pedro Castillo	An attack on democracy

Source: Authors' own creation.

Congresses, therefore, turned out to be proactive in the face of presidents with accusations of corruption, socioeconomic mismanagement, or threats to the democratic order, and reactive when the situation materialized before they could act (Fujimori, Gutiérrez, Mahuad). Although it is not intended to idealize political parties, since, in many cases, legislative parties have been a fundamental part of political instability (see the case of Peru), the truth is that they have tended to act more as checks and balances against presidents than as executive extensions, especially in environments of divided government, social crisis, and threats to the current institutionality.

### **Presidentialism, party systems, and separation of powers. Towards a parliamentary relationship between powers?**

As previously highlighted, the basis of the presidential regime is the separation of powers, granting electoral legitimacy to both the chief executive and congressmen. In this way, the aim is to achieve political stability and autonomy for institutions and to move away from the deadlock between powers. However, this rigid model is not such if we stick to the comparative normative study, but also to the data analyzed, since there is an appreciable drop in the number of elected presidents (15.8%), especially if we focus on certain political systems. Likewise, and in line with the “Linzián” theses, it represents an unblocking in the face of political crises of the first magnitude, as if it were a parliamentary regime, although certain authors saw it precisely as a sign of instability and risk to democracy (Linz & Valenzuela, 1994; Valenzuela, 2008), a fact that could be accompanied by proven facts: the military did play an active role in some presidential interruptions (Zelaya, Morales, Gutiérrez), even if institutional mechanisms were maintained as means of resolution.

In this sense, Polga-Hecimovich (2024) highlights that although most of the processes of early presidential exits in Latin America have not become crises at the end of democracy, they have involved processes of instability in several of them, as well as open attacks on presidential figure by third parties (congress, social protests, military). It also highlights the “impeachment trap”, according to which the political and governance crises that preceded the early exit processes were not fully resolved with the removal of the president, so the affected countries tended to experience cyclical situations of political instability and citizen disaffection. Indeed, some regimes, such as Ecuador and Peru, show a high exit from their presidents, questioning from their very assumption how stable their mandate will be. Similarly, these presidential interruptions can also be interpreted as an attack on the electoral legitimacy of the president and the popular will in the face of a certain government program (Travers & Carneiro, 2017), although in situations of social crisis, this argument can be refuted.



By contrast, one can speak of the assumption of a chief executive's political responsibility before the camera. Indeed, an analysis of the early presidential departures shows that the reasons put forward by the opposition were mainly corruption, inability to govern, and attacks on democracy. Without going into detail about the suitability and fit in the face of the grounds included in each regulation, it is interesting to highlight the controlling and executing role of the congresses, as well as the opposition that occurs *de facto* between the legitimacy of origin (electoral) and the legitimacy of the exercise of the president. In this way, the chambers would be withdrawing their confidence in executives in situations of crisis of social legitimacy and parliamentary minorities. From an idealistic point of view, certain presidential crises –Lugo, Rousseff, and Vizcarra– are far from being framed in a scenario of social rejection and lack of legitimacy, but rather of a struggle for power, which in turn contravenes Hochstetler's (2008) and other studies (Cheibub, 2002; Przeworski et al., 2000).

Does this autonomy imply convergence with parliamentary regimes? In a way, yes, given the capacity of this power to condition the fate of the executive –including an evident total crisis of the cabinet– although they do not have powers for its direct configuration, a fact that exists in parliamentarism through the necessary motion of confidence. However, Latin American presidentialism is far from being a pure model that tends to be likened to the example of the United States. As can be seen from a quick comparison of the region's political systems, institutional heterogeneity is evident, as is the progressive emergence of other parliamentary elements –motions of censure, interpellations, and government coalitions– which result in a greater role for the legislature in the system and a nuance of the separation of powers. In other words, although it could be noted that the head of state must be politically irresponsible for the chamber, this would not be happening *de facto* in much of the region, although neither *de jure*, given the laxity of certain presidential impeachment process regulations.

