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Permanent Campaign: Three Glances on the Same Phenomenon from The Americas

Campaña permanente: tres miradas de un mismo fenómeno desde las Américas

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a state-of-the-art review of the permanent campaign in the Americas, examining it both as a concept and as a political and communicative phenomenon. It analyzes three geographically situated scholarly traditions within the continent: the United States, Canada, and Latin America. The research organizes existing approaches around six causal categories commonly used to address the phenomenon. However, upon identifying a methodological gap in causal articulation, the study employs process tracing to construct three exploratory theoretical models that unify these approaches. This facilitates progress toward the hypothesis that the permanent campaign constitutes a presidential strategy generating path dependence, thereby altering the democratic conditions from which it emerges. In this vein, the article proposes a new taxonomy of governmental communication. While the research does not empirically test these theories, it establishes a critical distinction between the permanent campaign and personalism,

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una revisión del estado del arte sobre la campaña permanente en las Américas, tanto como concepto como fenómeno político y comunicativo. Se analizan tres tradiciones de estudio geográficamente situadas en el continente: Estados Unidos, Canadá y América Latina. La investigación organiza los enfoques existentes en torno a seis categorías causales comúnmente utilizadas para abordar el fenómeno. No obstante, al identificar un vacío metodológico en la articulación causal, se emplea *process tracing* para construir tres modelos teóricos exploratorios que unifican dichos enfoques. Esto permite avanzar en la hipótesis de que la campaña permanente constituye una estrategia presidencial que genera un *path dependence*, alterando las condiciones democráticas de origen. En esta línea, el artículo propone una nueva taxonomía de la comunicación gubernamental. Aunque la investigación no somete a prueba las teorías, sí establece una distinción entre campaña permanente y personalismo, sostiene que esta estrategia no es exclusiva de los gobiernos

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argues that this strategy is not exclusive to left-wing governments, and posits the potential for studying diverse cases or case clusters in Latin America through the integration of historical institutionalism and process tracing.

Keywords: permanent campaign; American continent; political-electoral cycle; governmental communication; process tracing.

de izquierda y plantea la posibilidad de estudiar distintos casos o bloques de casos en América Latina mediante la integración del neoinstitucionalismo histórico y el *process tracing*.

Palabras clave: campaña permanente; continente americano; ciclo político-electoral; comunicación gubernamental; process tracing.

Introduction[1]

The permanent campaign —PC hereafter— is a political and communicative phenomenon that emerged in the late 1950s to describe the act of governing through communication (this article focuses exclusively on the governmental permanent campaign, emphasizing its scope and prevalence within the executive branch, thereby excluding opposition-led permanent campaigns). Thus, discussing this concept across diverse theoretical traditions inherently invokes a pejorative term, as —within the strict logic of the political-electoral cycle— a candidate who becomes president should no longer remain in campaign mode. The acts of governing and communicating become fused, distorting the political-electoral cycle and the foundational characteristics of democracy through the formation of an unconstitutional *path dependence* that undermines the principle of power alternation (Conaghan & de la Torre, 2008; Heclo, 2000; Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017).

In order to advance the hypothesis via the exploratory theoretical construction of causal mechanisms, this article is structured into four sections. The first section contextualizes the political-electoral cycle and the taxonomy of governmental communication based on Chávez-Cabrera's (2024) framework. The second section conducts a state-of-the-art review of the PC concept, tracing its definitions, evolution, and six identified approaches —potential causal links— across three geographically situated traditions: the U.S., Canada, and Latin America. The third section examines process tracing as a methodological tool for building exploratory theoretical causal mechanisms, enabling the unification of PC (as the outcome of interest) with its causes by organizing potential links into diverse causal configurations.

[1] This article is based on the research conducted for Cynthia Chávez-Cabrera's master's thesis, "Campaña permanente como decisión política de los gobiernos latinoamericanos: abriendo la caja negra de la presidencia de Rafael Correa (2007-2013)".

