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Christian Democracy in Latin America: Myth or Reality?

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CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA: MYTH OR REALITY?

The decisive victory of Eduardo Frei in the 1964 Chilean presidential election led many influential North and Latin Americans to hope that Christian Democracy (CD) would develop into a significant political force throughout Latin America; that Christian Democrats would ally with the existing democratic left, compete with Communism on ideological grounds, and offer an alternative, democratic route to social and economic progress.

Five years after the Frei victory, and despite the election this year of Christian Democrat Rafael Caldera as President of Venezuela, the fortunes of Christian Democracy appear to be on a downward trend, and the dreams of a hemisphere-wide Christian Democratic Revolution have proved to be no more than that. Perhaps the most important reason for the failure of Christian Democracy in general is the poor outlook for a victory by the Christian Democrats in the Chilean presidential elections next year and that party's failure to attract widespread support and to institute its programs even though it is the leading political force in the country. Traditional Latin American aversion for ideology, the continued dominance of personalismo in politics, the increase in the number of military governments, the continued growth of xenophobic nationalism, and the Christian Democrats' own failure to develop strong leaders and effective organizations are also factors contributing to the lack of success of Christian Democracy.

Despite all of the problems and shortcomings of Christian Democracy, however, its relative success or failure is still in the hands of fickle voters. Under certain circumstances, for example if the party represented the only alternative to Communism, as in Chile, or to an unpopular government, as in El Salvador, the CDs might continue to play an important political role in several countries.

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CURRENT BALANCE SHEET

The Christian Democratic movement is generally agreed to be of current political significance in only three Latin American countries—Chile, Venezuela, and El Salvador.

Chile

In Chile, the party demonstrated growing popularity from 1964, when Frei was elected President with 56.1 percent of the vote, through the 1965 legislative elections, when it garnered 42.3 percent of the total vote. In the 1967 municipal elections, however, its strength had eroded to 35.6 percent of the total vote, and dropped in the 1969 legislative elections to 29.7 percent. Nevertheless, the party is still the strongest political entity in Chile; 55 of the 150 members in the Chamber of Deputies and 20 of 50 senators are Christian Democrats.

Chile's Christian Democrats have had trouble with party discipline almost from the beginning of their ascendancy. In fact, it can be argued that the party came to power almost too quickly: it had not developed basic party structure at the grass roots and lacked secondary leaders. Before 1965 the Christian Democrats did not have enough legislators to be more than a desirable collaborator in government activities. Moreover, the party's leading figures found governing a chore, and they frequently acted in a manner irritating to other democratic parties. Frei has not been able to keep the party in line, and its problems are regularly aired in public. A long series of internal party disputes finally culminated this year in a split in the ranks when the left wing formed its own autonomous faction, the United Popular Action Movement (MAPU).

In essence, the party, which showed so much promise in 1964, has virtually hit bottom. It is

now trying to recapture the elan and sense of mission that its lack of political realism and quarreling conduct have almost destroyed. Radomiro Tomic, the party's 1970 presidential candidate, is hardheaded, energetic, and ambitious. His abysmal showing in the first popularity polls of the various presidential candidates should goad him and the party into renewed activity. He has nowhere to go but up, and he may make a good showing—perhaps good enough to bring about a virtual three-way tie, in which case Congress will select the president.



Radomiro Tomic
Chilean Christian Democratic
Presidential Candidate

Eduardo Frei
Chilean President

Tomic's candidacy will probably help to re-group and reorganize the party, which still has a great deal of support among some lower class groups that its policies have helped visibly during the last five years. The party should also receive the votes of many who still believe in reform without Communism. Their numbers, however,

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are not expected to amount to more than 30 percent of the total vote. Meanwhile, the party will retain over a third of the deputies and slightly less than half of the senators until 1973, and at least 12 will remain until 1977. This is based on the risky assumption, of course, that there will be no further splits in the party. The Christian Democratic Party of Chile will remain an important political force, at least through its legislative strength, for some time, but it is not likely to retain its present leading position in politics.