Similarly, the party variable must be highlighted as a determinant, since without most of the opposition in Congress it is not possible to meet the requirements to prosecute the president, although the study of the variable must be qualified. The persistence of the divided government in the region, as well as the difficulty in reaching stable, persistent, and majority coalitions on the part of the ruling party, is evident, emphasizing once again the importance of the study of this area in determining the capacity for success (Chasqueti, 2001, 2006; Reniú & Albala, 2012) of the executive or for its survival (Albala, 2009; Levitt, 2012; Paredes et al., 2020). It is also interesting to underline the capacity of the chambers to achieve these specific consensuses, especially in bicameral legislatures that exhibit a clear counterpart: weak presidents, fundamentally

under certain social and party conditions. Indeed, as anticipated in the introductory hypothesis, in times of social crisis and a marked pro-government minority, the president may be the escape valve that legislators find a way out. Alternatively, there may be a political opportunity for the opposition to impose a change on the executive. For an earlier period (1945-2010), Pérez-Liñán & Polga-Hecimovich (2016) also affirmed that the party variable was key to explaining presidential interruption through legal mechanisms in Latin America: presidents with party majorities enjoyed high stability if there was no military intervention.

Consequently, an analysis of early departures leads to a new rethinking of the need for executives to build coalitions. Although this is still true *a priori*, they do not require parliamentary majorities to survive because of the lack of institutional incentives (Mainwaring, 1993a, p. 200; Stepan & Skach, 1993, p. 130), a tendency towards presidential instability is identified in regimes characterized by poorly institutionalized party systems in combination with permanent parliamentary minorities, as in the case of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru. Brazil and Paraguay stood out for the permanence of the divided government, although with greater party institutionalization. For this reason, presidential stability would have been more related to the game of parliamentary majorities, together with the performance of the executive and certain attacks on democracy, than to the success or establishment of coalitions around the ruling party. In other words, the importance of the party system is evident; however, although necessary, it is not sufficient for the president to permanence, returning to the presidential logic of the separation of powers. Thus, the existence of coalitions does not seem to be a determining variable since both dominant and majority coalitions tend to collapse as the head of state is weakened or isolated. This would be in line with research for previous periods that analyzed the stability of governments in parliamentary and presidential regimes (Cheibub et al., 2004; Hochstetler, 2011) along with a conclusion already advanced previously: the institutional inability of presidentialism to replace an isolated government with a new one would really be the difference with parliamentarism. In other words, presidential logic allows minority governments a greater chance of survival than their parliamentary counterparts, although at certain junctures, their party weakness also leads to early exit. Therefore, Linz's thesis regarding the presumed intrinsic rigidity of presidentialism is rejected, and the results of this research are closer to those of subsequent studies (Cheibub & Limongi, 2002; Przeworski et al., 2000) on non-excessive differences in the stability of presidential and parliamentary governments. In this regard, table 5 shows the heterogeneity in terms of the establishment of coalitions, their characteristics, and, something to be highlighted, their limited loyalty

to the outgoing president: parliamentary partners did not hesitate to abandon either the ruling party or the head of state himself when the situation warranted it, which in turn hides electoral incentives, as research in this area has shown (Cheibub et al., 2004; Fernandois, 2000; Hochstetler, 2011) or party discipline (Cheibub, 2002).

**Table 6.** Successful impeachment processes in Latin America and party situation (1990-2023)

Year	Country	President	Situation of the ruling party	Ruling coalition
1992	Brazil	Collor de Mello	Pro-government minority	Yes, but a minority and they abandon
1997	Ecuador	Abdalá Bucaram	Pro-government minority	Non-formal, they act by abandonment
1999	Paraguay	Raul Cubas	Isolation President	Yes, minority
2000	Peru	Alberto Fujimori	Absolute majority	Yes, but they abandon the ruling party
2005	Ecuador	Lucio Gutierrez	Pro-government minority	Non-formal, they act by abandonment
2009	Honduras	Manuel Zelaya	Isolation President	Yes, but they leave the president
2012	Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	Pro-government minority	Yes, minority
2015	Guatemala	Perez Molina	Pro-government minority	Yes, with smaller benches
2016	Brazil	Dilma Rousseff	First minority	Yes, but they abandon the ruling party
2018	Peru	P.P. Kuczynski	Marked minority	Non-formal, one-off support
2020	Peru	Martín Vizcarra	No official match	No
2022	Peru	Pedro Castillo	First minority	Non-formal, one-off support

Source: Authors' own creation.