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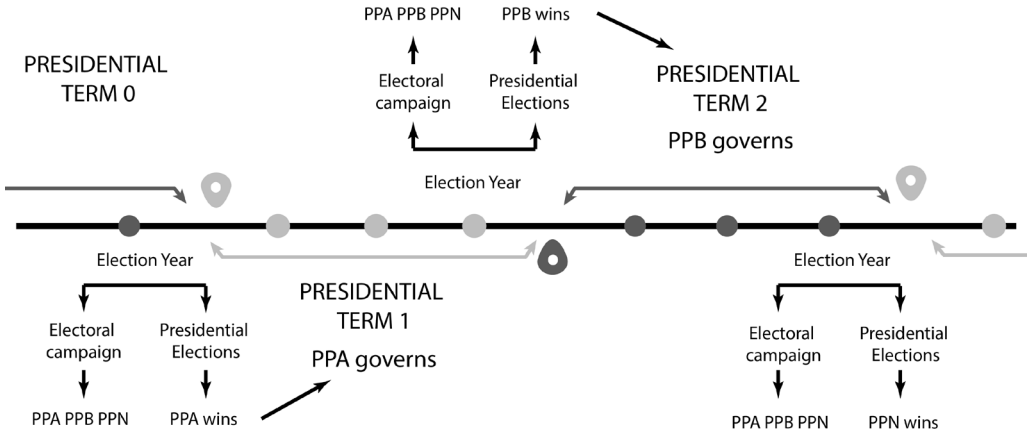
The fourth section synthesizes three exploratory theoretical causal mechanisms. Finally, the conclusions outline future research agendas.

Basic premises for understanding the permanent campaign

Political-electoral cycle

Numerous political scientists (Dahl, 1997; Huntington, 1996; Linz, 1998; O'Donnell, 2010; Przeworski et al., 1998; Sartori, 1988, 2003; Schmitter & Karl, 1996; Schumpeter, 1996) argue that democracy hinges on a temporal variable institutionalizing the participation of multiple political parties in electoral contests. This participation is governed by constitutionally enshrined periodic rules ensuring that elections "periodically produce winners and losers" (Przeworski in O'Donnell, 2010: 27). Constitutions and related laws establish fixed presidential terms (ranging from four to six years in Latin America), with the final year designated as an "electoral year" to organize the subsequent presidential election. This "electoral year" operates under a complex system of electoral calendars regulating voting procedures to meet the conditions of fairness, transparency, and periodicity outlined in the definition of democracy (Huntington, 1991: 7 cited in O'Donnell, 2010: 27). Rules govern candidacy eligibility, campaign conduct, voting processes, vote counting, and the determination of winning parties and candidates. As illustrated in Figure 1, electoral campaigns are discrete events conducted under equal temporal (and often budgetary) conditions by all competing parties and candidates. Thus, a clear distinction exists between being "in campaign" (electoral year) and "governing" (non-electoral or inter-electoral period).

Figure 1
Political-electoral cycle



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Prepared by the author based on Huntington (1991: 7 in O'Donnell, 2010: 27), taken from Chávez-Cabrera (2024: 16).
Note: PP = political party. The letters A, B, and N represent the number of political parties, which can be two or more.

Taxonomic proposal for government communication

Political communication is subdivided into two distinct categories: electoral communication and governmental communication. Heclo (2000) identifies key differences: first, their temporal scales —electoral communication spans months, while governmental communication spans the entirety of a presidency. Second, their purposes diverge: electoral communication, driven by competition, aims to maximize votes through persuasion, whereas governmental communication collaboratively builds consensus through deliberation to advance collective projects.

Fara and Sutelman (2018: 21) further delineate four substantive differences. On the one hand, electoral campaigns involve *1)* limited responsibilities toward the publics which have *2)* high expectations of persuasion. The *3)* crises they address revolve around winning elections or positioning for future contests, operating within a *4)* narrow scope of societal issues. Conversely, governmental communication *1)* assumes full responsibility for *3)* resolving ongoing crises throughout the governance period. This is managed by a permanent committee facing *2)* a public that demands not publicity but transparency regarding policy decisions and outcomes. Here, *4)* the societal problems addressed are typically large-scale.