Venezuela

In Venezuela, Social Christian Party (COPEI) leader Rafael Caldera was elected President in December 1968. His victory, made possible by a split in the Democratic Action Party and touted several years ago as a bellwether of the Christian Democratic movement in Latin America, has not materialized as such. In fact, Caldera's triumph (29.08 percent of the total vote), which was less than one percent over his nearest rival, and COPEI's relatively small congressional representation (59 of 216 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and only 16 of 57 seats in the Senate), have left him in the practically untenable position of presiding over a minority government. The new President has had immense difficulty in implementing his programs and has been further handicapped by an empty treasury, courtesy of the former government.

The party suffers from ideological unrest and has always been troubled to some degree by right-wing and left-wing factionalism. When the party was first founded, the conservative faction exerted the strongest influence because COPEI then drew its strength from the conservative agricultural areas of the Andean region. Caldera, then the leader of the more leftist faction that favored moderate social and economic reforms, worked to change the composition and image of the party.

Over the years workers, some peasants, and students have gradually replaced the early conservative supporters. Because of this, the party has been able to expand from its base in the Andean region and to develop electoral strength throughout the nation. In 1968, the party broke into three factions: a right-wing group, the dominant moderate faction, and a left-wing faction formed by COPEI's youth movement. Despite the left wing's relative lack of discipline and its radical programs, the belief that 1969 would be its year for success kept the party united behind Caldera and prevented an open schism.



Rafael Caldera
Venezuelan President

The present outlook for the Caldera government is not good. The President's inability to implement his programs, a faltering economy, the failure of the guerrilla pacification program to accomplish much, and continuous student disorders have stirred latent unrest within the military.

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removed from office, the party might be able to shore up its internal differences. It might also be able to gain more popular support because of sympathy accruing to it as the party turned out of office. On the other hand, a complete split in the party ranks may well occur.

El Salvador

In El Salvador the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), founded in 1961, is now the second largest political party in the country. Emerging in the 1964 municipal and legislative election as the principal opposition with 25.9 percent of the vote, the PDC has continued to gain strength. In 1966, it captured 31.2 percent of the total vote, and also won the municipality of Santa Tecla, the country's fourth largest city. In 1968, it won 42.8 percent of the vote and increased its legislative strength to 19 of 52 seats. It also increased its municipal strength by winning 81 of 261 municipalities, including seven of the 14 department capitals (among them the big three: San Salvador, Santa Ana, and San Miguel).

The PDC faces a number of problems going into the congressional and municipal elections in March 1970. Jose Napoleon Duarte, the three-term mayor of San Salvador and the party's secretary general, has decided not to run for another term, and the party is having difficulty selecting a candidate for the coveted position. In addition, strains within the party are being aggravated by the jockeying for position on the PDC list of legislative candidates. Nevertheless, Duarte and Dr. Abraham Rodriguez, the party's legal adviser and its 1967 presidential candidate, should be able to minimize the differences.

The party's most serious problem, however, is its relations with the Salvadoran military.



Jose Napoleon Duarte
Mayor of San Salvador

the party is concerned that even if there is no coup and no major electoral fraud, it will still be unable to sustain the electoral momentum of the past three legislative contests. Although party leaders are confident the government party will lose its razor-thin legislative majority if the elections are free, they feel that the PDC may also lose some seats, and that significant gains will be made by the far left. In this eventuality, the CDs might emerge from the elections as the senior partner in an opposition coalition that would control the Assembly.

The Dominican Republic

Although not of great political significance as yet, the Revolutionary Social Christian Party (PRSC) of the Dominican Republic has made some impressive gains since its founding in 1961. Following a period of radical leadership from 1962 until it was trounced at the polls in the 1966 presidential elections (gaining only 2.3

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percent of the total vote), the PRSC under Caonabo Javier began to moderate its policies and to advocate constructive opposition to the Balaguer government.

The new policies were partly responsible for the PRSC's improved showing in the municipal elections of 1968. Running candidates in only 35 of the country's 77 municipalities and severely hampered by a lack of funds, the party won 125,000 votes (about 12 percent of the total), gaining control of two councils and membership on 12 others. In the capital, the PRSC attracted a little more than 21 percent of the votes. The party's showing, however, was boosted by the decision of the PRD, the major opposition party, to boycott the elections as a protest against President Balaguer.