In any case, presidential instability should not be understood as systemic instability or a risk to democracy, since there are few regimes that experienced an authoritarian regression in this period of study, especially if the presidential crisis was considered a hypothetical trigger for the regime crisis. In other words, one could speak

of presidential instability but not of a latent threat to democracy. Therefore, a negative view of the lack of institutional mechanisms in presidentialism for the management of political crises (Linz, 1990; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994, 1997) should be rejected. There appears to be no evidence that this form of government promotes or hinders peaceful resolution of disputes between powers. This institutionalization of political crises is in line with the research of previous periods by other authors (Mustapic, 2006; Pérez-Liñán, 2000, 2008), since they have already exposed the uncertainty of the fixed presidential mandate and the not-so-clear centrality in the political system of the head of state, highlighting the alliance that could be forged between the vice presidency and the congress, or the independence of the ruling party in the chamber with the opposition until then. This reinforces the parliamentary vision of executive-legislative relations, but to the detriment of the presidential election. These findings lead to the concept of the “people’s shield”, (Pérez-Liñán, 2009, 2016) since presidents in a marked legislative minority would require certain doses of social rejection and difficult conjuncture (political, economic) for the congressional capacity to depose them to be activated.

However, as highlighted in this research, some presidents (Zelaya, Morales, and Gutiérrez) were removed after explicit military intervention. These situations undoubtedly put democracy at risk, although all of them achieved institutional redirection. Pérez-Liñán & Polga-Hecimovich (2016) show that, in fact, neither the processes of military intervention in the region dynamited democracy, nor did the other processes of early exit represent a democratic crisis. In other words, Latin American political systems have managed to consolidate constitutional mechanisms as quasi-monopolistic ways of transferring presidential power, and all actors, including the military, in cases of tacit threat to democracy have ended up accepting the necessary institutionalized solution. However, their vision is more pessimistic, highlighting how growing political polarization and radicalization have triggered various political crises in Latin America and the rest of the world.

From all this, an alternative question arises: why do some presidents in a parliamentary minority manage to survive the parliamentary onslaught with the disposition to remove him? Apparently, factors of legal culture, historical tradition, and leadership on the part of the president must be considered. Some authors such as Ollier (2008) emphasize that presidents can be used as throwaway cartridges in cases of serious social crises and parliamentary minorities. Thus, using Argentina as a case study (1999-2003), she analyzed the sequence and dominance of the legislative agenda over the executive to precipitate the early departure of the president of the republic as an institutional escape route. However, the author added a necessary condition: low presidential

leadership in the face of strong and effective opposition. In other words, charismatic presidents with the ability to lead and communicate in processes of social crisis would be able to survive processes of hypothetical early exit in the face of well-structured opposition. In the same sense, Fraschini (2021) argues that presidential leadership and its ability to generate “power resources” are undoubtedly the determining variables for predicting presidential stability in periods of social crisis, even above the party system or other factors. Thus, presidents capable of generating a “solid political position” (Fraschini, 2021, p. 33) could overcome conjunctural crises under party environments of low institutionalization. However, Fraschini’s research does not analyze the existence of divided governments or coalitions around the ruling party, although it is implicitly evident that strong presidents who had presidential leadership had, in turn, a majority in the chambers and the absence, in general, of social crises.

With regard to the current research, it is relevant to point out that, *prima facie*, there would be no impact on the probability of being removed from the political experience of the presidents or the party structure on which they previously relied, since not all of them could be considered *outsiders* or leaders of electoral vehicles with little institutionalization, although certain regimes stand out for their tendency to leave early (Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru) and the low institutionalization of its party system. Similarly, socioeconomic incidence must be discarded as a necessary variable, since several case studies did not coexist with macroeconomic instability, but the trigger was the party variable and the clash between powers. In this regard, there are cases of Paraguay, Honduras, Guatemala, and Peru, among others.

However, in the 23 cases of early presidential departures analyzed, including unelected presidents, a common pattern was evident: social unrest, political polarization, and coordinated opposition. In these cases, attention is focused on the specific processes of impeachment, and we can see a variability of cases objected to for their processing and culmination that, in any case, only confirm that, in certain scenarios, what is relevant is not to find the cause, but the qualified party majority, reinforcing the political character of the “control in parliament”. However, parliamentarisation of the presidential impeachment process is no longer a tool for exceptional employment and in the face of serious accusations, but rather for contexts of weak presidents and active and coordinated opposition to the executive (Aragón Reyes, 2002).