Building on these distinctions proposed by Heclo (2000) and Fara and Sutelman (2018: 21) (visualized in Figure 1), Chávez-Cabrera (2024) develops a spectrum-based taxonomic framework. This taxonomy positions PC as a strategy incumbent presidents employ to transform governance into a perpetual legitimization of their actions, effectively rendering every day in office an "election day." The taxonomy centers on interactions among three actors: the president, the media, and citizens. After critiquing earlier taxonomies by Mouchon (1998), Ponce (2013), and Amadeo (2016), Chávez-Cabrera (2024) advances their own classification, detailed in Figure 2.

Institutionalized governmental communication *a)* reflects the canonical and formalized state of communication, where the president addresses citizens through media outlets with targeted speeches while delegating spokesperson roles to ministers. This model is characterized by openness and transparency, focused on providing information and data to foster dialogue and consensus. In contrast, crisis governmental communication *b)* arises during unexpected events that compel the president to temporarily monopolize information dissemination to ensure public safety, during which media freedoms are curtailed until normalcy is restored. However, governmental communication as a PC *c)* institutionalizes the monopolization of information sources—absent any compelling justification—through a friend-enemy

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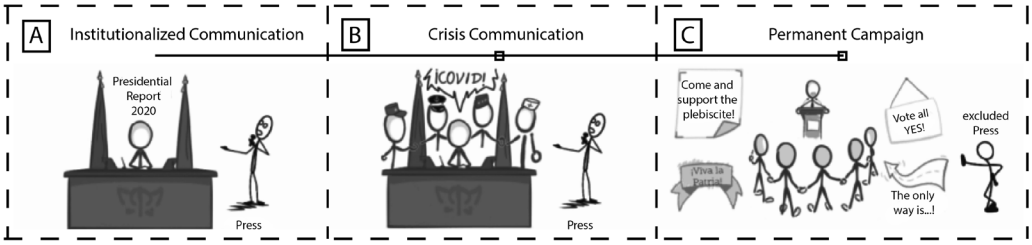
logic, transforming democracy into an endless contest for legitimacy. Here, media are marginalized, and citizens are subjected to relentless communication strategies to secure support for the incumbent. This undermines democratic foundations by distorting the principle of power alternation, creating an unconstitutional path dependence (Conaghan & de la Torre, 2008; Heclo, 2000; Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017).

Figure 2
Taxonomic proposal for government communication



Partial cut from the original prepared by Chávez-Cabrera (2024: 36).

Permanent campaign: definition and causal approaches

General definitions and conceptual evolution

Blumenthal (1980: 7) describes the PC as the "ideology of our age," referring to strategic governmental communication. He defines it as "the result of image-making combined with strategic calculation, turning governance into a perpetual campaign and reconstructing government as an instrument to sustain the popularity of elected representatives" (Blumenthal, 1982: 7). Heclo (2000: 15) notes that the PC emerged haphazardly in the mid-20th century through the convergence of "politically sophisticated individuals, communication technologies, and profit/nonprofit organizations" driven by a "voracious pursuit of public approval."

Though Blumenthal (1980, 1982) is the term's foremost exponent, its conceptual evolution began earlier. Heclo (2000: 1-3) traces its roots to political scientists, consultants, and journalists who shaped this informal institution (Helmke & Levitsky, 2012). Key milestones include:

- 1959: Neustadt (1993) emphasized presidential power as persuasion, arguing that informal influence over key figures defines leadership.
- 1960: Grafton (New York Times) warned of politicians' growing reliance on opinion polls.
- 1974: Mayhew linked congressional success to relentless reelection campaigns.

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- 1976: Caddell, Carter's advisor, drafted *Initial Working Paper on Strategy*, urging a "non-ideological ideology" for reelection.

Post-1980, studies expanded on the PC, including analyses of the plebiscitary presidency (1980s-90s), which ties presidential success to public approval, enabling near-absolute agenda control. By 1997, King critiqued U.S. politicians' excessive campaign-mode governance, while Drew (1998) linked declining political quality to a "culture of money" in partisanship. Mayhew's 1974 focus on Congress broadened to all political offices by 1998 (Heclo, 2000: 1-3). Collectively, these developments cemented the PC as a pejorative term for post-election political communication.

