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The Party Is Over: Policy Switch and Party Dismantling in Moreno's Ecuador

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Abstract
Why do parties break down? The literature on party development generally assumes that parties collapse as an unintended consequence of strategic mistakes on the part of their leadership. This article shows that the demise of a party can in fact be a direct consequence of the leader's deliberate actions to undermine it. Through an investigation of the dramatic downfall of *Alianza PAIS*, the most electorally successful party in Ecuador's history, the article puts forward a theory of party dismantling—i.e., the process through which a leader intentionally deprives their party of the resources necessary for it to thrive with the purpose of undermining it. The article marshals evidence from 46 interviews, newspaper articles, documents, and roll call votes to accomplish two goals. First, to demonstrate how, after his bait-and-switch to a neoliberal policy agenda, President Moreno (2017–2021) effectively dismantled *Alianza PAIS* to pursue his policy goals. Second, to show that three conditions are causally important for party dismantling to happen: a top-down party structure, support from actors outside the party and opposition from within the party to the leader's policy agenda. The article contributes to the literature on party development by shedding light on an understudied path towards party breakdown.

Keywords Political parties · Party breakdown · Policy switch · Latin America

Introduction

In the current era of personalized politics (Frantz et al. 2022), political parties rise and vanish more swiftly than in the past. This is even truer in Latin America, a region that is known for its exceptionally high levels of electoral volatility, with a great number of political parties regularly moving in and out of the electoral arena. In this context of instability and fluctuating electoral results, governing parties

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usually constitute an exception because they manage enough resources to at least secure their survival in the face of declining popularity. In this sense, the case of *Alianza PAIS–Patria Altiva i Soberana* (AP) represents an "exception to the exception" and a major puzzle, as it suffered what we might call a sudden party collapse, moving from roughly 40% of the vote to less than 2% over the span of just 4 years, while being the ruling party for its fourth consecutive term.

Yet, AP was not simply a ruling party; it has been without a doubt the most electorally successful party in the history of Ecuador since its return to democracy in 1979. It won four consecutive presidential elections (2006, 2009, 2013, 2017) when no other party managed to even win two. It is the only party that was able to obtain an absolute majority in the legislature (100 out of 137 seats in 2013) and the first party to win more than 50% of the votes in the first round of a presidential election (twice, in 2009 and 2013). In addition, once in office AP was able to win a majority of seats (79 out of 130) in the 2008 Constituent Assembly, and successfully campaign to approve two referenda. By 2017, AP had reached almost 1.5 million members (Alianza PAIS 2017). However, just 4 years after, in the 2021 elections, AP gathered an astonishing 1.5% of the popular vote and not even one seat in the Assembly. How could that happen? How could AP lose electoral relevance so quickly despite being in government, with all the resources necessary to survive and even thrive?

The 2017–2021 term was particularly eventful for AP, but two developments stand out: the divorce between the President Lenín Moreno (2017–2021) and AP founding leader and former President of Ecuador Rafael Correa (2007–2017) and Moreno's dramatic shift to a neoliberal policy agenda, abandoning the AP policy platform of public investments and state intervention (Ramírez 2019). The exit of the charismatic leader from the party and the turnaround from campaign promises to adopt unpopular austerity measures are credible suspects to explain the electoral failure of AP. However, if we look closer, neither factor appears to have been decisive. The high approval rates that Moreno was able to maintain after the separation from Correa—ranging from 60 to 80% (Associated Press 2017; El Universo 2018a)—and the election of former banker and advocate of neoliberal policies Guillermo Lasso in 2021 suggest that, on the one hand, AP could still enjoy popular support without (and even against) Correa and, on the other hand, voters were not necessarily opposed to a conservative economic policy platform. What else is left then to explain AP's abrupt and astounding fall?

I argue that, after his policy switch, Moreno took deliberate actions to dismantle AP because it was not a vehicle to advance his policy objectives anymore but rather an obstacle to their realization and future consolidation. While standard accounts of party development tend to assume that presidents either build their parties or leave them to atrophy, I argue that the demise of AP is a direct consequence of Moreno's deliberate actions to undermine it. I show how Moreno systematically depleted and starved his party of resources to render it politically inactive and prevent its future revival through a possible reunification with the *Correista* faction.

I study the collapse of AP in the context of other policy switches in the region. A sudden shift in policy orientations—unilaterally decided by the party high command—is likely to spark internal resistance to the new course from party cadres

and militants, fundamentally impacting internal party dynamics and putting its structures under strain. In this situation of internal strife, parties are more likely to break down and leaders are more likely to take deliberate actions to undermine the party in an attempt to weaken opposition to the policy switch, while freeing themselves from the constraints of party organization. Among the cases of policy switch, AP arguably represented a comparatively less likely case of party dismantling: We would have expected the early exit of the faction who opposed the switch to mitigate the incentives its leader had of undermining the party to pursue his policy goals.

In fact, policy switch does not always lead to party breakdown, but it did in the case of AP, which, as I show, was deliberately dismantled at the hands of its leader. To account for this variation, I identify three conditions that explain why Moreno dismantled his own party following the policy switch. First, the top-down structure of AP gave Moreno sufficient power to dismantle it. Second, Moreno could rely on the support of opposition parties and other social sectors to implement his policy plan. Third, AP represented a future threat to Moreno's policy legacy, as the permanence of former *Correistas* within its ranks left open the possibility of Correa rejoining AP, winning elections, and reversing Moreno's policies. While the first two conditions *enabled* the dismantling of AP, the third condition provides the *motive* for Moreno's actions. Each of the three conditions was necessary for the dismantling of AP.

To substantiate my argument, I draw observable implications from the theory and marshal qualitative evidence in two different ways: First, I provide a detailed account of the process of party dismantling under Moreno following the policy switch; second, I show how the three conditions outlined above were met and process trace the causal effect of each condition on the outcome—i.e., the dismantling of AP. Evidence was gathered through 46 interviews with high-raking party officials, ministers, congresspeople, journalists, and academics, plus newspaper articles, roll call voting records, and official documents.

My findings have important implications for the literature on party development. First, they shed light on an overlooked pathway towards party collapse: the dismantling of the party by the hands of its leader. While the available research has shown that there are many routes to party collapse—particularly in Latin America—it falls short of explaining the case of AP. The analysis of this puzzling case reveals how party breakdown can also come about as the *intended* consequence of party leadership's decisions and actions. The literature on party breakdown tends to assume—implicitly or explicitly—that leaders prioritize the survival of their own party and that party break down as an unintended consequence of party leadership's strategic decisions (Lupu 2016; Cyr 2017, among others). But the case of AP under Moreno shows that leaders sometimes subordinate the life of their party to policy goals that they deem more important, and this might lead them to take deliberate action to weaken their own party and even cause its demise. Second, this article adds to the literature on the consequences of policy switch by establishing a set of conditions under which a government's change in economic policy might lead to party breakdown through deliberate dismantling of party structures and resource depletion.

What We Know About Policy Switch and Party Breakdown

Changes in parties' policy orientations are not a rare phenomenon. Even in the more institutionalized party systems of older democracies, parties shift policy positions in response to shifts in voters' policy preferences (Adams et al. 2004; Tavits 2007). However, these changes usually happen across different electoral cycles. In fact, if we compare pre-election pledges and post-election policies within the same electoral cycle, governments in industrialized democracies generally tend to do what their party manifestos promised (Fishel 1985; Keeler 1993; Klingemann et al. 1994).

Sudden shifts in policy orientations, in particularly in the economic realm, are much more common in peripheral democracies. It is thus no coincidence that the most systematic studies on economic policy switch—by Stokes (2001) and Campello (2014)—focus on Latin America. The two works explore why presidents campaign on state-oriented policies and then shift to market-oriented policies once in office. While they provide different explanations for the occurrence of switches—expected electoral returns vs. currency cycles—parties are an important variable in both accounts. Both find a negative association between a governing party's age and the likelihood of policy switch—i.e., the younger the party, the less its capacity to force the president to abide by the campaign program. Stokes, however, only finds mixed evidence of the relationship between party institutionalization and policy switch, observing that policy switches happened both in countries with weakly institutionalized parties (such as Ecuador and Peru) and relatively well institutionalized ones (such as Argentina and Venezuela).

Neither Stokes nor Campello delve much into the consequences of policy switch on party development. Stokes just briefly mentions how, following a policy switch, governing party members found themselves marginalized or had to accommodate to the government's about-face, and how mandate unresponsiveness weakened relatively well institutionalized parties, such as the Peronist party in Argentina and *Acción Democrática* in Venezuela (Stokes 2001, 114–15). We also know, however, that the Peronist party was able to adapt to the new conditions dictated by policy switch, and thanks to its flexible structure it transformed and survived (Levitsky 2003), while *Acción Democrática* succumbed partly due to its rigidity (Morgan 2011).

Other scholars have provided a more complete picture of the relationship between policy switch and party development. Roberts (2013) shows how policy switches by leftist leaders destabilize party systems and sometimes led to party system collapse. Lupu (2016) and Brown (2024) find that parties collapse when they adopt policy positions inconsistent with their traditional platform, causing a dilution of their party brand and consequently an erosion of voters' attachment.