Despite the party's improved showing, disagreements between the national hierarchy and leaders of the party's youth organizations—the national university's Revolutionary Social Christian Bloc (the country's second largest student organization) and the Revolutionary Social Christian Youth (the only democratically oriented youth groups of substantial size)—have continued. Some members of the youth organizations, whose main strength is concentrated in the national district, oppose the party's tentative decision to compete in the 1970 elections, preferring an abstentionist policy if Balaguer decides to run for re-election. The PRSC is the only major party to nominate a candidate for 1970—Alfonso Moreno, who was also its candidate in 1962.

The party's progress continues to be hampered by its inability to establish a strong national organization, to overcome financial difficulties, and to come up with a charismatic leader. The financial problem may be partially rectified by the Venezuelan Christian Democratic Party's promise to pay a monthly subsidy to the PRSC.

Moreover, the increasing radicalization of Juan Bosch's PRD gives the PRSC an opportunity to move into the "moderate" center-left vacuum, although it must now compete with the recently formed party of former provisional president Hector Garcia-Godoy for this vote. In seeking wider support, the PRSC's potential is enhanced by its affiliation with the country's 30,000-member Autonomous Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CASC) and a growing campesino organization. Although a coalition with Garcia-Godoy, or participation in a "national front" in 1970 remains a possibility, the PRSC's early decision to nominate Moreno suggests that it intends to build slowly, looking toward 1974.

Other Latin American Countries

The limited promise shown by the Christian Democratic parties in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Panama has been arrested by their respective military governments. The Guatemalan party, which was legalized in 1967, has demonstrated some strength among students and campesinos and will probably run a presidential candidate in the next elections, but he will have no chance of winning. The remaining seven parties—in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay—show scant promise of developing into forces of national importance over the next five years.

WHY CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY HAS FAILED

The reasons for the failure of Christian Democracy to attract wide following in Latin America are many and varied. Some are inherent in the nature of Christian Democratic ideology. Others are particular to the Latin version of the movement, and still others are bound up in the matrix of Latin American politics. The following is an attempt to highlight the more important causes of the movement's lack of success.

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IDEOLOGICAL COMPLICATIONS

In general terms, one of the fundamental problems of Christian Democracy that has led to specific difficulties faced by the movement is its idealistic oversimplification of world realities. This has, in turn, led to gross miscalculations and errors in political judgment. Some Christian Democrats have long appeared to believe that Messianic zeal and high-sounding phraseology are all that is necessary to transform society and human nature. Although this phenomenon may be written off as merely campaign exaggeration, the evidence indicates that some of the party politicians really believe in it. In fact, this belief may be partially responsible for the split in the Chilean party, because the radical "true believers" felt they could no longer coexist with the more pragmatic party "moderates."

Oversimplification of problems has also led Christian Democrats to place great faith in social planning and social "engineering." Political and social problems, according to Edward J. Williams in his book, *Latin American Christian Democratic Parties*, are "depicted as technical problems and written off as easily resolved by technical measures." The errors in this approach are obvious. Latin American society, which is basically conservative and composed of traditional economic, social, cultural, and political patterns, cannot be altered by simple agrarian reform measures or nationalization of industry. In each case, an influential portion of society will be offended, and support for the CDs will diminish. The view that "all will participate in the benefits of the new society, according to their true necessities and capacities" is purely theoretical, especially in the Latin American context, and the realities of the situation must be considered.

In Chile, for example, the Christian Democrats' decision to "go it alone" in 1964 and

not to seek alliances with other components of the democratic left eventually forced the party into a situation where collaboration was possible only with the Communists. This basically unnatural relationship alienated many of the moderates who were in part responsible for the CD victory in 1964 over the Marxists. The party is now faced with the difficult task of trying to woo these moderates back in order to win in 1970. Unfortunately, many scores remain unsettled and the division between the CDs and the more moderate elements that spawned them may never be mended.

"The Social and cultural matrix within which Latin America's political leaders operate at present is such that effective and representative popular democracy is, with few exceptions, not a feasible alternative. The only really responsible questions that a democratically minded observer can ask of a politician in Latin America today is whether his conduct is conducive toward increasing the prospect of popular and representative democracy."

