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Surviving against all odds: Pachakutik's electoral support, mobilization strategies, and goal achievement between 1996 and 2019

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1 Introduction

In October 2019, the Ecuadorian indigenous population took to the streets and paralyzed the country for almost ten days. This event resembled the well-known June of 1990 *levantamiento* (uprising) that, at the time, was the first display of the indigenous movement's strength and unity. The indigenous population's ability to coordinate these national *levantamientos* back in the 1990s and early 2000s pushed the state to backtrack austerity measures and even contributed to the ousting of two presidents. The 2019 *levantamiento* had an outcome similar to the previous *levantamientos*. After the confrontation, mostly localized in Quito, the government backtracked the austerity measures that had started the indigenous mobilization.



Figure 1.1 Mural: Somos granos de la misma mazorca by David Sur. Painted in a house of the comuna Tocachi. Photo by the artist.¹

As the indigenous population and their supporters returned to their houses, having partially achieved what they aimed to achieve, two crucial questions popped up: was this a signal of the

¹ David Sur allowed me to use this picture of his art free of cost. I can only repay his generosity thanking him once again.

indigenous movement's return to the political arena as a strong actor? And, what did this mean for the indigenous party Pachakutik²?

The 2019 *levantamiento* was a breath of fresh air for the otherwise dormant (often described as in crisis) indigenous movement. In the midst of the social unrest, an artist from Quito, David Sur, painted the mural “*Somos granos de la misma mazorca*” in the *comuna Tocachi* in response to the high levels of police brutality experienced by the indigenous population. He explained to me that it represented the unity of the indigenous population. They stood their ground together. The mural is also an allegory to the well-known words of the indigenous leader, Transito Amaguaña: “*Somos como la mazorca, si se va el grano, se va la fila, si se va la fila, se acaba la mazorca*” which translates roughly into “we are like the corncob, if one kernel is gone, the whole line is gone, if the line is gone, the corn cob is gone.” Transito Amaguaña's words referred to the necessary unity amongst the indigenous population and how their strength depended on this unity.³ One of the indigenous leaders at the October 2019 *levantamiento*, Leonida Iza, also used these words. He reminded all of the indigenous movement's groups that they should not become loose kernels but stay in the corn cob (“*no podemos desgranarnos*”).⁴

The indigenous movement's strength has informed many of the arguments developed around the indigenous party Pachakutik, particularly those regarding the party's strength. The party was created in 1996 and entered the electoral arena as a *viable indigenous party*. To stick to the corncob metaphor, this was a party seen as the likely beneficiary of unity of the corn kernels. The party leaders stressed that it would concentrate the indigenous voters' support (Madrid, 2005; Van Cott & Birnir, 2007).

Pachakutik received enough electoral support to be granted international recognition during its first years. The party members were elected at national and subnational elections, and in 2002, the candidate the party supported was elected president. The party members' presence in the political arena was suggested to positively affect Ecuador's overall democracy (Van Cott, 2005, 2008). However, after 2006, Pachakutik's electoral support at the national level declined dramatically. The party went from receiving an average of 18.64% of the national vote in three elections (1996, 1998, and 2002) to an average of 4.06% of the national

² The full name of the party is: *Movimiento Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik* (MUPP or Pachakutik)

³ As this dissertation was going into print, Guadalupe Llori, Pachakutik's legislator, was elected president of the Asamblea Nacional. On the day of Guillermo Lasso's inauguration (May 24, 2021), Llori's speech started with Transito Amaguaña's words.

⁴ Leonidas Iza spoke to a group in Quito on October 15, 2019. Radio Latacunga posted a video of this on its Facebook page accessible here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=535273760349681>

vote between 2006 and 2017. This electoral support decline – also visible at the legislative elections – was taken as the first sign of Pachakutik’s impending breakdown (Beck, Mijeski, & Stark, 2011; Madrid, 2012).⁵

Between 2006 and 2019, the indigenous movement’s presence in the political arena also dwindled. Rafael Correa’s administrations (from 2006 to 2017) actively sought to hinder any actions from social movements, including the indigenous organizations. The government’s efforts were effective. In fact, until 2019, there was an absence of successful social organization and public demonstrations, especially from the indigenous population (de la Torre, 2013a, p. 29). As Carlos de la Torre (2013) argues, the indigenous movement was in crisis, “temporarily losing its capacity to engage in sustained collective action” (p. 28). Bringing back the metaphor of the corncob and the kernels, it was only in 2019 that it made sense to think of the indigenous population as unified (part of the corncob) rather than as a fragmented set of independent groups (a loose set of corn kernels). It had been years since the indigenous population had shown its organizational skills and capability to hold a whole country at a standstill.⁶