Beyond the upset caused by policy switches, there are a variety of factors that lead to party decline, including the emergence of new challengers (Lawson and Merkl 2014), the decay of linkages between parties and society (Morgan 2011), and generalized anti-party sentiment (Bardi 1996). As a result, party failure is a rather common phenomenon, as the general instability of patterns of electoral competition around the world suggests (Kreuzer and Pettai 2003; Mainwaring 2016).

In her investigation into what happens to parties after a crisis, Cyr (2017) argues that a party's capacity to weather an electoral downturn depends on the availability of resources needed to remain politically relevant. In particular, she finds that party revival is a result of the organizational and ideational resources at its disposal plus the opportunities provided by the competitive structure of the post-crisis party system. Ultimately, she suggests that what determines party breakdown is the lack of resources when confronting an electoral crisis.

This body of work provides insightful frameworks to understand why and how parties break down or survive and revive. Yet, these accounts of party development are built on a crucial assumption—that a leader's top priority is the survival of their own party. Theories of party breakdown tend to assume actors' preferences, which can be problematic given that political actors pursue multiple objectives at the same time. In Cyr's words, "incentives for revival […] are assumed in my theory. A party's raison d'être is to compete in and win (national) elections. A sudden loss of that capacity should immediately provoke an existential crisis that induces party leaders to strategize about the possibility of revival" (Cyr 2017, 64).

This assumption is obviously a reasonable one to make, and it holds particularly well in cases of twentieth century traditional parties, which were stronger and more influential in regulating sociopolitical life compared with today. Parties were almost irreplaceable, and it was more difficult to imagine leaders not having the survival of their own party as their priority, as the party was their only channel of access to state decision making. Yet, currently parties worldwide have become more temporary electoral vehicles rather than permanent political organizations (Mair 2013; Luna et al. 2021). Parties qua personalist vehicles have proliferated (Frantz et al. 2022) and, given the availability of other avenues to connect with voters, have become more disposable (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). This development provides a good rationale to relax the assumption that a party leader's priority is the survival of their own organization.

As a matter of fact, a party raison d'être is not simply to maximize votes but also to facilitate coordinated political action in support of a public policy agenda. So, while there is reason to believe that if a party confronted an electoral crisis its leader would strive to revive it, what would happen if a party inhibited coordinated political action? What if it failed to fulfill this instrumental function and it became a dead weight or even an obstacle for the party leadership to reach its policy goals?

Policy Switch and Electoral Performance: the Strange Case of *Alianza PAIS*

In Stokes' analysis of policy switch in Latin America, to be considered a policy switcher, it is "sufficient for a politician to renege swiftly on a policy position that had been salient in the campaign" (Stokes 2001, 43). Simply "pronouncing [oneself] in favor" (Stokes 2001, 25) of a policy or set of policies and then switch to their opposite once in office constitutes a case of policy switch.

Stokes includes cases of presidents that strategically shifted towards the center during the campaign but then once in power reverted to their *original* policy positions—e.g., Ecuadorian president Sixto Durán Ballén (Stokes 2001, 44). I argue,

though, that strategically crafting campaign promises to cater to the demands of broader strata of the population is quite common. What is less common is winning on a party platform and ruling on its opposite.

Therefore, I use a more stringent definition of policy switch to be able to capture the most dramatic and uncontroversial shifts—those that are more likely to cause turmoil within the party. Similar to Campello (2014), I consider policy switch not simply as strategically moving slightly away from the party platform to win votes and then reneging on that move. *A policy switch consists of campaigning on an original and recognizable party platform and then adopting the opposite platform once in government*. By "adopting the *opposite* policy platform," I mean moving from state-oriented policies to market-oriented policies, or vice versa. There are cases of candidates governing in a less radical fashion than promised (e.g., Ollanta Humala in Peru in 2011) or strategically moderating their policy platform during campaign to increase their chances of getting elected—and then rule consistently (e.g., Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2002). Yet, a president or candidate *moderating* their economic policy orientation due to strategic considerations or external constraints (international economic variables, unfavorable balance of power vis-à-vis the opposition, etc.) without transitioning into its opposite does not constitute a case of policy switch for my purposes.

Following this definition and updating Stokes' and Campello's analyses up to 2020, I identify five cases of complete policy switch in South America: Argentina in 1989 under Carlos Menem, Ecuador in 2002 under Lucio Gutiérrez and in 2017 under Lenín Moreno, Peru in 1990 under Alberto Fujimori, and Venezuela in 1988 under Carlos Andrés Pérez. The focus on the most dramatic policy switches ensures selecting cases where party infighting is more likely to break out and where leaders have stronger incentives to try to neutralize internal opposition in order to implement their new policy plan, potentially even at the cost of weakening the party itself. All these cases moved from state-oriented campaign promises to market-oriented government policies once in office. Menem's *Partido Justicialista* (PJ) and Pérez's *Acción Democrática* (AD) are cases of relatively well institutionalized parties, while Gutiérrez's *Partido Sociedad Patriótica* (PSP) and Fujimori's *Cambio 90* were recently formed personalist vehicles that did not undergo any process of institutionalization. AP stands somewhere in the middle. While AP is not a well institutionalized party, it certainly has a more complex organizational structure than PSP and *Cambio 90*: It had a formal apparatus with national, provincial, and cantonal directorates; it held annual conventions, had a statute outlining party rules, and party branches all over the country's territory.

Table 1 shows the electoral performance of switching parties when they won office (i.e., before the switch) and in the first presidential election following the switch. In two cases, policy switchers improved their performance and won re-election—Menem in Argentina and Fujimori in Peru in 1995—while in the other three, they did not. However, in two of those three cases, governing parties managed to remain electorally relevant in the immediate aftermath of the switch—Gutiérrez's PSP in Ecuador with 17.42% and AD in Venezuela with 23.6% of the vote; their breakdown came an electoral cycle later. There is only one case where the governing party immediately lost political relevance after switching policy platform, that of AP under Lenín Moreno with a surprising 1.54% of the vote.

Table 1 Policy switches and electoral performance in South America (1982–2020)

Country year	President (*Party*)	Electoral result pre switch (%)	Electoral result post switch (%)	Difference (%)	Re-elected?
Argentina 1989	Carlos Menem (*Partido Justicialista*)	47.51	49.94	+2.43	Yes
Ecuador 2003	Lucio Gutiérrez (*Partido Sociedad Patriótica*)	20.64	17.42[a]	−3.22	No
Ecuador 2017	Lenín Moreno (*Alianza PAIS*)	39.36	1.54[a]	−37.82	No
Peru 1990	Alberto Fujimori (*Cambio 90*)	29.09	64.42	+35.33	Yes
Venezuela 1988	Carlos Andrés Pérez (*Acción Democrática*)	52.89	23.60[a]	−29.29	No

Electoral results are first rounds of presidential elections

[a]Party presented different candidate

What explains this striking downfall? One immediate explanation might point to the exceptional unpopularity of neoliberal economic policy in Ecuador, especially considering the banking crisis it generated in 1998–1999 and its social consequences, a decade of neo-developmentalism under a very popular president—i.e., Rafael Correa—and perhaps even the fact that Moreno's was the second policy switch after Gutiérrez's in a little over one decade. But if that had been the case, we would have expected to see Ecuadorian voters punishing parties that ran on a neoliberal platform in 2021. In fact, we witnessed the exact opposite: They elected as president Guillermo Lasso, loser of the run-off against Moreno in the 2017. Former CEO of Guayaquil Bank from 1994 to 2012 and one of its main shareholders, Lasso is not only an advocate of neoliberal policy but an implementer as well, as he acted as super minister of finance in 1999—a special position created by President Jamil Mahuad to confront the economic crisis. Thus, opposition to Moreno's policies does not provide a satisfactory explanation to the collapse of AP. Neither does opposition to the figure of Moreno, as he did not run for re-election.

If the fall of AP is not a consequence of change in voters' economic policy preferences, then we must look at internal party dynamics. The exit of AP's founding leader Rafael Correa and his faction in late 2017 represented a huge blow to the popularity of the party (Hurtado 2017). Correa was not only the founding leader of AP, but it was also the charismatic leader of the party, a key component of its party brand. However, during the first year in office, Moreno proved he could maintain and even increase his popularity without Correa. At the end of July 2017—before the policy switch but after parting ways with Correa—Moreno's government had an approval of 70%, almost 20% more than when it took office in May (Associated Press 2017). By the end of August, when the rift with Correa had deepened, he reached around 80% (The New York Times 2017), and at the beginning of April 2018, just before switching economic policy platform, he was still at 60% (El Universo 2018a). Moreno also handily won the referendum in February 2018, which was strongly opposed by Correa, with a minimum of 60% in all seven questions (Associated Press 2018). Moreover, after the exit of the *Correista* faction, AP still

maintained popular figures, such as the most voted member of the Assembly, José Serrano. This evidence suggests that, while the importance of the figure of Correa for AP's success cannot be overstated, Moreno and AP were able to gather voters' approval without him, and thus, that the exit of Correa did not inevitably set AP on the path to failure. The early exit of the faction who opposed the policy switch makes AP an unlikely case of party dismantling and thus an interesting one to study: The expectation is that the exit of the opposing faction would defuse infighting and should theoretically mitigate the incentives Moreno had to weaken the party.

Why Would Leaders Dismantle Their Own Party?

