

Simposio Internacional Innovación Institucional en las Repúblicas del Bicentenario.  
La democracia latinoamericana a dos siglos del Congreso de Panamá

Coalitional Presidentialism in Latin America: what to learn from it?

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Paper for presentation at the “Simposio Internacional Innovación Institucional en las Repúblicas del Bicentenario. La democracia latinoamericana a dos siglos del Congreso de Panamá”, on March 10-11 in Panama City.

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## 1. Introduction

The view that crises are recurrent outcomes of presidential regimes has long shaped both scholarly literature and public debate. At a moment when U.S. presidentialism, the foundational reference point of this institutional arrangement, displays clear signs of tension and instability, this perception may appear even more compelling. It therefore becomes particularly important to reexamine, from a comparative perspective, how systems based on the separation of powers have evolved over more than two centuries.

Situating this discussion in the context of the bicentennial of the Congress of Panama (1826) provides a privileged analytical vantage point. More than a historical episode, the Congress can be interpreted as an early instance of how political elites have confronted problems of institutional design under conditions of high uncertainty and strong incentives to invest in institutional engineering. This period has marked the beginning of a longer trajectory of institutional experimentation that would accompany the consolidation of presidential republics in Latin America, one in which formal rules, political practices, and strategic adaptations evolved jointly over time.

The first generation of the presidentialism debate linked Latin American crises to the structural limitations of presidential systems. The present article departs from that perspective and aligns instead with scholarship that examines political crises in Latin America as contexts that can also generate endogenous institutional innovation. These innovations operate through at least two evolving rationales. The first is anticipatory: political actors adjust institutional arrangements and distributions of authority based on strategic expectations about future conflicts, seeking to reduce the costs of deadlock and the risks of institutional breakdown. The second is institutional learning, through which past experiences of instability inform incremental reforms and adaptations.

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A key outcome of this evolution has been the emergence of coalitional presidentialism, a governance arrangement in which presidents, lacking stable single-party majorities, construct and manage multiparty coalitions to govern effectively within a separation-of-powers framework. It is an adaptive response to two structural trends common across the region: the expansion and regulation of presidential powers, and the growing fragmentation of party systems.

An understanding of how these forces interact is critical for reform debates. Institutional change rarely occurs through sweeping constitutional redesign. More often, it unfolds through targeted recalibrations: adjustments in electoral rules, delegation mechanisms, cabinet formation practices, budgetary institutions, and oversight tools. These reforms reshape incentives and alter the balance of authority without dismantling core constitutional structures.

I argue that the most consequential way to understand these innovations is to recognize their incremental dynamics. This approach connects moments of formal institutional redesign to the political practices that emerge from the routine operation of rules and procedures that structure executive-legislative relations, electoral competition, and coalitional governance. It allows us to examine how institutional equilibria are continuously recalibrated in response to shifting incentives and opportunity structures faced by political actors. These conditions have generated varied democratic and governing equilibria across countries, some relatively stable and effective, others markedly less desirable or even dysfunctional.

Any discussion of the distinctiveness of presidentialism in Latin America must begin by recognizing that this distinctiveness does not take the form of a single, homogeneous institutional model. Rather, it is characterized by substantial regional heterogeneity, in which different combinations of formal rules and political practices shape the strategic environment within which political actors operate.

This chapter is organized into six sections. The first sets out the conceptual framework and situates coalitional presidentialism as a governance arrangement that has emerged through incremental changes at different levels of the system of government. The second examines the structural drivers of this arrangement, emphasizing the historical transformation of the institutional foundations of

executive authority and the expansion of political fragmentation in the region. The third turns to the coordination dilemmas (interbranch, interparty, and intragovernmental) and analyzes how governing coalitions seek to manage them. Three final sections examine the ongoing transformations of coalitional presidentialism and explore how these developments may signal emerging patterns of power-sharing within a separation-of-powers architecture.

## 2. Coalitional Presidentialism: What Does This Governance Arrangement include?

The institutional practice under examination is coalitional presidentialism, understood not merely as cabinet multipartism but as a governance arrangement resulting from strategic interactions between presidents and political actors, including political parties, intraparty factions, and subnational leaders, aimed at expanding the president's political support base across both electoral and governing arenas within a formal system of separated powers.

Coalitional governments are neither exclusive to presidential systems nor unique to Latin America (Cheibub et al., 2004). Their global proliferation across diverse political regimes has been closely associated with rising political fragmentation and a declining likelihood that elections produce clear legislative majorities (Chaisty et al., 2018). These same dynamics have shaped contemporary politics in Latin American presidential systems.

However, it is important to assess whether coalitional presidentialism has fostered new governance practices that enhance interbranch relations and decision-making processes. If so, which institutional features of this arrangement contribute to these outcomes?

Presidentialism stands apart in how it structures coalitional politics compared with parliamentary systems. The combination of separate elections and fixed terms generates distinct incentives for presidents and legislative parties to form alliances, including at the pre-electoral stage, with the aim of governing jointly. In the absence of formal mechanisms of investiture and confidence, the president becomes the natural formateur of the government, a feature that fundamentally alters the conditions of coalition formation. While this structural trait is not unique to Latin American presidentialism, it generates distinctive dynamics when combined with two broader trends that have

shaped government formation in the region: the expansion of presidential powers and the fragmentation of party systems (Cheibub et al., 2010; Ginsburg et al., 2010; Negretto, 2013).

The concentration of lawmaking, appointment, and administrative powers in the executive branch reflects long-standing processes of state-building, modernization, and alternating phases of liberalization and authoritarian retrenchment, which have left enduring imprints on presidential institutions. Although this institutional architecture dates back to the establishment of presidential republics in the nineteenth century, it has been further reinforced during the most recent wave of democratization beginning in the late 1970s. The growing fragmentation of party systems, linked in several countries to the adoption or strengthening of proportional representation rules in recent decades, has increased the prevalence of party-minority presidents.