The party’s declining electoral support and the weak indigenous organization seemed to foretell the party’s end. Notwithstanding these omens of party breakdown, by 2019, when the *levantamiento* took place, Pachakutik was a party with an active presence in the Ecuadorian political arena. Despite receiving less than 4% of the national vote in every election since 2002, the party consistently won seats at the legislature and the governments of provinces, cantons, and rural parishes on every election.⁷ In 2019, the party held five seats at the legislature (out of 137 seats). Moreover, it was the third party with the most elected candidates at the subnational elections, with over 663 party members elected as prefects, mayors, municipal council members, and parish council members.⁸

1.1 Pachakutik’s unlikely survival

Pachakutik is a 24-year-old party with a clear and active presence in the Ecuadorian political arena. However, the party’s persistence has gone undiscussed. More attention has been given

⁵ As I finished writing this dissertation in April 2021 Pachakutik’s electoral performance changed. The party’s presidential candidate, Yaku Perez, received 19.39% of the national vote finishing third in a very close race to the second round, and in total 27 of the party’s candidates received at seat at the National Assembly.

⁶ While the indigenous movement organized a number of demonstrations between 2000 and 2019 the most consequential of these, before 2019, was the January 2000 *levantamiento* which contributed to the ousting of president Jamil Mahuad.

⁷ Ecuador is divided administratively into 24 provinces, 221 cantons, and 1040 urban and rural parishes.

⁸ See chapter 3, table 3.7 for a detailed overview of the number of party members elected at the subnational elections.

to the sharp decline of the party's electoral support in 2006 – explained by mestizo voters and mestizo party members abandoning the party (Madrid, 2012; Mijeski & Beck, 2011) – than to the consistency of the party's electoral outcomes at subnational elections or the slight increase in electoral support for the party's candidates at the national elections. The unspoken explanation for the party's electoral results has been the same used to explain the party's formation; Pachakutik stood on the strong indigenous movement's shoulders and thus should garner their electoral support.

However, as mentioned already, the indigenous movement was not effectively strong for much of the time Pachakutik has persisted. This opens up the question: what explains Pachakutik's persistence?

Extant knowledge about the party offers minimal clues about possible explanations for the party's longevity. As mentioned already, the party receives scarce electoral support. Moreover, the indigenous social movement, which could be taken as the purveyor of resources for the party organization, has been weakened for a long time. Additionally, the Ecuadorian political arena does not appear to have a particularly welcoming institutional set-up for weak parties to persist. Between 2006 and 2019, numerous political parties disbanded, including parties created before Pachakutik, such as the *Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano* (PRE), which lost its official registration in mid-2014.

Pachakutik is a party that persists despite having scarce resources and receiving low levels of electoral support. Conventional theories of party survival are at odds when tasked with explaining this type of party's persistence. The common wisdom would expect parties with low levels of electoral support to disband as their electoral failures become consistent (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Harmel & Robertson, 1985; Kitschelt, 1988; Levitsky, Loxton, & van Dyck, 2016; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Morgan, 2011, 2018; Obert & Müller, 2017; Seawright, 2012; Tavits, 2008; Zur, 2019). Setting aside electoral support, Pachakutik's lack of resources (given the weakness of the indigenous movement) goes against the expectations of theories that explain party survival as likely when parties have access to different types of resources (Beyens, Lucardie, & Deschouwer, 2016; Bolleyer, 2013; Bolleyer & Bytzeck, 2013; Burgess & Levitsky, 2003; Casal Bértoa & Spirova, 2019; Cyr, 2017; Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2018; Dolenc & Širinić, 2017; Grzymala-Busse, 2002; Kopecký & Mair, 2012; Rose & Mackie, 1988; Tavits, 2013).

The lack of a theory on party survival to understand Pachakutik's persistence suggests this party is unique. However, this is not the case. Pachakutik is, in fact, an example of a myriad of parties that inhabit party systems across the world. These are parties that persist with low

levels or fluctuating levels of electoral support and scarce resources. To name only a few cases in Latin America, Peru's *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA), Venezuela's *Primero Justicia* (PJ), Ecuador's *Izquierda Democrática* (ID) are all parties that persist with fluctuating levels of electoral support and scarce resources.

This type of parties (parties that persist with low or fluctuating levels of electoral support and with scarce resources) should garner more attention than the one they are currently receiving. These parties fulfill functions within the democratic arena (Cyr, 2017; Sartori, 1976). These are parties that can affect both elections and policy-making. As Bolleyer and colleagues (2019) state, “only new parties that contest more than a few elections can broaden the offer of the party system and may have a direct or indirect impact on policy-making, by entering government or by triggering shifts in the offer of mainstream parties” (p. 20). Moreover, these parties may offer important insight into organizational stability and longevity. Understanding their persistence's determinants is crucial for understanding their effects (and importance) on political systems.