We can talk of *party dismantling* when a *party leader voluntarily deprives the party of the resources necessary for it to thrive with the intention of undermining it*. Cyr broadly defines resources as "those assets that a party wields to function successfully" (Cyr 2017: 30). She identifies four types of resources: material (i.e., money and patronage), organizational (i.e., party militants, staff, and locales), elite (i.e., candidates, office-holder, and key decisionmakers), and ideational (i.e., ideology, party brand, and expertise). When a leader takes away resources from their party or actively prevents that party from gaining access to those resources, they are engaging in party dismantling.

It is worth distinguishing party dismantling from a related phenomenon—party streamlining—which can be understood as the centralization of party decision-making authority through the cutback of party organizational resources to isolate party elites from the pressure of party militants. Party streamlining is quite common in organized parties that gradually shift their policy platforms and find that the demands coming from their bases are incompatible with the new policy course.[1] The difference between the two processes is a matter of scope and objectives. In terms of scope, while party dismantling is the process of draining the party of all the resources necessary to function, party streamlining entails disposing only of those resources that limit leaders' room for maneuver—i.e., organizational structures that enable bottom-up input. Relatedly, the two processes seek to attain different objectives. With party streamlining, the leader does not deliberately seek to undermine the party; just reform its structure to make it more adaptable to their policy goals. The goal of party dismantling, on the contrary, is to intentionally impair the party and make it electorally irrelevant.

When would a leader engage in party dismantling? To begin with, to engage in party dismantling, a leader must be *able* and *motivated* to do so. Therefore, a series of conditions must be in place that enable and motivate a leader to decide to undermine their own party. Each condition generates an observable implication that guided the empirical analysis.

First, given the above definition of party dismantling, it is reasonable to assume that the party must have a structure that gives the leader control over party resources

[1] Examples abound: Bolivia's *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*, Brazil's *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, UK's Labor Party, Italy's *Movimento 5 Stelle*, Germany's *Sozialdemokratische Partei*, etc.

to make dismantling possible. A top-down, hierarchical structure where decision-making power is concentrated at the top with little participation from below—akin to Duverger's "cadre party" (1954) or Michels' elite-dominated party (1962)—would give the leader enough power to starve the party of resources and destroy existing ones. The existence of a significant bottom-up component in internal party dynamics would tilt the balance of power against the leadership and make it more difficult for them to destroy the party from within:

Condition 1: The party must have a top-down structure to enable to leader to engage in party dismantling.

Observable Implication 1: If this condition is present, we should observe evidence of little participation of the party bases in decision making and that the decisions about party program and management of its resources would be a prerogative of party cadres.

Second, if a leader decides to dismantle their own party, we imagine that they have an outside option, an alternative organization that supports them and allows them to pursue their policy goals. External support is particularly important in terms of legislative backing and personnel for cabinet appointments. The president's policy agenda must therefore find favor with other political and social sectors for them to make their resources available to the executive, and these sectors must have sufficient presence in the legislature and personnel to provide. If no other organization was supportive of the new policy agenda, then the president would not be able to draw on any other party for the resources necessary for governing except their own, which would increase the cost of dismantling it. The lack of alternative political organizations to lean on would force the president to work within their own party to build support for their policy agenda or abandon it:

Condition 2: The leader can rely on the support of other political parties to pursue their policy goals.

Observable Implication 2: If this condition is met, we should observe other political organizations lending support to the leader to facilitate governability and the attainment of his/her policy goals. Support should come in the form of (1) legislative backing to the policy initiative of the leader and (2) provision of personnel to staff the executive.

Third, the leader must have a motivation to dismantle their own party. Presumably, this motivation would come from the party representing some threat to the leader's political goals. Given condition 1, it is unlikely that a top-down party would represent any significant immediate threat to its leadership. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the party must be a *future* threat to the leader's interests, and party dismantling should serve to prevent the party's future revival.

Obviously, to engage in party dismantling, a party leader must subordinate the survival of the party to their policy goals. Presidents strive to facilitate the actualization of their policy agenda but are also concerned about locking in policy outcomes

after implementation—i.e., their policy legacy—particularly in the context of extensive policy reforms. If the party simply worked as a vehicle to advance the president's ambitions and did not show any sign of reviving as an opposition force or viable governing party under a different leadership, then the president would have no interest in dismantling it:

> *Condition 3: The party must be a future threat to the leaders' policy legacy to motivate them to engage in party dismantling.*
>
> *Observable Implication 3*: If this condition is present, we should observe (1) some form of opposition from within the party that is threatening their policy legacy and (2) evidence that the leader or their inner circle perceive this opposition as a potential future threat.

The three conditions must be simultaneously present for the leader to undertake actions to undermine their own party. The absence of either one of these conditions would either make party dismantling an insurmountable task (condition 1), increase the cost of party dismantling (condition 2), or remove incentives for doing it (condition 3).

Methodological Strategy

The aim of the article is to explain a specific case of party collapse in Latin America that does not align with the explanations in the existing literature and to draw theoretical implications from it (Beach and Pedersen 2016). To do so, I mobilize qualitative evidence to accomplish three analytical tasks. First, provide a detailed descriptive narrative of party dismantling under Moreno—from the 2018 policy switch to the 2021 elections—and establish the occurrence of the hypothesized process. Second, show that the conditions I identified as causally important for the dismantling of AP were met, and third, process traces the effect of the three conditions on the outcome of interest to assess their causal importance. The observable implications that the theory generated guide the analysis and presentation of the evidence.

For the evidence, I draw on 46 interviews with key actors (particularly AP cadres, ministers, and legislators) and observers,[2] national and international newspaper articles, and documents from AP and the Presidency of Ecuador to trace the process of party dismantling and to demonstrate the causal importance of the first and third conditions. As for the second condition, I use (a) roll call votes on economic bills sent by Moreno to the Assembly to identify which parties provided Moreno with the support necessary to pass key neoliberal reforms that made the policy switch possible; and (b) party affiliation data of cabinet members to trace changes in the partisan composition of Moreno's cabinets.

[2] See Appendix A for full list with interview dates and interviewees' positions. Questions varied depending on the interviewee. Key actors (such as former and then-current AP members) were asked about (a) relationship between the executive, party cadres, and legislators; (b) internal party dynamics.

Policy Switch and Party Dismantling in Ecuador

In this section, I will provide an account of the evolution of the formally governing party AP under President Moreno, shedding light on the relationship between the executive, AP legislators, and the party itself, mainly embodied by its national directorate. The goal of this section is to analyze evidence of the actions of the executive led by party president Moreno towards his own party. These actions, I argue, were deliberately aiming at the dismantling of AP and led to the electoral failure of AP both in the 2019 subnational elections and in the 2021 national ones.

The Neoliberal Turn and the First Steps at Dismantling

Moreno became president of AP on May 1, 2017, and president of Ecuador on May 24. Although the *Correista* faction accused him of abandoning the campaign platform as early as the summer of 2017, the dramatic shift in Moreno's economic policy became undeniably apparent only in April 2018, when he presented the government's economic plan, which included austerity measures, tax exemptions, and financial market deregulation (El País 2018). One month later, he appointed Richard Martinez—at that time president of the *Comité Empresarial Ecuatoriano* (Ecuadorian Business Committee)—as minister of finance to implement that plan.

Until then, Moreno had not shown any intention of dismantling his own party. To the contrary, when the *Correista* faction tried to expel him, he fought back to keep control of it (El Comercio 2017). His cabinet still included AP members in important ministries and AP non-ministers participated in the politburo[3]. However, after the policy switch Moreno purged the remaining AP members from the cabinet and surrounded himself with people connected with right-wing and business sectors (El Comercio 2018a, 2018b).[4] The few traditional AP elites that remained in the executive after the summer of 2018 had lost capacity to act in coordination and to ensure ideological consistency to the government.[5]

Moreno started to dissipate and divert resources from the party in concomitance with the implementation of the neoliberal economic program. The seventh convention of AP in August 2018—which would be the last for the following three years—was an important moment of party re-branding and organizational shake-up. Strikingly, the party abandoned what up to that point proved to be a very successful brand: It changed its official colors from the characteristic lima green to white and blue and moved away from the "Socialism of the twenty-first century" and "Bolivarian" ideological rhetoric, key components of the party brand under Correa (El Comercio 2018c).

[3] Personal interview #43

[4] Personal interview #40.

[5] Personal interview #44.

During the same convention, the executive committee guided by Moreno decided to dismantle the *Comités de la Revolución Ciudadana* (CRCs—Committees of the Citizens' Revolution), the base committees of AP, and transform them into "centers for organization and political action" (El Comercio 2018c). These new institutions had not yet materialized neither by September[6] nor by December 2021.[7] The number of members of the national and provincial boards was also expanded. New provincial directors who were sitting on the party national board were close to Moreno.[8] This move suggests that Moreno did not have any intention of foregoing control of AP. On the contrary, it locked in Moreno as president of AP, as it made more difficult for the faction within AP who sought to expel him to reach the quorum to do so.[9]

The Exclusion of AP from Power (and Its Spoils)

By the end of 2018, Moreno remained the only formal member of AP in the government. All other AP elites lost access to government and, despite formally being the governing party, it became increasingly difficult for AP to obtain access to decision-making spaces. "We were the governing party but we were not governing," that is how one member of the AP national directorate described the situation. The executive secretary of AP at the time claims that Moreno was insistently invited to participate in the meetings of the national directorate of the party which he was supposed to preside, but he showed up only two or three times in four years.[10]

AP elites asked for spaces to generate public policy in the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion, in the Ministry of Education or Health. Moreno said he would work on it but never followed through. No candidate proposed by AP cadres was accepted.[11] What was given to AP was the management of bureaucratic bodies with little political responsibility, such as the Secretariat of Risk Management and the Ecuadorian Vocational Training Service.[12] AP was also excluded from governors' appointments,[13] which were awarded to other parties, such as right-wing CREO and center and center-left *Izquierda Democrática* and *Pachakutik*. "This is how we lost territorial presence," denounced one member of the AP directorate.[14] For an organization that developed as a ruling party in tight collaboration with the executive, this was an unprecedented situation.