Under this configuration, government formation and management are shaped by the interaction of presidents who are institutionally strong but weakly partisan, a combination often associated with the recurrent formation of coalitional governments. The implementation of this model varies both cross-country and within-country, emphasizing its contingent and politically constructed nature. Across the region, three broad clusters can be distinguished according to the frequency with which this governance arrangement has been adopted since the onset of the third wave of democratization.

In the first cluster, comprising Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Panama, coalitional governments have been the predominant strategy for cabinet formation, becoming a recurrent feature of presidential governance (Amorim Neto, 2006; Camerlo & Martínez-Gallardo, 2018; Dávila et al., 2013; Mejía Guinand & Botero, 2018). The second cluster includes Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, where presidents have alternated between single-party and multiparty cabinets, reflecting greater variability across administrations (Acosta, 2009; Chaisty et al., 2018; Chasquetti, 2001). Finally, in the third cluster, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua, single-party governments have generally prevailed, and coalition formation has been comparatively rare (A. Figueiredo et al., 2012; Martínez-Gallardo, 2014).

The arrangement also varies considerably with respect to the minority-majority status of coalitional governments. Presidents have more frequently achieved majority status through multiparty alliances

in Brazil and Chile, often relying on oversized coalitions, as well as in Colombia, Panama, and Uruguay. In other countries, such as Peru, coalitional governments have more recently operated under minority conditions (Chasqueti & Buquet, 2018; Inácio, 2018; Meireles, 2016; Mejía Guinand & Botero, 2018). In Ecuador, this pattern has been more entrenched, with minority governments, whether coalition-based or single-party, being more common over time (Basabe-Serrano et al., 2018).

The performance and outcomes of coalitional presidentialism vary considerably across contexts. A central task of comparative analysis, therefore, is to identify which institutional features enhance interparty and interbranch cooperation; which features promote stable patterns of decision-making; and which features, by contrast, generate coordination failures or become targets of reform in contemporary presidential democracies.

Addressing this agenda requires moving beyond aggregate patterns to examine the mechanisms through which coalitional governance is constructed and sustained. Figure 1 conceptualizes coalitional presidentialism as a multilevel coordination arrangement. Therefore, coalitional presidentialism emerges from the strategic interactions among electoral dynamics, executive-legislative relations, interparty competition, and intragovernmental management. Arrows indicate feedback loops, showing that changes in one arena can affect others. The model emphasizes the contingent and context-specific nature of coalitional governance, which depends on both institutional structures and strategic choices by political actors.

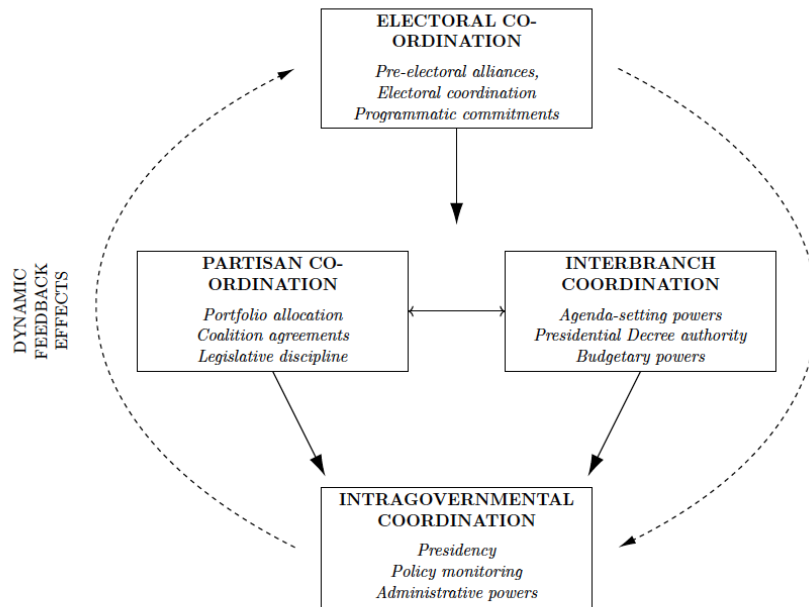


Figure 1: Multi-Level Coordination Model of Coalitional Presidentialism.

By foregrounding these interconnected arenas, the figure underscores the central claim of the present article: coalitional presidentialism is not a fixed institutional formula but, rather, a contingent configuration shaped by how political actors activate and combine coordination strategies within specific institutional and partisan environments. Coalitional presidentialism is, therefore, embedded not only in cabinet composition but in the broader architecture of executive–legislative relations and in the instruments through which presidents secure and maintain governing majorities.

### 3. A challenging approach of coalitional presidentialism

The literature on comparative presidentialism developed in critical dialogue with approaches that regarded this institutional design as the primary source of government failures and regime instability. Engaging with the seminal work of Juan Linz (1990), comparative scholarship on presidentialism has moved the focus from the system’s “inherent” risks to the incentives arising from the interplay between institutional rules and electoral and party systems. Within this framework, governing coalitions are seen as pragmatic responses to multipartism and divided government. They allow

political leaders to anticipate coordination problems and sustain executive–legislative cooperation under fragmented conditions.

### *Electoral foundations of coalitional presidentialism*

Over the past four decades, electoral reforms across Latin America have increased party-system fragmentation and strengthened multiparty competition. These changes have significantly reshaped the incentives structuring presidential politics.

The transition from plurality-based electoral systems to proportional representation occurred during the twentieth century along distinct national trajectories (Negretto & Visconti, 2018; Wills-Otero, 2009). In many cases, this transformation unfolded under noncompetitive regimes, intra-elite fractures and calculated efforts to reshape electoral incentives and curb emerging political risks. At the presidential level, even under semi-competitive conditions observed in several countries between the 1940s and 1960s, chief executives maintained firm control over party machines and exercised extensive partisan powers (Ginsburg et al., 2010; Negretto, 2013). In this context, distributive expectations surrounding electoral alliances remained relatively contained, as access to executive office and legislative majorities was largely centralized.