In this dissertation, I introduce a theory that addresses why parties may choose to survive, change, or disband. I argue that parties can survive (or survive while adapting) when they achieve their primary goals and that these goals differ from party to party (Harmel & Janda, 1994). I approach political parties from a sociological perspective that emphasizes that parties are not only tools for ambitious politicians. Parties are complex and multidimensional organizations driven by group goals that participate in electoral processes and fulfill different functions within a democracy (Bawn et al., 2012, p. 571; Bolleyer et al., 2019, p. 20; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967, p. 5; Monroe, 2001, p. 21; Mudge & Chen, 2014, p. 310). I define persistent parties as those that 1) fulfill at least one of the different functions that parties execute in democracy and 2) present candidates to national and/or local elections after breakthrough. A party will be considered dead if it stops presenting candidates at any election (Bolleyer et al., 2019).

This thesis' argument does not differ much from the standard arguments about party survival, wherein parties are expected to disband as they stop achieving their (electoral) goals (e.g., Spirova, 2007). The difference is that instead of putting vote-maximization as the core (and only) goal parties pursue, I argue that parties can pursue different goals (see similar arguments in: Bolleyer et al., 2019; Deschouwer, 2009; Kitschelt, 1989), and that they will persist as long as they continue to achieve this primary goal. Parties may be policy-seeking, office-seeking, and parties may also seek to ensure their organizations' continuity (i.e., hold a

value-infusion goal).⁹ Each of these goals may be achieved by different means. Thus, party persistence will not be determined solely by electoral outcomes or the resources parties can access. This dissertation's proposed theory is useful for explaining the persistence of parties that survive with low or fluctuating levels of electoral support and scarce resources.

I use the case of Pachakutik to illustrate this theory of party survival. This party is the perfect example of a party that persists with few resources and low levels of electoral support. This is, however, not immediately evident. The party is commonly regarded as relying heavily on the indigenous organization for its resources (linked to its roots). Therefore, in this dissertation, in addition to developing the theory of party survival, I take the necessary steps to demonstrate the party is indeed one with few resources and low levels of electoral support.

1.2 The organization of the book

Chapter 2 introduces the theory of party survival discussed in this introduction. I first take stock of extant theories of party survival and argue that they are missing a crucial consideration: parties will need to choose to persist or disband. It is hence necessary to think through the decision-making process of political parties. I argue parties will decide to persist if they achieve their primary goal or if they are likely to achieve their primary goal, even if, at the moment of deciding, they have not achieved their primary goal. Achievement is conceptualized in terms of a party surpassing or reaching its aspiration level. Instead of expecting parties to be maximizers, I argue parties will be satisfiers aiming only to get a minimum acceptable level in terms of their goals. This chapter also introduces a method to identify a party's primary goal and a goal achievement evaluation method, necessary to understand parties' survival decision-making processes.

Chapter 3 introduces Pachakutik as a party that has persisted for over 24 years with scarce resources and low levels of electoral support. This chapter reviews the party's electoral performance at national and subnational levels and examines the party's organization's strength and resources. Furthermore, this chapter discusses Ecuador's political history, the evolution of party regulation in Ecuador and the party system to clarify Pachakutik's context between 1996 and 2020.

Chapter 4 addresses the most likely explanation for Pachakutik's persistence: its connection to the indigenous population. I explore this connection by focusing on the voting

⁹ I introduce this party primary goal in more detail in chapter 2. This goal relates to the party members' interest of ensuring the persistence of an organization *per se* and not only as a tool to pursue their own goals. This is done by infusing the organization with value and routinizing decision-making procedures.

patterns of the indigenous voters. The expectation was that if the party had a strong relationship with these voters, i.e., the indigenous voters supported the party as a block, then the party's survival could be explained as dependent on these voters' commitment to the party organization. Using the ecological inference technique to explore the indigenous voters' voting patterns, I find that less than 25% of the indigenous voters vote for Pachakutik's candidates at national and subnational elections. Pachakutik is not the recipient of Ecuador's ethnic vote, understood as the indigenous voters voting together.

Interestingly, the ecological inference estimations suggest no ethnic voting in Ecuador, as the indigenous voters appear to split their votes amongst multiple parties. I thus advance a possible explanation for the indigenous voters splitting their votes and argue this is due to the fragmentation of the *indígena* identity into *pueblos*¹⁰ and nationalities. In short, I argue the indigenous population should not be taken as a single and unified group but as a loose set of independent groups.