6 Personal interview #23.

7 Personal interviews #40, #43.

8 Personal interviews #39, #43.

9 Personal interviews #39, #43.

10 Personal interview #43.

11 Personal interviews #39, #40, #43.

12 Personal interviews #39, #43.

13 In Ecuador governors are the representatives of the executive in the provinces. They are appointed by the president, which distinguishes them from prefects, who are popularly elected and function as executives of the provinces.

14 Personal interview #39.

As the executive starved its party of patronage[15] resources, it redirected them towards legislators that formally remained under the banner of AP after the exit of the *Correista* faction. The goal was to ensure support for bills that the executive sent to the Assembly as part of the policy switch. The executive—the Ministry of Government in particular—negotiated directly with AP legislators individually, not as a group, and distributed patronage in exchange for votes.[16] One interviewee described the dynamic this way:

> There were direct conversations between [Minister of Government] Romo and legislators, there was no unified channel. Those conversations were not transparent, and the content was never revealed to the rest of legislators from the same party. Each legislator talked to Romo and took a position, which was usually to support the incoming bill.[17]

Interviewees mentioned that various positions in the public sector were offered and distributed to AP legislators, which included provincial management of different Ministries (especially big-budget ones, such as Education, Healthcare, and Socioeconomic Inclusion), management of the electrical system, transit agencies, local secretaries of transport, and public hospitals.[18] The distribution of public hospitals in particular was at the center of a corruption scandal involving legislators and Minister of Government María Paula Romo (El Universo 2020; Plan V 2020).

With this strategy, the executive lured legislators into abandoning the party platform to support a new policy orientation in exchange for power of appointment in the public administration at the local level, which facilitated reelection as legislators or to subnational offices. This patronage-for-votes tactic severed the relationship between party and legislators and prevented coordination even within the group of AP legislators itself. AP legislators have reported how sometimes they would learn from the media about presidential bills coming to the Assembly, which made it very difficult to agree on decisions within the same AP legislative group.[19] The party was even further removed from the negotiations, and the legislators did not consult with the AP national directorate when making decisions about voting bills in the Assembly.[20] Under these conditions, any kind of coordination between the AP national directorate and AP legislators became impossible, and the party lost another point of access to decision making.

[15] I use the term "patronage" following Kopecký, Mair, and Spirova (2012): "We define patronage appointments as the power of political actors to appoint individuals by discretion to non-elective positions in the public sector, irrespective of the legality of the decision." This definition focuses not so much on the electoral function (i.e., the immediate electoral returns) of patronage but on the use of such appointments to reward the people who help the distributor win and maintain office.

[16] Personal interviews #41, #42, #45, #46.

[17] Personal interview #45.

[18] Personal interviews #41, #43, #45, #46.

[19] Personal interviews #41, #45.

[20] Personal interviews #41, #46.

The Lack of Electoral Endorsement and Its Consequences

In the electoral field, the situation was analogous. Moreno repeatedly abstained from endorsing AP electoral candidates. This move had a detrimental effect on the electoral competitiveness of AP, a party that historically benefitted from the endorsement of the executive to attain electoral success. Arguably, the dependence on presidential endorsement (and thus the damage caused by its withdrawal) even intensified after the dismantling of the base committees and the deprivation of patronage that could be used to build an electoral advantage vis-à-vis other parties.

One interviewee pointed out how, while Correa actively campaigned to endorse AP candidates in subnational elections (El País 2014), Moreno never showed up to a rally nor endorsed a single AP candidate to the local elections of 2019 (El Comercio 2019a).[21] Some interviewees even claimed Moreno actively boycotted AP candidacies in the local elections of 2019.[22] Some declared that the executive ordered AP governors and party provincial directors to not provide any support nor endorsement to AP candidates.[23] One interviewee even argued that the unpopular economic measures were purposely announced during the campaign to undermine AP's electoral chances.[24]

The harsh consequences of the lack of endorsement on the part of the party leader already became evident in the subnational elections of 2019. In the local elections of prefects—i.e., akin to province governors—and mayors, AP fared disastrously. They were not able to put any of their candidates for prefect into office and they participated in winning coalitions in only two provinces out of 23 in total. AP won mayoral races in 27 municipalities out of 221, but in only 10 of them, they won without forming alliances (Consejo Nacional Electoral 2019). In major cities, the situation was even more ruinous. AP did not run any candidate in Quito and Cuenca and gathered only 2.71% of the votes in Guayaquil. As a term of comparison, in 2014, AP won in 10 provinces and 68 municipalities, in what was at the time considered an electoral setback.[25]

As a result, AP lost territorial presence and executive positions at the subnational level, and it was further pushed out of the state apparatus. Moreover, the poor electoral performance had a negative impact on the party's finances, as it translated into fewer public financial resources to cover day-to-day operating expenditures. Table 2 shows how, while the decline of party public funds had been steady since 2015, it substantially steepens between 2018 and 2019.

This blow was worsened by the fact that President Moreno was not demanding private financial contributions from donors to the party anymore.[26] As campaigning can be financed only through private contributions from party supporters and

[21] Personal interview #43.

[22] Personal interviews #39, #42, #43, #45.

[23] Personal interviews #39, #43.

[24] Personal interview #43.

[25] Personal interview #25.

[26] Personal interviews #39, #41, #43.

Table 2 Financial resources of Alianza PAIS (in USD)

Year	Private funds	Public funds	Total
2015	2.537.260,08	1.828.349,97	4.365.609,45
2016	1.990.333,42	1.577.863,94	3.568.197.36
2017	1.014.849,81	1.378.133,08	2.392.982.89
2018	888.271,57	**1.342.652,38**	2.230.923.95
2019	-	**478.325,37**	-

Primicias 2020a. Bold added to indicate variation of funds under Moreno

donors, their fall was a major obstacle to AP's chances of bouncing back after the electoral results of 2019. This vicious circle of financial bleeding forced the formal governing party to layoff party staff and sell its headquarters in Quito in July 2020 (Primicias 2020b).

Moreno's lack of endorsement or even active boycott of AP candidates happened again during the presidential elections of 2021. Moreno had no intention to run again (Gobierno de Ecuador 2018) and the party convention to nominate the presidential ticket was delayed several times (El Comercio 2020a). In their interviews, the presidential and vice-presidential candidates for AP denounced that the government was set on stalling the nomination process to avoid designating any candidate and thus put an end to AP. The goal—they thought—was to "transfer" those votes by endorsing other political parties—most likely *Construye*, formerly *Ruptura 25*, a small but influential party to which the Minister of Government and the Interior and the Secretary of the Presidential Cabinet belonged.[27] Nonetheless, at the convention of August 2020, when all candidates were withdrawing, they managed to gather enough support to get elected (El Comercio 2020b). On the next day, at the deadline for presenting the result of party primaries, *Construye* finally presented its presidential ticket (El Comercio 2020c).

It is clear that under these adverse conditions, with the party leader stalling and boycotting the internal designation of presidential nominees, the party was doomed to perform once again poorly in the upcoming electoral cycle. Moreno did not even endorse the AP candidate Ximena Peña. He was eventually expelled from AP in March 2021 (El Comercio 2021), after the party had gathered 1.5% of the vote during the first round of the presidential elections. Echoing the testimony of all other AP cadres I interviewed, AP Assembly candidate Diego Fuentes argued that the party "had to carry the weight of Moreno's poor decisions but additionally we had to carry the weight of the whole organization surrounding the president which threatened to kill the movement" and that "the removal of Moreno [had] to do with the urgency of the political survival of our organization" (Primicias 2021).

[27] Personal interviews #39, #41.

Loss of Resources and the Unlikely Revival of AP

When we look at the case of AP at the end of the Moreno presidency, we see a party whose resources have depleted as a consequence of Moreno's actions or deliberate inactivity. Table 3 summarizes the loss of party resources under Moreno since his policy switch in 2018. Certain instances of loss of resources are a direct consequence of Moreno's actions (e.g., patronage, professional staff/committees, ideology, brand), while others are second-order effects of his decisions (e.g., the lack of electoral support for AP candidates led to a loss of elite resources but also to a loss of money and locales).

After 4 years under Moreno as a formally governing party, AP moved from being a dominant party to a marginal one. In 2021, AP elites renamed the party MOVER, which stands for *Movimiento Verde Ético Revolucionario y Democrático* (Green Ethical Revolutionary and Democratic Movement), with an explicit focus on green politics to appeal to younger generations.[28] This attempt at party rebranding to take distance from the damaging years of the Moreno presidency did not produce positive electoral results and the party was suppressed in 2024.