This picture shifted with the third wave of democratization beginning in the late 1970s. Constitutional and electoral reforms unfolded amid changes or erosion of previously consolidated party systems, rising electoral volatility, and an increase in both the number and electoral weight of new parties, particularly from the 1990s onward. At the presidential level, the emergence and success of outsider candidates marked critical turning points in government formation, especially in contexts characterized by weak party institutionalization and vulnerability to external shocks such as economic crises and corruption scandals, as illustrated by Fujimori in Peru (Carreras, 2017). These transformations were accompanied by increased transfers of votes to new parties (Mainwaring & Su, 2021), raising the costs of electoral coordination.

Longitudinal studies show that the growing prevalence of coalitional governments have occurred alongside increasing party fragmentation and a higher probability of minority-party presidents

(Amorim Neto, 2006; Chaisty et al., 2018; Pérez-Liñán et al., 2023). Parties increasingly confronted uncertainty about their electoral prospects and their relative leverage within prospective governing alliances.

Despite substantial cross-national variation, these developments illustrate how political elites have adjusted their strategies within evolving electoral and party systems, actively reshaping the practical conditions for forming and sustaining coalitional governments under presidentialism. Many of these strategic adjustments have been driven by reforms and endogenous changes within electoral and party institutions.

An important step in this direction was the adoption of runoff systems, with varying thresholds, which quickly spread across Latin America. By introducing the possibility of a second-round election, these systems increase electoral uncertainty, prompting parties to form alliances, negotiate support, and strategically coordinate at both the legislative and presidential levels (Buquet, 2007; McClintock, 2018; Sánchez, 2013). Although a set of countries – Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela – continue to rely on single-round plurality rules, the broader regional trend has been toward arrangements that directly impact parties’ calculations in presidential contests.

One strategic response adopted by political elites to rising electoral uncertainty has been the pursuit of reforms to relax presidential term limits, an initiative that proved highly contested across the region. Supporters argue that reelection extends governing horizons and lets voters retain approved leaders. Critics warn that it entrenches incumbents and weakens electoral competition. According to Acuña (2025), of 39 constitutional reforms between 1977 and 2025, 67 percent sought to allow presidential reelection (consecutive, nonconsecutive, or indefinite) reflecting its appeal as a mechanism to extend governments’ temporal horizons and raise entry costs in presidential contests<sup>2</sup>. Reversals have also occurred, as in Colombia, which adopted limited presidential reelection in 2005 and banned it ten years later.

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<sup>2</sup> Reforms enabling indefinite presidential reelection have emerged in contexts characterized by executive-driven constitutional change. In such cases, incumbents have reshaped term-limit rules as part of broader strategies to entrench their position and reduce the competitiveness of presidential contests. In several countries, these reforms have been closely associated with processes of democratic erosion and authoritarian backsliding, underscoring that the institutional effects of reelection rules depend critically on the surrounding balance of power and the degree of executive constraint.

Of more than 150 presidential elections from 1978 to 2017, just over 80 allowed a second round (Zovatto, 2017). A runoff was held in 46 cases, and in 34 of these (75%) the first-round leader ultimately won, suggesting that this mechanism has primarily functioned to give frontrunners additional time to broaden their support.

Reelection increases the strategic interdependence between electoral and governing coalitions, as parties must weigh immediate office payoffs against longer-term access to executive resources. In parallel with the spread of runoff systems, reelection reforms may have reshaped parties' strategic calculations, lengthening their temporal horizons and heightening their expectations regarding the distributive effects of coalition formation. Where reelection is allowed, incumbents play a pivotal role in sustaining coalitions, shaping cabinet distribution, coordinating legislative action, and guiding pre-electoral alliance strategies across at least two electoral cycles.

The runoff electoral system and the introduction of presidential reelection in 1997 in Brazil contributed to presidential competition that is increasingly structured around two major partisan and ideological poles, as well as longer life cycles for governing coalitions. Incumbents were generally able to carry their governing coalitions into reelection campaigns, by negotiating support for legislative and subnational candidates from cabinet parties and limiting possible challengers. All Brazilian presidents elected since 1994 have been reelected, except for Michel Temer (2016–2018), who did not run, and Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), who only belatedly assembled a multiparty cabinet.

A bipolar dynamic is also observed in Chile, albeit under different institutional conditions. Between 1990 and 2010, presidential elections took place under a runoff system with no consecutive reelection, alongside a binominal legislative electoral system and a party system fragmented but organized into two main ideological blocs. Coalition formation relied heavily on complex pre-electoral negotiations, which became increasingly costly as they were revisited with each successive presidential election. These costs may be further exacerbated by recent institutional reforms, including the adoption of four-year presidential terms, concurrent presidential and legislative

elections from 2005 onward, changes of proportional representation rules, the expansion of public campaign financing, and the resulting increase in party fragmentation.

These effects extend beyond the presidential race, as presidential competition itself plays a coordinating role in interparty dynamics, influencing strategic entry and electoral viability in both presidential and legislative races (Limongi & Vassalai, 2018; Melo & Câmara, 2012). Accordingly, an important line of research has emphasized the centrality of pre-electoral alliances in structuring coalitional governments.

Empirical evidence highlights the strategic importance of pre-electoral arrangements, while also revealing the constraints and trade-offs that shape these decisions. Albala (Albala, 2021) finds that 91% of 33 coalitional governments established in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay since 1980 emerged from pre-electoral coalitions. Kellam (2017) emphasizes that ideological proximity shapes parties' calculations, with ideologically similar parties more likely to form pre-electoral agreements. Such coalitions, that translate into majority governments, generally tend to exhibit greater stability and cohesion than alliances formed after the election (Albala et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the post-electoral landscape can constrain coalitional adjustments: pronounced legislative polarization may limit presidential maneuverability, reducing the capacity to restructure pre-electoral coalitions (Couto, 2025).