Chapter 5 addresses one puzzling fact about Pachakutik's electoral performances: the party's stable support at the subnational elections, which seems to come from indigenous and mestizo voters alike. This chapter aims to answer the research question: how does Pachakutik mobilize indigenous and mestizo voters? I explore Pachakutik's mobilization strategies at the mayor's elections of 2014. I look into the working plans presented by the candidates and analyze them using qualitative content analysis. This analysis shows the party uses multiple mobilization strategies (programmatic, clientelistic, and symbolic ethnic-based, symbolic party-based, and symbolic candidate-based) to mobilize voters. I find Pachakutik's candidates employ different strategies, often together (mixed), in each district. Notably, the party does not always use symbolic ethnic-based appeals. In a little under 48% of the districts, the party's candidates do not use any form of symbolic ethnic appeals. I find Pachakutik's candidates' campaigns do not focus solely on indigenous voters. Instead, the party appears to concentrate as well on mestizo voters. This attention is arguably well received as the party's electoral support analysis shows mestizo voters consistently support the party's candidates.

Chapter 3, 4, and 5 set the scene to present Pachakutik as a party with low levels of electoral support and with scarce resources. Building on this, chapter 6 explores the party's survival from a goal achievement perspective. The party's persistence evaluation focuses on

¹⁰ Mark Becker (2011) asserts that a nationality comprises a group of people who share common customs, cosmology, and way of life and a *pueblo* refers to a population with an "ancestral relationship dating to the period of colonization or formation of the state that conserves their own institutions, customs, traditions, and territories" (2011, p. 5). Some authors have chosen to translate "pueblo" into "peoples", however because of the particular definition of pueblo, it is best not to translate it

the period between 1996 and 2017 and uses the party goal identification and goal achievement evaluation methods introduced in chapter 2. I argue the party has pursued different primary goals throughout the years. The party was a policy-seeking party between 1996 and 2002, turned into an office-seeking party between 2002 and 2006, and eventually transformed into a value-infusion-seeking party from 2006 until the present days. The party has achieved its primary goals during many of the periods of analysis, which contributes to the party's survival. The party surpassed its aspiration level during the 1998-2002 period (compared to its performance in the 1996 -1998 period), did the same during the 2009-2013 period (compared to the 2006-2009 period), and surpassed its aspiration level during the 2013-2017 period (compared to its performance during the 2009-2013 period).

Chapter 7 brings all elements from the other chapters together to discuss Pachakutik's survival as an illustration of the party survival theory introduced in chapter 2. I explore alternative explanations for the party's survival, such as the influence of ambitious politicians, the context in which the party persists, i.e., party regulation and the state's control over political parties, and the possible effect of other parties' disbandment. I argue these explanations are not enough to make sense of Pachakutik's persistence. Lastly, I discuss the importance of understanding the survival of parties like Pachakutik and possible avenues for further research.

1.3 The relevance of the research

Although it is unorthodox to present the research's relevance after presenting the book's structure, this is necessary because of each chapters' multiple topics. This dissertation speaks to numerous research agendas.

First, this dissertation advances the overall research agenda on Ecuadorian politics and specifically research on Pachakutik. Research on Pachakutik stalled during the early 2000s (mostly after 2006) and has since then dwindled (Van Cott, 2005, 2008). This dissertation engages in a detailed analysis of Pachakutik's evolution, from its formation until current times focusing on the party's electoral performances at the national and subnational elections and its organizational resources' development. I make three important arguments: 1) Pachakutik's persistence cannot be linked solely to the support the party receives from the indigenous voters; 2) Pachakutik is an ethnic party that mixes and segments strategies across and within districts which likely contribute to the party's mestizo electoral support; and 3) Pachakutik is no longer a policy-oriented party.

Second, this dissertation also speaks to the scholarship on ethnic politics in Latin America and beyond. It highlights the need to take seriously the malleability of ethnic identities and the fact that it might be a mistake to look for an “ethnic pull” between a party and an ethnic group without first questioning the ethnic identity linking them. For research in Latin America, this means that research on the voting patterns of indigenous voters (ethnic voting) and how these voters interact with indigenous parties should be prefaced with a question addressing whether the ethnic identities connecting the party’s and the voters make sense (see, for example, Hirsland & Strijbis, 2019).

Third, this dissertation also contributes to the study of political parties’ mobilization strategies. This research agenda is slowly moving towards an understanding of parties employing multiple strategies at a time to mobilize voters (Calvo & Murillo, 2019; Halvorsen, 2019; Luna, 2014; Thachil, 2014a), against the common-place idea that parties will use a single strategy to mobilize voters (Kitschelt, 2000). The theoretical framework developed in chapter 5, and especially the conceptualization of how parties may use multiple strategies, contributes to expanding the tool-kit researchers have to understand this phenomenon.

Lastly, this dissertation focuses on the underdogs of parties, which are seldom at the center of any research agenda. These are parties often considered irrelevant, that rarely reach standard electoral support thresholds, or do not hold a specific number of seats at the legislature. However, these parties populate multiple party systems and are likely to affect those party systems and policy-making processes (Bolleyer et al., 2019). As these parties persist against all odds, studying their survival strategies can enrich our understanding of all parties’ organizational survival and their impact on party systems and elections.