Why Party Dismantling in Ecuador

In this section, I will examine what conditions brought about the dismantling of AP under Moreno. I first consider the two conditions that enabled Moreno to engage in party dismantling—the top-down structure of AP and the support that Moreno received from actors external to the party. Then, I consider the condition that motivated Moreno to deliberately weaken his own party—i.e., the fact that AP and its members represented a future threat to Moreno's policy legacy. The goal of this

Table 3 AP's loss of party resources under Moreno (2018-2021)

Resources		Loss	Cause
Material Resources	Money	✓	Stopped asking for private contributions; electoral failure led to drop in public funding
	Patronage	✓	Cut off party from patronage
Organizational Resources	Militants	✓	Dismantled base committees
	Professional Staff/Committees	✓	Dismantled base committees; layoff staff
	Locales	✓	Financial duress forced to sell headquarters
Elite Resources	Elites	✓	No electoral support/boycott of AP candidates
	Leaders		
Ideational Resources	Ideology	✓	Abandoned 2007–17 ideology
	Brand	✓	Changed traditional party colors
	Expertise		

Author's elaboration based on Cyr (2017: 32–33)

[28] Personal interview #39.

section is to show (1) that each condition was met in the case study and (2) that each condition was causally important for the outcome of interest to occur.

Condition 1: AP Had a Top-down Structure

AP has been characterized by a distinct top-down structure and enjoyed very little—if any—autonomy from the government (Conaghan 2021). It was founded during the 2006 electoral campaign to support the presidential candidacy of Rafael Correa, and after 8 months, it was already a governing party, avoiding an initial phase at the opposition. As a result, the decision-making power was concentrated in the executive and the politburo—a collective body appointed by the president.[29] Overlap between government officials and party cadres was extensive. From 2007 to 2021, the president of AP has always been the president of Ecuador.

Participation from below by party rank-and-file and connection with social movements was also extremely limited. Even though party conventions were held every one or two years and resolutions were subject to membership vote, the executive decided the policy agenda with little to no external input.[30] The party mostly deferred to the executive, complying with the decisions that were passed down from the government. The party was thus unable to autonomously steer governmental action and always struggled to detach itself from the executive.

AP mainly served as a very effective electoral machine, and a tool to coordinate, facilitate, and monitor policy implementation throughout the territory.[31] The more leftist faction of AP always tried to transform AP into a permanent political party but with little success (Resmini and Abbott 2024).

The structure of AP gave Moreno enormous power and room for maneuver and played a central role in allowing him to starve the party of resources it needed to prosper. Before Moreno, AP had been able to maintain territorial presence thanks to a favorable distribution of patronage from the executive and the positive electoral results facilitated by the president's endorsement of candidates to legislative and subnational elections.

As shown in the previous section, this unmitigated dependence on the executive turned against AP after Moreno's policy switch. Moreno was able to turn the flow of patronage away from the party and towards political actors that provided support for his new policy agenda—i.e., opposition parties and AP legislators—without major resistance from AP officials. The same happened when Moreno withdrew electoral support from AP candidates. Just like under Correa, the executive had the party at its disposal. This concentration of power at the top of the AP structure also frustrated attempts made by the *Correista* faction in 2017 to expel Moreno, who at that moment was the president of the party.

If AP had been more capable of autonomous mobilization—both electoral and non-electoral—and more ideologically disciplined and internally coordinated,

[29] Personal interviews #25, #37.

[30] Personal interviews #16, #25.

[31] Personal interviews #13, #25, #43.

regardless of the whims of the executive, it would have been able to (1) maintain territorial presence through organization and decrease dependence on patronage and (2) perform better electorally even without presidential endorsement. A more organized and participatory party would have been much more difficult to dismantle from the top.

Condition 2: Moreno Could Rely on the Support of Actors External to the Party

AP started the legislative period 2017–2021 with 74 legislators out of 137 seats in total. After the split within AP, 29 legislators from the *Correista* faction left AP and formed a new legislative block *Revolución Ciudadana* (Citizen Revolution) in opposition to the government. As previously mentioned, Moreno engaged in patronage-for-votes exchange with legislators that remained in AP. This strategy granted him only 44 votes at best,[32] while 70 votes are required to pass bills in the Assembly. Initially, Moreno was 26 votes short of a majority, and he needed the support of other parties in the legislature to pass economic reforms that were crucial for his policy switch.

To show which parties provided support to Moreno to implement his new policy agenda, I looked at roll call votes on three key economic bills that were passed under Moreno: (1) the Organic Law for Productive Development, Investment Attraction, Employment Generation, and Fiscal Stability and Balance (June 21, 2018), which included liberalization of import, income tax exemptions for investments, debt remission (including big business), exoneration from and reduction of foreign currency exit tax, and prohibition to approve the government budget with primary deficit; (2) the Organic Law of Humanitarian Support to Fight the COVID-19 Health Crisis (May 15, 2020), which included an important section on labor relations, facilitating layoffs, renegotiation of employment contracts between employers and employees, and reduction of the workday; and (3) the Organic Law Reforming the Monetary and Financial Code for the Defense of Dollarization (April 22, 2021), which gave the Central Bank of Ecuador autonomy from the executive, created a Board of Directors of the Central Bank—consisting of 5 members elected by the Assembly with a 5-year tenure—and eliminated any regulation over interest rates and bank commissions, among other things.

If these bills had not passed, Moreno would not have been able to pursue the neoliberal restructuring of Ecuador's economy that was part of his policy agenda since mid-2018. Moreover, the second and particularly the third law mentioned above were necessary to live up to the commitments the Moreno government made to the International Monetary Fund when they agreed to a $4.2 billion loan in March 2019. To ensure the passage of these bills, Moreno had to rely on the support from opposition parties.

Tables 4, 5, and 6 show roll call votes by party on the three economic bills sent by the executive. The tables show the total number of seats and the number of favorable votes for each party, plus a tally of how many votes were left to reach the majority

[32] The number of AP legislators declined during the term—from an initial 45 down to 33 in 2021.

Table 4 Roll call votes on the law for productive development (June 21, 2018)

Legislative group	Seats	Yes votes	Votes left to reach majority 70	Necessary to reach majority
AP	44	40	30	✓
Revolución Ciudadana (RC)	29	0	30	
Unidad por el Cambio (CREO)	**32**	**10**	**20**	✓
Cambio Positivo (PSC)	**17**	**17**	**3**	✓
Integración Nacional (PK, ID, PSP)	13	6	0	✓
Independent	2	0	0	
Total	137	73	-	

Author's compilation. Data from observatoriolegislativo.ec; asambleanacional.gob.ec

Bold indicates right-wing parties

Table 5 Roll call votes on the law of humanitarian support (May 15, 2020)

Legislative group	Seats	Yes votes	Votes left to reach majority 70	Necessary to reach majority
AP	40	36	34	✓
Revolución Ciudadana (RC)	29	0	34	
Unidad por el Cambio (CREO)	**33**	**28**	**6**	✓
Cambio Positivo (PSC)	**16**	**1**	**5**	✓
Integración Nacional (PK, ID, PSP)	13	7	0	✓
Independent	6	2	0	
Total	137	74	-	

Author's compilation. Data from observatoriolegislativo.ec; asambleanacional.gob.ec

Bold indicates right-wing parties

Table 6 Roll call votes on the law reforming the monetary and financial code (April 22, 2021)

Legislative group	Seats	Yes votes	Votes left to reach majority 70	Necessary to reach majority
AP	33	23	47	✓
Revolución Ciudadana (RC)	29	0	47	
Unidad por el Cambio (CREO)	**33**	**31**	**16**	✓
Cambio Positivo (PSC)	**16**	**16**	**0**	✓
Integración Nacional (PK, ID, PSP)	13	7	0	
Independent	13	9	0	
Total	137	86		

Author's compilation. Data from observatoriolegislativo.ec; asambleanacional.gob.ec

Bold indicates right-wing parties

after considering each party's number of favorable votes, and a column indicating parties whose votes were ultimately decisive for the bill to pass. The numbers show how right-wing parties CREO (*Movimiento Politico Creando Oportunidades*) and the Social Christian Party (*Partido Social Cristiano*, PSC) provided support that was decisive for the passage of the three economic bills. CREO and PSC sometimes voted almost unanimously (Table 6), other times their support was more fragmented (Tables 4 and 5), but none of the three bills would have been approved without the favorable votes from these parties.

The tables also show how the ideologically mixed legislative group *Integración Nacional* (IN)—which includes *Pachakutik* (center-left), *Izquierda Democrática* (center), and *Partido Sociedad Patriótica* (right)—had an important role in making economic reforms possible. They were crucial in the passage of the Law for Productive Development and Law of Humanitarian Support bills, where CREO and the PSC did not vote united.[33] The only time when their vote was not decisive was with the Law Reforming the Monetary and Financial Code, where AP together with the right-wing sector had already reached 70 votes. The tables show that the neoliberal policy switch found support in all political forces except *Correismo*.

It is also important to highlight how the number of seats held by AP had been decreasing from 2018 to 2021 (44 in 2018, 40 in 2020, 33 in 2021). So was the percentage of internal support for the bills in question (91% in the 2018 law, 90% in the 2020 law, and 69% in the 2021 law). This decline in the number of AP legislators and in their support for Moreno's agenda made Moreno more dependent on right-wing and other parties outside of the AP group to push forward reforms. Moreno could afford to lose AP legislators while he was dismantling the party because of the support he found in other political sectors in the Assembly.