If electoral coordination structures the conditions under which coalitional governments become viable, the post-electoral arena determines whether these arrangements can be sustained. The following section shifts the focus from the electoral foundations to the institutional and political dynamics of executive–legislative bargaining and cabinet governance under coalitional presidentialism.

### *Broad yet Bounded Presidential Authority*

The breadth of presidential powers is what Ginsburg et al. (2010) termed the signature feature of Latin American presidentialism. Equipped with constitutionally grounded legislative and decree authority, executives occupy a pivotal, often agenda-setting, position in law-making. Over time, the

expansion of these powers has contributed to partial institutional convergence among presidential systems in the region, particularly since the third wave of democratization beginning in the 1970s.

Extensive scholarship views concentrated presidential authority as heightening risks, such as unilateralism and legislative gridlock (Amorim Neto, 2006; Shugart & Carey, 1992), ; and weakening horizontal accountability and legislative autonomy. Others argue these powers also shape legislators' and parties' incentives, fostering cooperation under specific institutional conditions and shared policy preferences (Alemán & Tsebelis, 2016; Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999). Rather than facilitating unilateralism, Executive authority can thus operate through delegation, combining interdependence with oversight to enable coordination and mutual monitoring.

Building on this view, Latin American presidentialism is distinguished not simply by the formal scope of law-making powers, but by how the delegation of authority to the executive branch is regulated and circumscribed. Focusing solely on the breadth of authority obscures a more consequential dimension: the institutional design that regulates delegation, prescribes oversight, and establishes mechanisms for potential reversal. Similar constitutional endowments can generate distinct patterns of executive-legislative interaction, depending on whether delegation is automatic or conditional, broadly discretionary or tightly regulated, insulated or subject to legislative scrutiny.

From this perspective, the degree of regulation attached to executive powers emerges as a key axis of variation in the functioning of coalitional presidentialism across Latin America<sup>3</sup>. Where delegation is embedded in procedural constraints, deadlines, amendment rights, and ex post review mechanisms, executive authority operates within a framework that incentivizes negotiation and interbranch coordination. In such contexts, coalitional presidentialism emerges not merely as a partisan strategy, but as a response to regulated delegation: presidents rely on multiparty coalitions to secure and sustain the exercise of delegated powers.

Comparatively, Latin America's expansion of presidential powers mirrors a global trend, but its development in the region has followed a distinctive path. While emergency powers have been

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to the constitutional and procedural mechanisms through which legislatures grant presidents broad authority while specifying conditions, limits, and reversal procedures.

constitutionally recognized since the 19th century (Cheibub et al., 2010; Ginsburg et al., 2010; Negretto, 2013), the delegation of law-making and decree powers has expanded along distinct trajectories from the 20th century onward. However, the remarkable expansion of executive authority is a relatively recent phenomenon, concentrated in constitutional reforms associated with the third wave of democratization. These reforms strengthened the presidency not only in law-making and decree powers, but also in budgetary prerogatives and the initiative to amend constitutions. According to Cheibub et al. (2010), the latter two dimensions were central to the growth of executive authority in the region during this period.

### Why Does the Regulation of Delegated Powers Matter?

Institutional designs in Latin America reflect the deliberate and strategic regulation of presidential powers. This contrasts sharply with the United States, where constitutional ambiguity regarding executive authority has been linked to unilateralism and claims of a unitary executive, particularly under a divided government (Howell, 2003; Rudalevige, 2012). In the U.S., ambiguity has not weakened the presidency; rather, it has enabled growing discretion for deploying administrative and informal tools to shape policymaking. While congressional and judicial reversals remain possible, they are often costly, highly judicialized, and can ultimately expand executive authority by legitimizing unilateral action.

In Latin America, by contrast, delegation of presidential authority has generally been constitutionally explicit, defining limits and oversight while often strengthening legislative capacities to monitor, amend, or nullify executive action (Inácio et al., 2023). This regulated expansion reflects institutional learning and strategic anticipation, shaped by the countries' authoritarian past, and remains an ongoing process as legislatures recalibrate delegation in response to evolving political conditions.

In some cases, the choice was to retain presidential powers expanded under authoritarian regimes, recognizing their advantages for fast-tracked decision-making and maintaining the executive's pivotal role, while subjecting them to parliamentary oversight. The decree power of the Brazilian president, originally adopted under authoritarian regimes, was redesigned after democratization to allow congressional amendment or rejection and to impose procedural constraints. These Provisional

Measures (MPVs) have functioned as a mechanism for majority protection, enabling governing coalitions to advance politically costly policies while limiting exposure to parliamentary obstruction (Limongi & Figueiredo, Argelina, 2009). However, when the ruling coalition's survival became highly uncertain, a constitutional amendment (no. 61/2001) curtailed the executive's ability to unilaterally alter policy through MPVs by prohibiting indefinite reissuance, setting deadlines, and suspending other floor decisions if Congress fails to act, thereby conditioning MPV validity on congressional approval within a constitutional timeframe.

In other contexts, reforms of law-making and decree powers resulted from institutional learning that produced new forms of regulation. In Colombia, the 1991 National Constituent Assembly sharply delimited presidential emergency powers, introduced an additional veto player (the Constitutional Court), and strengthened oversight not only over the declaration itself but also over derivative acts, such as legislative decrees. These became subject to constitutional review, political oversight, and legality review (Jurisdicción Contencioso-Administrativa), exemplifying a model of regulated delegation in which executive decree authority operates within a dense web of controls.

Argentina pursued an expansion of presidential powers, albeit accompanied by less restrictive regulatory constraints. The 1994 constitutional reform granted the president the power to issue Decretos de Necesidad y Urgencia (DNUs), previously used informally. DNUs remain valid indefinitely, granting wide presidential discretion unless explicitly rejected by both legislative houses. The bicameral commission to review DNUs, delegated decrees, and vetoes was only established eleven years later. Since 2025, ongoing tensions over decree authority, in the context of polarized executive-legislative relations, have prompted legislative initiatives to impose expiration deadlines and prohibit reissuing decrees on matters rejected within the same legislative year.