*Frank Tannenbaum
Ten Keys to Latin America*

The idealistically vague and incomplete Christian Democratic program, which may have appealed to the voters in the past, has not reached full fruition. While improving the lot of the poor, it has antagonized the moderates. Because the goals for the most part are unattainable, the CDs have been limited largely to negative activity and in many cases have been forced into simply responding to initiatives from other political parties. The Salvadoran party, for example, has been outmaneuvered by the government many times because it has not established a basic set of principles to guide it within certain ideological parameters. Its solution to each specific every-day problem, therefore, has been to write a "paper" after the opposition has taken the initiative.

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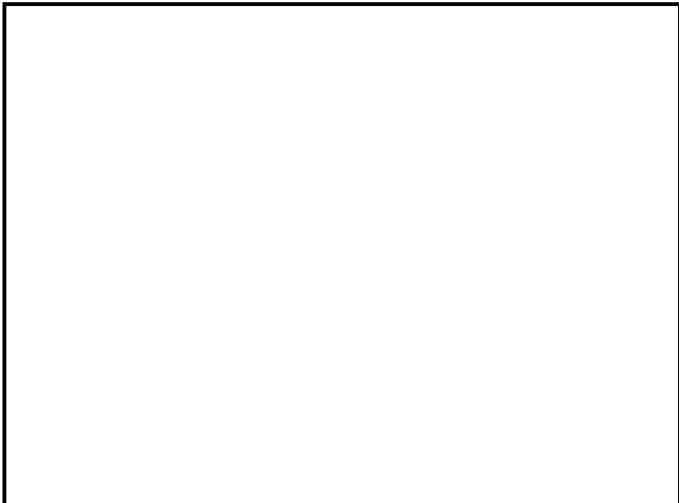
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IDEOLOGY

j In addition to the complications mentioned above, the basic ideological tenets of Christian Democracy have never been widely accepted by the majority of Latin Americans. Latins traditionally are nonideological in nature and usually elect officials on the basis of personality. Even where Christian Democratic ideology agrees with popular sentiment—anti-Americanism, opposition to the oligarchy or to foreign capitalism—Christian Democrats may be submerged by the popular appeal of a personalistic candidate such as the present politically attractive Jorge Alessandri in Chile.

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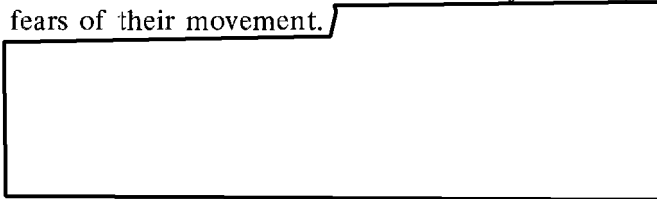
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PERSONALISMO AND MILITARISM

The continued dominance of personalism and militarism in Latin American politics is another factor inhibiting the growth of Christian Democracy. As mentioned before, these forces are more typical of Latin American heritage than is the ideologically based Christian Democratic movement. The increase in the number of military governments in recent years has curtailed the amount of political party activity in the area, and the small, developing Christian Democratic entities in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia have not really had an opportunity to attract followers.

Military unrest in Chile, moreover, simply reinforces the Latin American military's inherent suspicion of the motives and aims of Christian Democracy. For their own part, the CDs have never made much of an effort to allay military fears of their movement.

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NATIONALISM

Latin America's rampant nationalism is also affecting Christian Democracy. As long-time advocates of continental unity, the Christian Democrats have been forced to adopt the nationalistic tendencies now prevalent in Latin society. As a result, the exchange of information and ideas, as well as cooperation between national CD parties, has been severely limited. The mystique of the international aspects of Christian Democracy has been shattered and the idea of the ideology's sweeping the continent is no longer realistic.

Nationalism has also resulted in a loss of prestige and influence for the international arms of the movement, such as the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CLASC) and the Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA).