As we saw, one of the fundamental steps in the dismantling of AP was the removal of its officials from decision-making venues, in particular from the executive, in order to exclude them from control over patronage resources. The removal of AP members from the executive was crucial but equally crucial was replacing them with people who had the governing expertise and the ideological affinity to carry forward Moreno's policy agenda. To do that, Moreno drew on other political sectors to staff his cabinet. The availability of these sectors to join the Moreno cabinet was key to enable the dismantling of AP. If these sectors had not been willing and available to join the government, Moreno would have been forced to rely on AP officials. Their presence within the government would have made party dismantling more unlikely, given that AP would have maintained some control over the flow of patronage, which was crucial for the survival of the party.

Table 7 shows Moreno's number of appointments in ministries and secretariates by party in the periods before and after the policy switch of April 2018. There is a clear decrease in the ratio of AP cabinet members (from 37 to 7%) and a simultaneous increase in the ratio of cabinet appointments of politicians without

[33] For example, 20 legislators from CREO abstained from voting the Law for Productive Development because they demanded stricter control on public spending (El Universo 2018b). The PSC voted against the Law of Humanitarian Support complaining about the tax increase on business (El Comercio 2020d).

Table 7 Number of cabinet appointments before and after the 2018 policy switch

Party	Cabinet appointments			
	Pre-policy switch (May 2017 to Mar 2018)		Post-policy switch (Apr 2018 to May 2021)	
Independent	24	55%	68	80%
Alianza PAIS	16	37%	6	7%
Centro Democratico	1	2%	2	3%
Fuerza Compromiso Social	1	2%	0	-
Partido Socialista Ecuatoriano	1	2%	0	-
Ruptura25	0	-	6	7%
Pachakutik	1	2%	1	1%
Juntos Podemos	0	-	1	1%
Military	0	-	1	1%
TOTAL	44		85	

Author's compilation. Data from *presidencia.gob.ec*

a formal partisan affiliation (from 55 to 80%), revealing how Moreno started to draw more heavily on "independent" politicians after his shift to the right. Moreno's post-switch cabinet also sees the entry of people from *Ruptura25*—a small, electorally marginal center-left party, who supported the Correa government during its first years. This party was surprisingly able to obtain high-profile appointments under Moreno: for instance, the Ministry of Government and Minister of the Interior, the Secretary of the Presidency, and the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion. A trend of increasing presence of "independents" can also be observed in the designation of vice-presidents (Table 8): the two vice-presidents appointed after 2018 were both independent.

It is worth making a few clarifications about the numbers just presented. First, cabinet positions are not alike—some are more important than others. Before April 2018, AP cadres had been occupying important and high-budget ministries such as those of Defense, Economy and Finance, Urban Development and Housing, Education, Foreign Relations, Transport and Public Works, Justice, and Science Technology and Innovation, plus various secretaries and positions close to the president. In addition, the Minister of Public Health, who counts as an independent, was already in office during the last few years of the Correa government. After Moreno's shift, all those ministries went to independents. AP members (not cadres) were either appointed to marginal ministries or to important ones but for a short period of time, and usually at the end of the term.

Second, the term "independent" indicates the lack of a formal partisan affiliation during the tenure but it is silent about sociopolitical background. As a matter of fact, a number of independent members of the executive came from the business sector or right-wing political parties. For instance, the Minister of Economy and Finance Richard Martínez was president of the *Comité Empresarial Ecuatoriano* (Ecuadorian Business Committee)—the most important business organization

Table 8 Vice-presidents of Ecuador under Moreno (2017–2021)

Name	Period	Party
Jorge Glas Espinel	May 24, 2017 to Jan 2, 2018	AP
María Alejandra Vicuña Muñoz	Jan 6, 2018 to Dec 6, 2018	AP
Otto Sonnenholzner Sper	Dec 11, 2018 to Jul 10, 2020	Ind
María Alejandra Muñoz Seminario	Jul 22, 2020 to May 24, 2021	Ind

Author's compilation. Data from *presidencia.gob.ec*

in the country. The person who succeeded Martínez as Minister of Economy and Finance—Mauricio Pozo—was vice-president of *Produbanco* bank and vice-presidential candidate for the right-wing PSC in 2017 (El Comercio 2016). Both Minister of Transport Gabriel Martínez and vice-president Otto Sonnenholzner came from the media business. The former is the son of the owner of *Expreso* newspaper (Pichincha Comunicaciones 2019), while the latter was general manager of Radio Tropicana and president of the *Asociación Ecuatoriana de Radiodifusión* (Ecuadorian Radiobroadcasting Association).

Condition 3: AP Presented a Future Threat to Moreno's Policy Legacy

Despite the exit of the *Correista* faction in January 2018, several cadres coming from left-wing sectors remained within AP. As explained in the previous section, they were being isolated by the executive—excluded from decision-making spaces and cut off from AP legislators. Nonetheless, after Moreno's shift to the right, the AP national directorate started to express disagreement with the policies of the executive through public statements, about Moreno's economic and foreign policy in particular (Alianza PAIS 2019a, 2019b).

AP elites kept trying to regain control of the party but were not able to. During interviews, members of the AP national directorate recounted how they tried several times to vote Moreno out of the presidency of the party for non-fulfillment of function, but they never managed to reach the quorum.[34] One account is that several members of the national directorate were answering directly to the executive and were instructed to stall voting on Moreno's removal.[35] Another account is that members failed to see the benefit of dismissing Moreno and were still hopeful that the privileged relationship with the executive would pick up again.[36] Nonetheless, there was agitation and discussion within AP main decision-making body about the possibility of expelling Moreno and retaking control of the party.

While the party was immobilized and marginalized—at least temporarily—the ambiguous relationship between AP cadres and former-AP *Correistas* made

[34] Personal interviews #39, #42, #43.

[35] Personal interview #39.

[36] Personal interview #43.

the party a future threat for Moreno's policy legacy. The lack of a clean breakup between former co-partisans foreshadowed the possibility of a reunion, with Correa rejoining AP, winning elections, and reversing Moreno's policies. This risk was accentuated by the fact that Moreno made clear since the beginning of his term that he would not run for reelection (Gobierno de Ecuador 2018), and thus, he would not be able to maintain control over the party in the long run. Moreno's absence would have allowed the next party leader to reopen the doors to Correa.

The relationship between AP officials and *Correistas* was ambiguous because, despite the accusation of betrayal coming from *Correismo*, a significant number of AP officials still maintained connection with their former co-partisans and refused to turn against the policies of the Correa government. As the AP executive secretary put it, "Correa called us traitors, but Moreno called us *Correistas*." A member of the national directorate of AP and minister on both the Correa and the Moreno governments said that he was fired over this:

> One or two weeks before I was fired [from the government], President Moreno declared that in Esmeraldas there is a bridge going to Colombia which is unfinished and that was built by the Correa government to favor drug trafficking. They called me to the presidency and asked me to publicly declare as Minister of Defense that I confirmed what the president said and added that the Correa government did nothing at the border with Colombia and collaborated with drug traffickers. I said 'look gentlemen, what the Correa government did was strengthen state presence all over the territory […] I will not take part in this, if you want these statements you have to come out and make them yourselves' […] and the same week I was dismissed I had informed the president that I just had a meeting with a few *Correista* leaders to promote agreements and foster dialogue. After two days, they fired me.[37]

Another minister of the Moreno government and longstanding AP cadre mentioned the unwillingness to turn against the previous government as something Moreno and his collaborators saw with suspicion: "Correa has attacked us [those who remained in AP] verbally many times and Moreno wanted us to come out and attack Correa ourselves, but we refused, we always refused to attack Correa. And Moreno looked at that with suspicion."[38] The AP presidential candidate argued in the interview that it was more than a suspicion: "[Minister of Government] Romo wanted AP dead because it was still close to *Correismo*. I am sure about that."[39]

AP officials' words and actions support the idea that the threat of a reunion with Correa was real. Members of AP national directorate pointed out how they were never opposed to the idea of rejoining forces with Correa, it was more the other way round.[40] The President of the Assembly in 2018—from the faction of AP that more

[37] Personal interview #40.

[38] Personal interview #44.

[39] Personal interview #41.

[40] Personal interviews #39, #43.

unambiguously took distance from *Correismo*—said that that was the reason behind her disaffiliation from AP: “At times I thought that we did not have a real renovation [within AP] because they [AP cadres] didn’t want to do it, they didn’t want to break with Rafael [Correa] because they bet on uniting with him once again in the future.”[41] To lend support further support to this theory, AP endorsed *Correista* candidate Andres Arauz in the run-off of the presidential elections 2021 (El Universo 2021).

In response to this imminent threat, Moreno never abandoned control over AP until after the first round of the 2021 general elections. A few interviewees thought that Moreno’s permanence was also serving a double goal: preventing it from getting closer to Correa and using it as a scapegoat to deflect blame to for implementing the neoliberal policy platform that was defeated at the polls in 2017.[42] The extremely low popularity of the Moreno government was used as a weapon against AP: “Moreno didn’t leave the party because he knew he was going to sink AP, which without him would have reunited with *Correismo*.”[43]

Alternative Explanations

At least two key alternative explanations must be addressed.

Party Weakness

Standard accounts of AP depict it as a weakly institutionalized, poorly organized party (Conaghan 2021). Based on these accounts, it is little surprise that Moreno was able to dismantle AP: Weak parties are easy to dismantle precisely because they are so weak. Therefore, party weakness would be the key permissive condition for the dismantling of AP.