Innovations in presidential powers in Latin America went beyond agenda-setting. The presidential veto acquired new features, combining positive and negative agenda control over the lawmaking process. These innovations were introduced at the end of the 19th century as part of the reconfiguration of post-independence presidentialism in the region, under the notable influence of Simón Bolívar.

Departing from the U.S. model, the region witnessed a widespread diffusion of partial (line-item) vetoes, enabling executives to block specific provisions without rejecting entire pieces of legislation. (Alemán & Tsebelis, 2005). Partial vetoes became a key tool enabling presidents to coordinate coalitional bargaining during lawmaking (Palanza & Sin, 2014). Several countries further innovated by developing forms of partial veto authority that incorporated amendatory observations (Alemán & Tsebelis, 2005; Ginsburg et al., 2010). Introduced in the constitutions of Bolivia, Peru (1826), and Chile (1928) (Alemán, 2005), this mechanism allows presidents to propose alternative wording or policy adjustments, institutionalizing structured post-enactment negotiation while preserving legislative decision-making authority (Soto et al., 2024).

However, the scope and effectiveness of presidential veto power depend on how legislatures regulate their capacity to override vetoes and on the president's party strength. The quorum size and the rules for legislative insistence determine how veto authority translates into agenda control. The Peruvian Congress has increasingly constrained presidential veto power through legislative insistence, since an absolute majority is needed to override a veto, and recent presidents have lacked strong partisan support. By contrast, in Brazil, presidential preferences have prevailed for several years, often with the Senate president delaying veto consideration. Since a 2013 procedural reform set firm deadlines for agenda placement, overridden vetoes have become more frequent.

The executive toolbox in the region also encompasses budgetary power, which was expanded during the latest wave of democratization. After that, a wave of changes of budgetary institutions took place in the mid-1990s as part of the broader process of stabilization and structural reforms, reinforcing powers of the president and coordinating ministries in budget and fiscal decision-making. Important constitutional and legal reforms changed the framework for the budgetary cycle with the adoption of fiscal restrictions and transparency laws, modifying the political environment for pork barrel politics, intergovernmental transfers and executive leverage in the late-1990s.

Taken together, these institutional innovations show how Latin American presidentialism has evolved into a distinctive pattern of coalition-based governance. Presidential authority expanded, but in a regulated manner. Cross-national variation therefore reflects not just the scope of presidential

powers, but also the ways in which delegation is structured to regulate executive–legislative bargaining over time.

#### *4. Coordination Problems and Coalition Management*

Coalitional presidentialism operates in an architecture combining separation of powers with sharing-power structures. Interbranch cooperative dynamics and discouragement of unilateral strategies by the Executive are expected outcomes. However, these dynamics depend on how, and to what extent, presidents and parties overcome coordination problems stemming from this framework on a daily basis.

As pointed out before, the operation and performance of coalitional government depend on inter-branch and intrabranched coordination dynamics, which takes us to how presidents manage coalitions and how their members respond to it.

##### a) Inter-branch coordination

In a cross-regional comparative study, Chaisty et al. find that legislators identify portfolio distribution as the most effective negotiation tool in coalitional bargaining. Legislators and parties may expect portfolio allocation as a “package deal”: access to policy domains and ministerial resources, with tangible consequences for legislative production, budgetary control, and patronage within ministerial jurisdictions. While coalitional bargaining may involve negotiations over policy, office, and budget, presidents manage coalitions by selectively deploying their constitutional powers and political resources.

Presidents in Latin America have traditionally relied on strong constitutional prerogatives to foster interparty coordination, reinforce party discipline, and maintain agenda control throughout the legislative process. However, in a separation-of-powers system, this outcome is conditional on the procedural authority of speakers and party leaders within Congress to translate a governing coalition into a legislative coalition (Amorim Neto et al., 2003; Amorim Neto, 2006; Chasqueti, 2001, 2013; A. Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999).

Centralized congressional decision-making, under the control of speakers and party leaders, has been linked to lower interparty coordination costs, facilitating legislative bargaining with the executive in countries such as Chile and Uruguay, and even where individual parties are less disciplined, as in Brazil (Chasquetti, 2011; Figueiredo and Limongi, 1999). The speakership, for instance, functions as a key institutional asset that can be negotiated with coalition partners in order to preserve control over the legislative agenda (Inácio, 2006). In contrast, the absence of institutional mechanisms for agenda control within Congress has been described as contributing to the “unrealized potential of presidential coalitions” in Colombia (Chasquetti, 2011, 2013; Dávila et al., 2013; Limongi & Figueiredo, 1998).

Inter-branch coordination is also conditional on the use of presidential appointment powers. The formation of governing coalitions through the distribution of ministerial portfolios can be understood as a more stable protocol for interparty bargaining than purely legislative agreements. Although presidentialism does not require investiture or a vote of confidence, except in Peru, portfolio distribution remains a key instrument through which presidents compensate parties. The “ministerial bonus”, measured by the number and importance of ministries allocated, is considered an important mechanism for inducing party discipline (Amorim Neto, 2006). Yet, this is a complex calculation, as parties assign different values to these payoffs depending on the alignment of policy domains with their programmatic priorities or the demands of their constituencies.

As cabinet members, parties can influence pre-legislative negotiations over the government agenda, draft bill proposals and sectoral budgets to be placed on the presidential agenda (Gaylord & Rennó, 2015). Granting cabinet members veto opportunities during these pre-legislative negotiations allows presidents to anticipate legislators’ reactions and avoid executive bills being defeated in floor decision-making (Amorim Neto et al., 2003).