So far, CLASC has been a failure as an organized force except among the campesinos. Its only impact and sole purpose have been as an instrument of political action attempting to appeal to the working classes. In this role it has earned a reputation for independent action and irresponsibility that has reflected negatively on the whole Christian Democratic movement.

ODCA, the regional organization formed in 1949, has not evolved beyond a sort of fraternity held together more by negative factors such as hostility to US capitalism and the oligarchies than by any basic agreement among its members on doctrine or principles. Moreover, the individual national parties have made it very clear that they will fight any effort—whether initiated by ODCA or by European financial backers of the CD movement—to impose standards and controls that will impinge on their freedom of action. Opposition to ODCA has also been voiced by several national governments. The most recent example is the

Guatemalan Government's decision to prohibit the holding of a congress by ODCA in Guatemala City on the grounds that it would constitute interference by an international political force in internal Guatemalan affairs.

INTERNAL PARTY DISSENSION

Accompanying the shattering of at least the facade of continental unity has been the growth of internal dissension in the various national CD parties. The split in the Chilean party is a good example of this phenomenon. Only six months after Frei took office, the party's left wing led by Alberto Jerez and Jesus Silva Solar nearly gained control of the party in an open challenge to the President. In 1969, this small but active faction left the party to form the United Popular Action Movement (MAPU) and moved quickly into full rapport with the Communists and even the more extreme Socialists. The loss of some of the MAPU troublemakers was in some ways a blessing to the party, but it also took away some of the party's more energetic individuals.

In all the Latin American parties the youth wings have shown a propensity for radicalization. In several countries, in fact, the positions assumed by the CD youth groups are almost indistinguishable from those of Communist youth elements. This phenomenon has in some cases contributed to military distrust of the CD's even before a party evolves. The great concern of responsible party leaders is that as these students progress from campus to parent party, they will swell the ranks of the radical wings and push the parties further left. Other observers, however, expect the "hotheads" to mellow once they participate directly in party life and have to cope with hard political reality. Both views can be defended. Some mellowing is inevitable, but in the past ten years the demand for revolutionary change has mushroomed among youth.

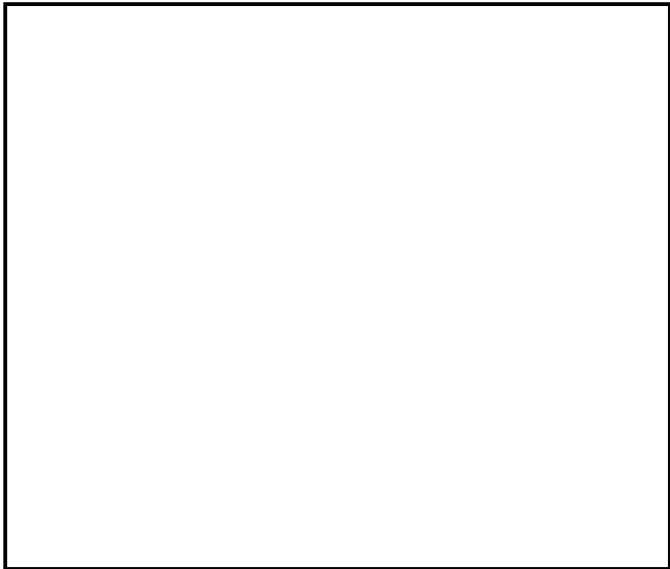
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that, as in other typical Latin American political parties, the various national parties' success will be entirely dependent on factors such as the charisma of the leader, the party's organizational talents, and its approach to local issues. International events and ideology will continue to count for little.



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OUTLOOK

Christian Democracy, in one form or another, is likely to be a permanent political fixture in Latin America. The first flush of enthusiasm following the Frei victory in Chile in 1964 has been lost, however, and even the Caldera victory this year has not restored it. Although Christian Democrats might continue to win legislative or municipal elections in several countries, it appears

"Christian Democracy seems to be failing in Latin America. It appealed to many because it offered something more satisfying than material progress.... Yet, this mirage seems to be little more than a glimmer on arid sands....The brute struggle for political power, which is a basic fact of life everywhere and especially in Latin America, has destroyed the dream of Christian brotherhood."

*Commentary
Hispanic American Report*

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