Approaches from Geographically Situated Traditions: U.S., Canada, and Latin America

The PC has been extensively studied in North American, European, and Australian contexts (Canel & Sanders, 2010: 9-10). In the U.S. and Canada, it is viewed as unconstitutional, as it exploits the first presidential term to campaign for reelection, eroding democratic quality (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 3). In Latin America, the term is less common (due to its Anglicism), though empirical parallels exist. Regional complexity and fragmented scholarship —separating political communication from political science— have hindered unified analysis.

In the U.S. Tradition, Heclo (2000: 19-27) identifies six factors driving the PC's U.S. origins:

1) The steady decline of party systems.
2) Policies accommodating diverse interest groups, from marginalized to powerful.
3) Reliance on political funding for advertising.
4) Shareholder-like activism (e.g., lobbying).
5) Emergence of new communication technologies.
6) Advances in political technologies, notably opinion polling.

Building on these six causes, subsequent studies —detailed in the following subsections— have further articulated the phenomenon. As Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) describe these recent decades as the "third age of political communication," the PC reflects a governance style fixated on winning rather than governing. McChesney (2008) frames the PC as propaganda's resurgence, while Herman and Chomsky (2002) critique the structural state-media relationship as "manufacturing consent." Hess (2000: 49) argues that the PC was invented by those in power, repurposing electoral tactics for governance. As a governmental strategy, the PC frames political events through a singular lens, suppressing alternative interpretations. In this context, the media is pivotal in agenda-setting and agenda-building (Kaid, 2004a). Cook (2005) contends that "media are no longer merely part of politics;

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they are even part of government," as governing and campaigning dissolve into one (Ornstein & Mann, 2000: 219).

Canada has similarly engaged with this political-communicative phenomenon. Despite its parliamentary system, Canadian scholarship highlights parallels with the U.S. context. Marland, Lennox, and Giasson (2017: 11) identify "hyperpartisanship" as a defining trend, with power concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office, driven by relentless reelection efforts through partisan discipline and strategic communication. Canadian parties, since 2004, have pursued five strategic objectives under the PC framework Marland, Lennox, and Giasson (2017: 17):

1) Controlling communication,
2) Exploiting economic resources,
3) Concentrating power to redefine norms,
4) Institutionalizing voter database management (using polls to tailor campaigns)
5) Securing power through minority-winning coalitions.

These objectives have been analyzed across governance, political communication, public administration, and political science (Savoie, 1999, 2010; Aucoin, 2011, 2012; Kozolanka, 2014; Elmer et al., 2012; Esselment, 2014).

In Latin America, the PC is rarely studied explicitly but emerges indirectly through related variables (Blumenthal, 1980). While scholars like Amadeo (2016) and Canel and Sanders (2010) acknowledge its regional presence, Noguera (2001: 79) observes the blending of campaign, governmental, and opposition strategies to retain power. Campo (2018: 50) notes that:

> the permanent campaign is employed to attract the undecided public —*paradestinatarios* (undesignated recipients; Verón et al., 1987:17). It aims to persuade groups resistant to acknowledging transformative national changes by leveraging the full media infrastructure and content developed over time.

Finally, scholars like Conaghan and de la Torre (2008) have applied the term to analyze 21st-century socialist governments in Latin America, examining the phenomenon through political science frameworks aligned with regional realities: populism emerging from the widely criticized deinstitutionalization of party systems. These governments often lean toward plebiscitary democracies, distorting the direct democratic foundations they claim to uphold, rooted in historical legacies of clientelism and patrimonialism that further enable hyper-presidentialism.

The following six causal approaches are common across the three geographically situated scholarly traditions: *1)* party-system decay, *2)* breaking from the establishment: political inclusion of diverse interest groups and the rise of outsiders/populists, *3)* political financing: electoral funding, shareholder activism in governance, and media patrimonialism, *4)* emer-

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gence of communication and political technologies, *5)* negative campaigning and media control, and *6)* executive power concentration: hyper-presidentialism, *caudillismo* (strongman politics), and clientelism.