For this reason, it should be noted that there is a certain parliamentarisation in the use of impeachment by Latin American legislatures during the period under study, as if it were a motion of censure, essentially because its use is neither extraordinary nor solidly argued, but rather based on the political situation or opportunity. In other



words, it fits what is expected in theory (Aragón Reyes, 2002; Mora-Donatto, 2010; Sartori, 1994; Stepan & Skach, 1993) and practice (Mustapic, 2006; Pérez-Liñán, 2009; Serrafiero, 2018; Zícari, 2022) in terms of the use of political control mechanisms and their partisan effects. Marsteintredet (2008) precisely highlights presidential departures in the region as a product, for the most part, of the effects of vertical accountability (social protests) and vertical accountability (parliamentary political control). In this way, the presidential figure would be weakened in favor of the legislature and society, although there are no possible future risks, such as attacks on the electoral legitimacy of elected presidents and governability. Llanos & Marsteintredet (2010) complemented this point of view with the subsequent periods of democratization that Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala experienced after the early departures of the presidents after the clash with the legislatures, although they did not forget the international pressures suffered by the outgoing leaders.

Along the same lines, another piece of evidence reaffirms the parliamentary nature of executive-legislative relations in certain systems and under certain circumstances: congresses that acted in a reactive manner in the face of authoritarian presidents with low social support and divided governments. Indeed, as some of the cases exemplify, the legislatures also acted *a posteriori* and in response to attacks on democratic institutions, signifying the importance of presidential dismissal as an aggravated tool and only usable under very specific circumstances. This was the case of Fujimori and Castillo in Peru and, apart from that, Gutiérrez (Ecuador), Morales (Bolivia) and Zelaya (Guatemala). In this regard, it is interesting to analyze the differences in these presidential departures, since while in some of them it implied an active and leading role against the head of state (Morales, Zelaya, Castillo), in others, the congress reacted to situations resolved by the action of other actors, whether social protests or military corps. In the case of Gutiérrez, this gives a certain institutional channel for the political crisis. Thus, the term “popular impeachment” (Pérez-Liñán, 2016; Zamosc, 2012) can be rescued, since, based on the study of Ecuadorian governments between 1979 and 2006, the authors warn that social protests and the uprising of actors external to Congress were necessary and decisive for the subsequent action against the president by the legislature. The “popular mobilization” (Hochstetler, 2008, 2011) then, as well as the marked pro-government minority, would have been two of the necessary factors for the early departure of the president, reinforcing the congress either as a determining actor or to give the appearance of regularity to the *fait accompli*.

## Conclusions

The analysis of presidential stability in Latin America between 1990 and 2023 shows that neither presidents were so stable, nor that the use of impeachment was so limited or exceptional. In fact, several irregular presidential impeachment processes were carried out, including the participation of the military union, and in other cases, not even early departure managed to bring stability to the head of state.

However, this instability did not necessarily lead to a crisis in the democratic regime. On the contrary, impeachment proceedings were generally argued as a defence of democracy, legality, or governance, which, leaving aside the veracity of the assumptions, opens new questions about the repeated rigidity of presidentialism and the absence of simple and effective mechanisms to resolve political conflicts, as well as showing how democracy continues to be established in most Latin American states.

As a result, we can speak of presidents who are not as powerful or capable of dominating the legislative agenda, especially in the context of a divided government, opposition to the capacity to articulate itself and various conjunctural elements, such as social protests, economic crises, and growing polarization, updating the original research on presidential (Pérez-Liñán, 2000, 2008), stability, and reaffirming the autonomy and reactive capacity of the chambers for certain political systems already observed in the past, or to give the appearance of constitutional regularity to impeachment processes already consummated by non-political actors (García Montero, 2009).

Thus, this combination has produced a parliamentarisation of relations between the executive and the legislature, showing autonomous, effective, and proactive congresses for this task. An example of this balanced relationship was, of course, impeachment as a mechanism of parliamentary control given its effectiveness in removing presidents, its ambiguous regulation in numerous legal systems, and its power of threat, as it led several presidents to resign preemptively so as not to be deposed.

Finally, the results obtained invite new avenues of research, such as the institutionalization of party systems, the leadership of Latin American presidents or the programmatic links of deputies and heads of state. In this way, not only could the analysis of divided government as a necessary condition for presidential disruption be completed but also the degree of commitment of legislators to a given policy agenda or the reasons for coordinating to prosecute the president.

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