In fact, data about the organizational strength of AP tell a different story. According to the V-Party dataset of V-Dem, in the period leading up to 2017, AP scored well above the world average for territorial presence, reaching a score of 2.5 out of 4 in local party office presence in 2013 (vis-à-vis a world average of 0.3). Over the same period, AP also scored above the world average for level of permanent party activism at the local level, peaking in 2013 with a local party strength score of 2 out 4 (vis-à-vis a world average of 0.4). Finally, AP appears in the top 11% of Latin American parties according to organizational strength over the last three decades, ranking 18 out of 169. These data suggests that despite its personalist character and top-down structure, AP was an above average party in terms of organizational structure and territorial presence.

While we know that party-building efforts within AP were ultimately frustrated (Resmini and Abbott 2024), its limited success at organizational expansion was sufficient to cast serious doubts on the party weakness hypothesis.

41 Personal interview #45.

42 Personal interviews #39, #46.

43 Personal interview #41.

Democratic Backsliding

A standard explanation of the motivations that encouraged President Moreno to dismantle AP focuses on the preservation of democratic stability. This account considers the Correa's decade in power as a period of democratic backsliding and interprets Moreno's actions as President as an attempt to restore conditions necessary for the proper functioning of Ecuadorian democracy (De la Torre 2018). Under this view, the dismantling of AP should be read primarily as an attempt to prevent the return of electoral authoritarian rule under Correa, with the preservation of Moreno's policy legacy and of the restoration of neoliberalism in Ecuador taking a secondary role.

While this explanation has its merits and considerations of regime stability have informed the perception of the actors involved in the Moreno administration, the questionable democratic record of the Moreno government casts doubts on his pro-democratic motives. In particular, the government came under the spotlight during the indigenous protests against its neoliberal reforms in October 2019, when it let loose a wave of brutal repression, which led to the killing of 11 people, the injury of at least 1500, and the detention of at least 1200 (Human Rights Watch 2020). Arrests of opposition figures, including elected officials, followed the protests (El Comercio 2019b).

In addition, during Moreno's mandate, violations of political rights were allegedly committed against opposition forces. After leaving AP, *Correistas* sought to create a new party but their attempts were thwarted by the electoral authorities (El Comercio 2018d). They joined a preexisting political organization to participate in the 2019 subnational election, but in 2020, the electoral authorities suspended it for alleged irregularity in the collection of signatures (El País 2020), leaving the main opposition force without an electoral vehicle.

The Moreno government also engaged in multiple violations of the constitution. The referendum held in February 2018 without the approval of the Constitutional Court led to the purge and ad hoc designation of state authorities, including the Attorney General and the Constitutional Court itself (El Comercio 2018e). The agreement with the International Monetary Fund also violated the constitution, which establish that all treaties with international financial institutions need the approval of the Assembly and the Constitutional Court (Ecuador Ombudsman 2019).

The evidence here suggests that the Moreno administration was indeed trying to weaken *Correismo* to prevent its comeback. The political means that it used to do so, however, seem to contradict the idea that stopping the democratic backsliding was its main goal.

Assessing External Validity

To assess the external validity of the theory, I conducted an analysis of the same three conditions in four shadow cases that respond to the definition of policy switch I provided above.[44] Table 9 summarizes the analysis. The cases present variation in

[44] See Appendix B for a complete analysis of the shadow cases.

Table 9 Policy switch and conditions for party dismantling in South America

Country case	President (*party*)	Condition 1 *Top-down party*	Condition 2 *Opposition support*	Condition 3 *Internal opposition*	Party dismantling
Argentina 1989	Carlos Menem (*Partido Justicialista*)	×	✓	×	NO
Ecuador 2002	Lucio Gutiérrez (*Partido Sociedad Patriótica*)	✓	✓	×	NO
Ecuador 2017	Lenín Moreno (*Alianza PAIS*)	✓	✓	✓	YES
Peru 1990	Alberto Fujimori (*Cambio 90*)	✓	✓	×	NO
Venezuela 1988	Carlos Andrés Pérez (*Acción Democrática*)	×	✓	✓	NO

Author's elaboration

party structure—top-down in the cases of Ecuador and Peru, and a more dispersed power structure in the cases of Argentina and Venezuela—and how much the governing party represented a threat to the president's policy switch—with Venezuela standing out as the only case of real internal opposition. There is, on the other hand, no variation in opposition's support for the policy switch. This is not surprising considering that the government is implementing their policy platform, but it is not predetermined.

Three parties collapsed after the policy switch—AD, PSP, and AP. Only one, however, collapsed due to dismantling (AP). The lack of our outcome of interest—i.e., party dismantling—across the board coincides with the absence of at least one condition in all cases—two in the case of Argentina. This finding explains how rare party dismantling is and suggests that the stars aligned in an unusual way in the case of AP. In all the other cases of dramatic policy switch considered, we see parties surviving at least another electoral cycle, and then being abandoned (*Cambio 90*), collapsing (AD and PSP) or remaining competitive (PJ).

Conclusion

In this article, I showed how, after the policy switch towards a neoliberal agenda, President Lenín Moreno engaged in the dismantling of the formally governing party *Alianza PAIS*, which dominated Ecuadorian politics for a decade. I marshaled qualitative evidence, first, to demonstrate how Moreno deliberately deprived the party of resources and then to prove what conditions made this exceptional outcome possible. I found evidence that (1) AP's structure acted as a permissive condition for party dismantling, (2) other parties and business organizations provided support to Moreno and his economic policy plan, and (3) the possibility of AP rejoining forces with Correa constituted a threat to the longevity of Moreno's policy and motivated the executive to dismantle the party.

Although party dismantling is a rare phenomenon, the findings of this article have important implications for the study of political parties. First, they brought to light a new path towards party breakdown: dismantling of party structures and depletion of party resources by the hand of the leader. Second, the article showed that party leaders sometimes prioritize other goals (policy, career advancement, accumulation of wealth, etc.) over the survival of their own organization. In particular, the case study of AP also suggested that an executive might decide to sacrifice its own governing party if it becomes a threat to its policy legacy—particularly in high-stakes policy areas like the economy. Third, the article adds to the literature on personalist parties by showing that their top-down structure makes them more vulnerable to breakdown than the average party, even when they survive leadership change. Fourth, the article sheds light on the political consequences of policy switches. Betraying the mandate not only has immediate consequences for political representation (i.e., undemocratic change in policy agenda); it can also cause institutional disruption as a second-order consequence (i.e., weakening of mechanisms of representation, like political parties).

Future research should look for other instances of strategic resource depletion within parties—for instance, as a consequence of party factionalization and with the purpose of weakening internal enemies—and other examples of party undermining short of breakdown (e.g., party streamlining). Although this article has showed that the conditions for party dismantling are stringent, the fact that personalist parties are becoming increasingly common (Frantz et al. 2022) might indicate that dismantling will become more frequent, which would only strengthen the existing association between personalist parties, crises of representation, and political instability.

Appendices for "The Party is Over: Policy Switch and Party Dismantling in Moreno's Ecuador"

Appendix A: List of Interviews

#	Interviewee	Date of interview	Medium
1	Journalist at public TV *Ecuador TV*	April 16, 2019	Phone
2	Independent journalist	April 26, 2019	Phone
3	Academic	April 29, 2019	Phone
4	Journalist at private newspapers *Hoy* and *El Comercio*	May 2, 2019	Phone
5	Local *Alianza PAIS* Activist #1	September 17, 2019	In person
6	Local *Alianza PAIS* Activist #2	September 17, 2019	In person
7	Legal advisor for the Constituent Assembly	September 17, 2019	In person
8	Director of private magazine *Vistazo*	September 18, 2019	In person
9	Director of ONG "Comité de Derechos Humanos"	September 19, 2019	In person
10	Director at private newspaper *El Universo*	September 20, 2019	In person
11	Vice-director of private newspaper *Expreso*	September 20, 2019	In person
12	Director at public newspaper *El Telégrafo*	September 23, 2019	In person
13	Former Minister of Planning and Development; Congressperson *Revolución Ciudadana*	September 24, 2019	In person
14	Legal advisor for the Organic Law of Communication	September 25, 2019	In person
15	Vice-president of news at private TV *Ecuavisa*	September 25, 2019	In person
16	Former President of the Assembly; Former executive secretary *Alianza PAIS*; Congressperson *Revolución Ciudadana*	September 26, 2019	In person
17	Academic	September 26, 2019	In person
18	Congressperson advisor *Alianza PAIS*	September 27, 2019	In person
19	Vice-director at public newspaper *El Telégrafo*	September 27, 2019	In person
20	Former President of Superintendency of Communication	September 27, 2019	Phone
21	Journalist at public TV *Ecuador TV*	September 30, 2019	In person
22	Academic	September 30, 2019	In person
23	Member of the AP national directorate; Former Secretary of Communication of the Presidency	October 1, 2019	In person
24	Owner and director of private newspaper *Hoy*	October 2, 2019	In person
25	Former executive secretary of *Alianza PAIS*; Former Minister of Social and Economic Inclusion; Congressperson *Revolución Ciudadana*	October 3, 2019	In person
26	Director private news outlet *Ecuadorinmediato*	November 1, 2019	Phone
27	Congressperson *Revolución Ciudadana*	May 6, 2020	Zoom
28	Former member of Council of Communication; Academic	May 7, 2020	Zoom
29	Academic	May 8, 2020	Zoom
30	Academic	May 14, 2020	Zoom
31	Former Secretary of Communication of the Presidency	May 17, 2020	Zoom
32	Former Subsecretary of Information of the Presidency	May 19, 2020	Zoom
33	Former Subsecretary of New Media of the Presidency	May 21, 2020	Zoom