Budgetary powers constitute an additional pillar of executive-legislative coordination. Expanded since democratization, presidential control over budget proposal and execution has provided a flexible instrument for bargaining at party, intergovernmental, and individual levels. A substantial body of research highlights the allocation of budgetary resources as a recurrent feature of

negotiations with parties and individual legislators. Between 1994 and 2014, budgetary negotiations in Brazil were conducted primarily along party lines (A. Figueiredo & Limongi, 2008) and oriented toward benefiting coalitional parties (Meireles, 2019). By contrast, individual bargaining takes place where coalitions are less partisan, as in Ecuador, where legislative coalitions are extensively sustained by budget allocations to provinces and appointments to leadership positions in state-owned companies. These practices form part of a recurrent presidential strategy of distributing particularistic benefits to forge what some describe as “ghost coalitions” in Congress (Acosta, 2009; Basabe-Serrano et al., 2018). The ban on *auxilios parlamentarios* in Colombia in 1991 opened space for presidentially led pork-barrel and clientelistic practices, which became aggravated by increased party-system fragmentation after 2000.

#### b) Intra-Coalition Coordination

A growing body of literature has drawn attention to coordination problems that arise endogenously from the multiparty composition of presidential cabinets. Maintaining cabinet members aligned with the government’s agenda, while allowing them to secure gains for their own policy priorities or party interests, constitutes a central challenge in coalition formation and management strategies.

The number of parties and their ideological heterogeneity constrain presidents’ strategies for portfolio allocation. While presidents retain agency in distributing ministerial posts, their decisions are conditioned by the need to manage multiple partners with distinct preferences and bargaining power. Variations in cabinet size remain understudied in the literature on coalitional presidentialism. Yet, Albala et al. (2023) find that more fragmented coalitions, encompassing a larger number of parties, tend to produce larger cabinets.

Cabinet partisanship may fluctuate depending on presidential legislative vulnerability, including party system fragmentation, partisan competition patterns, and the parliamentary strength of the president’s party. Studies indicate that presidential cabinets tend to allocate portfolios more disproportionately relative to parties’ legislative weight (Amorim Neto and Samuels, 2011), reflecting more diverse presidential strategies of cabinet formation and reshuffling. Ministerial “bonuses” tend

to be disproportional in presidential systems (Pachon Buitrago & Carroll, 2016), often biased toward the president's party (Silva, 2023), and cabinets vary in their degree of partisanship, including nonpartisans and presidential loyalists (Camerlo & Martínez-Gallardo, 2018). Presidents may appoint or dismiss ministers to enhance credibility and popularity, targeting patronage networks, interest groups, regional constituencies, and electoral bases.

Indeed, presidents mobilize multiple criteria in ministerial selection, using cabinet composition to balance governability, political control, and administrative performance. Early scholarship has highlighted the presence of nonpartisan ministers, emphasizing technocratic or technopol profiles recruited to enhance technical credibility and managerial capacity, particularly during economic crises or structural reforms (Centeno & Silva, 1998; Domínguez, 1997; Teichman, 2001). At the same time, presidents appoint advisers whose primary credential is personal loyalty and political trust, the “president's own people”, typically placed in strategic core positions to reinforce presidential control over the agenda and internal coordination (Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo, 2018). This may also create openings for greater permeability to interest groups. Amorim Neto and Acácio (2025) find evidence that cabinet militarization is more likely in presidential systems, especially in less institutionalized party systems and under extremist governments.

More recent studies suggest that party linkages are more nuanced than a simple partisan versus nonpartisan dichotomy. In a comparative study of inaugural cabinets in Latin America, Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo find that the appointment of strictly partisan ministers, those maintaining strong and active party ties, predominates in Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and Costa Rica, whereas Ecuador and Peru exhibit a higher proportion of ministers without partisan affiliations. Among the former group, hybrid profiles (partisan-experts) are also prominent.

These strategies allow presidents to balance competing objectives: consolidating political support while maintaining effective control over delegated authority. Presidents also rely on administrative tools to manage the inherent trade-offs of coalitional governance. Through the restructuring of ministerial portfolios, the redefinition of policy jurisdictions, and the reallocation of administrative and infrastructural resources, they can recalibrate the distribution of power within the executive branch. These institutional adjustments enable presidents to mitigate the costs of power-sharing,

keep tabs on coalition partners, and strategically align policy implementation with their broader political goals. (Camerlo & Martinez-Gallardo, 2018; Inácio, 2018).

Reinforcing electoral commitments to voters is also a goal that drives cabinet appointments, as presidents face a national constituency. For example, pressures for gender parity in cabinet appointments have grown across the region, with Mexico constitutionally adopting the principle of *paridad en todo*, extending to cabinet positions. In 2025, 29.6% of ministers in Latin America and the Caribbean were women, with Nicaragua, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico exceeding 40% (ECLAC Gender Observatory)<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, cabinets remain gender-biased as women disproportionately occupy social and cultural policy portfolios.

Presidential governance strategies in coalitional contexts also involve the dismissal of ministers. Cabinet reshuffles function as mechanisms of strategic recalibration rather than necessarily indicating coalition failure. Their use reflects shifts in the distribution of resources and expectations among coalition partners, as well as presidential efforts to update agreements in response to evolving political constraints. Comparative research coordinated by Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo (2018) shows that most ministerial exits do not result from external shocks or intra-cabinet conflict. Other studies highlight reshuffles as signaling devices for policy shifts, often in response to exogenous shocks, declining popularity, or economic crises (Camerlo & Martinez-Gallardo, 2018; Martínez-Gallardo & Schleiter, 2015). However, reshuffling strategies are selective: presidents target particular ministerial profiles depending on political circumstances. Under conditions of low approval, presidents may dismiss a broader range of ministers, whereas under high approval partisan ministers and experts face lower dismissal risk. In personalized political contexts characteristic of presidentialism, individual attributes of presidents and ministers also shape reshuffle decisions. While dismissals can threaten party agreements and therefore impose coalitional costs, presidents with greater political leverage, measured in votes, legislative seats, and popularity, may exhibit greater tolerance toward politically important but misaligned ministers (Inácio et al., 2022).

Another vector of intra-cabinet coordination concerns presidential authority to issue administrative decrees. In Latin America, these powers are constitutionally regulated, granting presidents authority

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<sup>4</sup> <https://oig.cepal.org/en>

to regulate legislation (regulatory decrees), and to organize and direct executive branch functioning (autonomous decrees, in some countries). Recent studies underscore the strategic value of administrative decrees in advancing executive policy priorities (Inácio et al., 2023), selectively implementing legislative decisions (Inácio and Recch, 2025), circumventing divergent or less capable bureaucracies (Polga-Hecimovich, 2016), reallocating ministerial jurisdictions, and centralizing policymaking authority (Inácio & Llanos, 2015, 2016). Such decrees allow presidents to undertake unilateral administrative actions that recalibrate access, influence, and veto capacity in policy implementation vis-à-vis legislatures, coalition partners, and bureaucratic actors. This research agenda is promising for understanding whether, and under what conditions, administrative powers expand presidential authority and how they are strategically deployed. Existing literature examines their use in relation to government legislative strength, risks of legislative or judicial reversal, ideological divergence between branches, and intra-governmental heterogeneity.

Institutionalized cabinet decision-making structures remain limited in most Latin American presidential systems, where policymaking is strongly presidentialized. In some cases, collective structures result from constitutional regulation. In Uruguay and Peru, councils of ministers formally participate in executive acts through countersignature and political responsibility. Argentina's chief of cabinet similarly shares formal responsibilities. Councils of government are constitutionally established in several countries, and individual ministers are subject to legislative accountability.

Nonetheless, presidents adopt organizational and informal strategies that shape internal executive decision-making, defining hierarchies of authority and influence among cabinet members. In Colombia, policymaking is coordinated by the presidency in direct articulation with the National Planning Department and the Ministry of Finance, alongside the National Council of Economic and Social Policy, composed of ministers and administrative authorities and serving as the highest authority in national planning (Mejía Guinand & Botero, 2018). During Rafael Correa's governments in Ecuador (2013–2017), six coordinating ministries operated as radial structures of presidential policymaking (Basabe-Serrano et al., 2018).

A central component of intra-governmental coordination is the presidency itself, sometimes described as the presidential center or center of government. Recent studies explore the strategic

(re)design of this structure to centralize decision-making, enhance policy coordination, and strengthen cabinet control. Ideological divergence and higher coordination costs in coalitional governments have been associated with organizational expansion and strengthening of presidential centers across the region (Inácio & Llanos, 2016; Lameirão, 2015; Mejía-Guinand et al., 2018). In Brazil, during the Lula (2003–2010) and Rousseff (2011–2015) administrations, the expansion of presidential responsibilities and units functioned as a coordination strategy, centralizing formulation and implementation of priority economic and social policies and removing them from sectoral ministries controlled by ideologically distant coalition partners (Inácio, 2018; Inácio and Llanos, 2016). Presidents have also relied on informal mechanisms to strengthen their immediate support structures. Advisory and strategic planning capacity within the presidency were expanded in Chile through appointments (“second floor”), and the creation of expert commissions without formal organizational enlargement (Dávila et al., 2013; Siavelis, 2012).

In sum, intra-coalition coordination has become increasingly strategic and adaptive. Beyond portfolio distribution, presidents rely on reshuffles, administrative powers, and organizational redesign to manage heterogeneity within multiparty cabinets. As legislative arenas grow more assertive, sustaining coalitional unity requires continuous recalibration rather than fixed power-sharing arrangements, reinforcing the bargaining-intensive character of contemporary coalitional presidentialism.

##### 5. Has coalitional presidentialism delivered on its promises?

Empirical indicators suggest that these combined mechanisms, agenda control, cabinet bargaining, and budgetary discretion, are associated with high levels of executive success. In Brazil, enactment rates for executive-initiated bills exceeded 60 percent for nearly all presidents between 1988 and 2022, except for Collor and Bolsonaro (A. Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999; Santos and Luz, 2023). In Uruguay, coalitional governments achieved average approval rates above 65 percent between 1995 and 2000 (Chasqueti, 2016). In Chile, studies report sustained executive legislative dominance from 1990 to 2014 (Figueiredo & Limongi, 1999). Although enactment rates are imperfect proxies, since executive bills are often amended, they provide comparative evidence of legislative output across cabinet types and countries.

However, conditions for interparty and interbranch coordination have changed in important ways, signaling new dynamics for coalitional presidentialism in the region, at least in countries where stable governance arrangements had previously emerged. Recent studies point to shifts in legislative production and a relative decline in executive dominance, with growing congressional protagonism in the lawmaking process. In Brazil, this process began in the early 2000s but gained traction after 2015, with a growing number of presidential vetoes overridden and tactical reversals of presidential decrees through the expiration of MPVs. As a result, 22 percent of non-budgetary MPVs lapsed under Bolsonaro and 39 percent under Lula during their first two years in office. This shift also reflects Congress's leading role in the lawmaking process, as the share of legislation authored by legislators in Brazil has increased since 2005. Part of this transformation is linked to the expanded use of conclusive deliberation, a procedural mechanism that allows standing committees to approve bills without a plenary vote (Almeida, 2019). In Chile, the declining legislative dominance of the executive also reflects greater legislative proactivity. Since 2005, the elimination of extraordinary sessions previously reserved for executive proposals has allowed legislators' bills to be considered year-round (Mimica and Navia, 2023).