#	Interviewee	Date of interview	Medium
34	Former communication advisor at Secretary of Communication of the Presidency	May 26, 2020	Zoom
35	Former Subsecretary of New Media of the Presidency	May 29, 2020	Zoom
36	Congressperson *Revolución Ciudadana*	May 30, 2020	Zoom
37	Former executive secretary *Alianza PAIS*; Former Minister of Culture; Former personal secretary of the President	June 8, 2020	Zoom
38	Founder of survey firm *Perfiles de Opinion*	June 9, 2020	Zoom
39	Member of the AP national directorate; Former Secretary of Communication of the Presidency; Vice-presidential candidate *Alianza PAIS*	December 3, 2021	Zoom
40	Former Minister of Defense; Former National Secretary of Political Management	December 7, 2021	Zoom
41	Congressperson and presidential candidate *Alianza PAIS*	December 7, 2021	Zoom
42	Former congressperson *Alianza PAIS*	December 9, 2021	Zoom
43	Executive secretary *Alianza PAIS*; Former Prefect of Pichincha	December 10, 2021	Zoom
44	Former Minister of Justice; Former congressperson *Alianza PAIS*	December 13, 2021	Zoom
45	Former President of the Assembly; Congressperson *Alianza PAIS*	December 13, 2021	Zoom
46	Former congressperson *Alianza PAIS*; Former President of the Assembly; Former Minister of the Interior	February 3, 2022	Zoom

Appendix B: Policy Switch and Party Dismantling Beyond Alianza PAIS

How does the theory of party dismantling presented in this article apply to other cases of policy switch across the region? In this section, I briefly analyze the other cases of policy switch identified (Argentina 1989, Ecuador 2002, Peru 1990, and Venezuela 1988) according to the three conditions outlined in the theory.

Argentina 1989

Carlos Menem won the elections of 1989 with the Peronist party (PJ, *Partido Justicialista*) against the candidate from the incumbent party *Unión Civica Radical* (UCR) campaigning on an anti-neoliberal platform, promising to revert the policies of President Alfonsín. Upon winning, he appointed two consecutive finance ministers coming from the business sector and a conservative labor minister, among others, and started implementing the policies that his opponent had advocated for.

- *Condition 1—top-down party*: The PJ was not a top-down party, certainly not in the way AP was. It was characterized by broad base-level organization with deep social roots, due to its long history. The party did not have an overarching structure strong enough to coordinate these subunits, which organized themselves autonomously of party bureaucracy (Levitsky 2003). This organizational structure clearly did not lend itself to dismantling.

- *Condition 2—support from opposition*: Throughout Menem's tenure from 1989 to 1999, the PJ remained the largest party in Argentina. After the 1993 legislative elections, where the PJ defeated its main opposition UCR by a wide margin, the UCR provided Menem support for a constitutional reform to allowing him to run for reelection (Stokes 2001). This agreement is evidence of the fact that Menem's policy agenda gathered support from other political force as well.
- *Condition 3—internal opposition*: Many PJ leaders opposed Menem's neoliberal turn but the weakly routinized party structure created incentives for them to bandwagon for career-advancement purposes and allowed Menem to put government officials in party leadership positions (Levitsky 2003). In the meantime, party local branches and activists opposed the new policy decision but remained disconnected from party leadership. As a result, Menem faced little intraparty opposition (Levitsky 2003).

Menem could not take advantage of a top-down structure and was not facing enough internal opposition to motivate him to engage in party dismantling. However, his actions transformed the PJ forever. Currently, the party is still at the center of Argentinian political life.

Ecuador 2002

Lucio Gutiérrez came to the fore politically in 2000 when he participated in a rebellion of low-rank militaries and indigenous movements that overthrew the constitutional president Jamil Mahuad. He then received amnesty for his participation in the coup and ran for president in 2002 on a left-wing platform, with his newly formed party *Partido Sociedad Patriótica* (PSP) in coalition with indigenous party *Pachakutik*. Once in office, he appointed a mixed cabinet with representatives from *Pachakutik* and from the traditional right. During the first year in government, he undertakes a dramatic shift to the right, which caused the exit of the majority of the left-wing faction from his government.

- *Condition 1—top-down party*: The PSP was founded by Gutierrez as a vehicle for his candidacy in the 2002 elections, which granted it a clear top-down structure. The vertical structure of PSP suggests that it would have been easy for Gutiérrez to dismantle the party.
- *Condition 2—support from opposition*: PSP was able to get elected only six congresspeople out of 100 seats available. The number went up to 15 if we also count co-governing party *Pachakutik*. After the policy switch, Gutiérrez found support in the opposition, establishing pacts first with right-wing PSC (El Universo 2003a) and then with populist PRE and right-wing PRIAN, whose leader Álvaro Noboa he defeated in the run-off. Gutiérrez gave these parties cabinet appointments in exchange for legislative support (El Universo 2003b).

- *Condition 3—internal opposition*: Gutiérrez faced little to no opposition to his policy switch within PSP. The opposition came from coalition partner *Pachakutik*, on which, however, Gutiérrez had no control. PSP did not represent an obstacle for Gutiérrez's policy switch.

Gutiérrez could have dismantled PSP—given its vertical structure—but he did not do it because it did not represent an obstacle to his policy goals. He overcame the electoral weakness of his party by seeking support from right-wing parties, who were endorsing his neoliberal agenda.

Peru 1990

Alberto Fujimori was a little-known outsider when he reached the run-off with widely known writer Mario Vargas Llosa in the 1990 presidential elections. While Vargas Llosa promised deep structural adjustments, de-regulation, and privatizations to fix the difficult economic situation, Fujimori and his brand-new party *Cambio 90* promised to implement gradual reforms informed by a neo-Keynesian approach. But once in office, Fujimori quickly adopted the economic positions of the defeated candidate and neoliberalized the Peruvian economy through what has been called the *fujishock*.

- *Condition 1—top-down party*: As a personalist vehicle stitched together a few months before the elections, Fujimori's party *Cambio 90* had a clear top-down structure, which would have made it easy for its leader to dismantle it.
- *Condition 2—support from opposition*: *Cambio 90* had won only 32 seats out of 180 in the Chamber of Deputies and 14 out of 60 in the Senate. Fujimori received support from the coalition he had defeated in the run-off—the *Frente Democrático* (Democratic Front, FREDEMO)—which provided staff, expertise to implement the economic plan, and support in Congress—at least until Fujimori dissolved it in April 1992 with the support of the military (Cameron 1998).
- *Condition 3—internal opposition*: Given that *Cambio 90* was a recently formed fragmented coalition of different actors, Fujimori faced little internal opposition to his policies. The governing party did not represent an obstacle to Fujimori's new policy plan.

In the 1995 elections, *Cambio 90* formed a coalition with a new party also created by the executive for the constitutional assembly, *Nueva Mayoría*, which was then replaced by the party *Perú 2000* for the 2000 elections. However, in the case of *Cambio 90*, we cannot properly talk about party dismantling because it was newly created and had little to no formal structure. It was an empty shell—an electoral label with very low resources. *Cambio 90* was the first of a series of "disposable parties" (Levitsky and Cameron 2003) that Fujimori used as electoral labels during his rule: The following *Nueva Mayoría*, *Sí Cumple*, and *Perú 2000* all operated as vehicles that Fujimori used for electoral purposes. In this sense, *Cambio 90* was more scrapped than dismantled.

Venezuela 1988

Carlos Andrés Pérez won the primary of the party *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD) in 1988 thanks to the support of AD labor leaders (Stokes 2001). He advocated for a prudent approach to solve the country's economic problems, promising wage increases across the board. On the contrary, his opponent—Eduardo Fernández from the other major party COPEI—proposed a plan of de-regulation and privatization of state industries. Pérez won the election and as president-elect he started to send signals that wages would not increase and that he was going to implement the economic recipe promoted by the IMF, in what came to be known as the Great Turnaround (*El Gran Virage*).

- *Condition 1—top-down party*: AD was a party with a strong organizational structure and labor, peasant, and—to a lesser extent—professional interests were incorporated into the party decision making (Morgan 2011). Interest incorporation gave the party an important bottom-up component that, although weakened, was still present at the end of the 1980s. This type of party structure substantially increased the costs of party dismantling.
- *Condition 2—support from opposition*: With AD increasingly adopting an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the president, Pérez increasingly relied on the support of COPEI to push forward with his economic plan (Morgan 2011). Opposition parties were thus providing support to the president's policy switch.
- *Condition 3—internal opposition*: At first, AD did not approve but neither interfered to stop Pérez's new economic agenda. However, the harsh defeat in the 1989 regional elections strengthened the faction that opposed Pérez, and AD started to oppose the president in Congress (Morgan 2011).

Contrary to other cases, in Venezuela, the policy switch did generate substantial opposition within the governing party. Pérez thus turned to the opposition for support, but a certain degree of power dispersion within AD prevented him from dismantling the party to facilitate the pursuit of his policy objectives.

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