Interbranch and interparty coordination is moderated by legislative oversight, which may be activated or intensified in response to shifts in political alignments. Since constitutional reforms in the late 1970s, several legislatures have introduced instruments of ministerial accountability, including interpellations and votes of censure. In Uruguay, stable party coalitions coexist with interpellations that rarely result in censure due to strong partisan backing (Chasquetti, 2024). In Chile, however, oversight practices have undergone a significant transformation. As presidential approval has declined and public demands for policy change have intensified, legislators have increasingly resorted to individual interpellations and constitutional accusations, culminating in ministerial removals during the first administrations of Bachelet and Piñera. In contexts characterized by greater party fragmentation and weaker ruling coalitions, such as Peru, interpellations have become more frequent and have likewise led to ministerial removals (L et al., 2022).

Some developments signal that the use of budgetary resources for interbranch coordination is changing. Since 2015, the Brazilian Congress has modified this regulation by making it mandatory

for the Executive to implement individual and state-caucus legislative amendments to the budget (Faria, 2023). This has reduced presidential budgetary power and the Executive's capacity to direct spending toward governmental priorities. The total share of the budget allocated by legislators has increased significantly, from approximately 6 billion to 47 billion (Brazilian reais) between 2015 and 2025, with individual amendments representing 51.6% in the latter year. Innovations have enabled the direct and obligatory transfer of legislator-proposed resources to subnational governments and organizations, creating greater opportunities for individualized electoral strategies. In Chile, the executive retains substantial control over the budget, with legislative participation largely limited to reducing or rejecting expenditures, and budgets automatically approved if not deliberated within 60 days. Nevertheless, the legislature seeks to influence budget allocations through negotiations with the Executive via non-binding "Protocol Agreements" between the Joint Budget Committee and the executive at the end of the budget approval cycle, which define modifications for the next budget proposal. Additionally, legislators use "budgetary glosas", which specify and restrict program expenditures, functioning as tools for oversight, regulation of specific spending, and micro-targeting of policies and programs (Araya, 2013). Under the Milei administration in Argentina, declarations of emergencies in specific policy areas have become a legislative mechanism to ensure the execution of budgetary spending.

## 6. Coalition Presidentialism: Open Questions

Considering the arguments advanced throughout this chapter, one conclusion stands out: coalitional presidentialism is not merely a pragmatic response to fragmented party systems, but a governing practice with the potential to democratize the exercise of executive power within a separation-of-powers framework. Rather than concentrating authority in a single individual, it introduces an implicit, or at times explicit, collegial dimension into presidential government. This feature is normatively significant in an era marked by rising risks of autocratization, authoritarian populism, and presidential hegemony, both globally and in Latin America. While presidentialism is formally unipersonal, coalitional governance produces a constrained chief executive, one who is checked not only by constitutional mechanisms, but by the daily routine of administration.

This does not imply that coalitional governments are immune to centralized leadership. Presidents backed by a large party, high popularity, or operating in less competitive contexts may exercise broader discretion. Yet even in these cases, coalitional governance introduces a structural rationale of shared authority that may constrain, though not necessarily prevent, plebiscitary or hegemonic tendencies in presidential rule.

A second and underexplored implication concerns legislative politics. Coalitional governments intensify competition within parliaments. Legislatures become arenas not only of government-opposition conflict, but also of intracoalitional bargaining over policy priorities, distributive allocations, and agenda control. Ministers remain presidential agents, but they also act as representatives of partisan constituencies invested in specific policy domains. When intragovernmental coordination fails, coalitional actors frequently shift contestation to the legislative arena. Although this dynamic may appear undisciplined, it can also be understood as institutionalized negotiation, one that produces amendments, partial vetoes, and policy recalibration, thereby strengthening monitoring and accountability. Coalitions operate as power-sharing mechanisms, but within a separation-of-powers architecture. As a result, Congress retains incentives to function as an additional agent of voters, something less likely under systems characterized by a fusion of powers.

The literature on coalitional presidentialism has largely emphasized constitutional presidential powers to explain both its emergence and its performance. This focus has been analytically productive, but incomplete. Presidential authority is not reducible to formal decree or agenda-setting powers; it is also shaped by partisan resources and the organizational capacity of governing parties. Presidential powers are not a substitute for partisan backing. On the contrary, coalitional presidentialism depends on the articulation of these two matrices of authority—constitutional and partisan. Understanding its resilience therefore requires closer attention to electoral dynamics, party organization, and the effects of polarization and affective radicalization on interparty coordination and government evaluation. In several countries, governing capacity has eroded not because constitutional powers were weakened, but because partisan environments became more fragmented, polarized, and volatile.

Concerns about democratic backsliding in Latin America are justified. Yet, focusing exclusively on erosion risks overlooking institutional adaptation. In some cases, recent developments do not signal the decline of coalitional presidentialism, but its recalibration toward more Congress-centered forms of interbranch bargaining. As legislatures expand their procedural, oversight, and budgetary leverage, presidents confront a dual coordination challenge: negotiating with a more assertive Congress while simultaneously managing the internal heterogeneity of multiparty cabinets. These arenas are increasingly interconnected. Changes in legislative activism and budgetary control reshape cabinet strategies, executive organization, and patterns of coalition maintenance.

This evolving context underscores the need to better understand executive administrative powers and their interaction with legislative authority. Decrees, directives, and regulatory instruments are not merely unilateral tools; they are also mechanisms for internal negotiation and accommodation within the executive branch. Through them, presidents and coalition partners exercise distributive leverage and policy influence, often in ways that remain less visible than legislative bargaining but equally consequential.

Over the four decades since the latest wave of democratization, Latin American presidentialism has not remained static. Despite substantial heterogeneity across countries, important institutional innovations have taken root. Coalitional presidentialism stands out among them. Where it has effectively institutionalized a rationale of power sharing, it has contributed to stabilizing governments and structuring interbranch relations in ways that have, on balance, strengthened democratic governance. Its trajectory is neither uniformly virtuous nor inherently fragile. Its democratic contribution depends on whether shared authority is sustained as an organizing principle of governance. Its effects have been most pronounced precisely where it has more effectively institutionalized a rationale of power sharing, an essential foundation of any democratic order.

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