Problems with the party system

In the U.S. context, Heclo (2000. 19) identifies two seemingly contradictory elements driving the PC in the United States. On one hand, political parties have strengthened by sharpening ideological distinctions to differentiate themselves to voters, yet this polarization has fragmented the party system. Conversely, parties face decline due to a causal chain creating a vicious cycle of path dependence. As parties lose their ability to nominate candidates capable of mobilizing voters through sustained, legitimate connections, elections devolve into personalized contests marked by a "free-for-all atmosphere" of political personalism. While this dynamic weakens traditional party formalism —where voters rarely identify with political elites— it fosters direct candidate-voter relationships, transforming politicians from "party loyalists" into "political free agents" (Heclo, 2000: 19-20).

Canada's political landscape is defined by hyperpartisanship and electoral volatility. Aucoin (2011, 2012, cited in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 15) attributes this to the New Political Governance (NPG) model, where electoral and budgetary reforms incentivize perpetual competition under a "winner-takes-all" logic. This shift replaces the traditional focus on a single electoral year with continuous coalition-building (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 21). However, Clarke et al. (1979; 2009, cited in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 18) note that while Canada's party system decline began in the 1960s, its flexible parties now outnumber those in the U.S. This fuels growing electoral volatility, as weak party-voter ties push governing parties to campaign incessantly during interelectoral periods to retain support (McNeney & Coletto, 2017).

In Latin America, party systems face profound challenges rooted in institutional fragility. Mainwaring and Scully's (1995) seminal study categorized 12 countries into three groups: institutionalized systems (Venezuela, Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Argentina), incipient systems (Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador), and hegemonic-in-transition systems (Mexico, Paraguay). Their analysis revealed that incipient systems were particularly susceptible to patrimonialism, clientelism, and the rise of populist outsiders (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995: 88-90).

Subsequent research by Alcántara and Freidenberg (2001a: 20-22) documented significant fragmentation across 18 Latin American countries by the late 20th century, contrasting post-democratic transition dynamics with evolving realities. Freidenberg (2016) later updated this work, noting radical shifts in Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Peru, where party

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systems collapsed entirely. Levitsky and Murillo (2010: 32) attribute these trends to systemic deinstitutionalization and representation crises, while Helmke (2007: 28) warns of a self-reinforcing cycle: declining institutional legitimacy lowers the costs of further attacks, perpetuating instability. By the early 2000s, party systems in Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru had collapsed, reshaping political landscapes (Levitsky & Murillo, 2012: 25-26), and by 2015, Freidenberg (2016: 526) identified similar collapses in Bolivia and Venezuela. While these developments may seem disconnected from the PC, they intersect through populism, *caudillismo*, and clientelism —historical legacies that enable hyper-presidentialism and blur governance into perpetual campaigning.

Leaving the establishment: political inclusion of diverse groups and the rise of outsiders and populists

The U.S. tradition acknowledges that the 20th century brought inclusive policies. Diverse social and interest groups demanded voice, vote, and a seat at the decision-making table, sparking debates over the distinction between being included and having access. Nominal inclusion of historically excluded groups was insufficient; they sought full access through effective political and civic participation, guaranteeing minimal rights via participatory democracy, transparency, accountability (oversight), and good governance (Heclo, 2000: 20). However, politicians —facing a party system offering neither incentives nor career stability— began capitulating to powerful interest groups (Heclo, 2000: 21).

The PC evolved from these two groups into a tool perpetuating a vicious cycle of vulnerability in the political system. Professionalized elite efforts orchestrated and amplified a supposed "right to voice" serving their interests and patrons (Ornstein & Mann, 2000: 231) under a plebiscitary democracy model. The core objective of these independent politicians lay in breaking from the establishment and differentiating themselves from others, as Caddell (1980: 42) asserted in his memo:

> In designing a strategy for the Administration, it is important to recognize that we cannot successfully separate politics from government […] Occasionally, the result of an apolitical government is positive, but most of the time it leads to voter discontent and eventual political disasters. When politics is divorced from government, the talented and well-intentioned people working in public administration often act without understanding why they were elected and begin implementing policies that run counter to voters' expectations and desires […] In essence, this is my thesis that governing with presidential approval requires a continuous political campaign. (Caddell, 1980: 38-39)

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Something quite similar occurred in Latin America but under a different name. Mayorga (2006) argues that the decline of the party system is the primary cause for the emergence of outsiders and populists. By 2015, Freidenberg (2016: 526) identified that the collapse of party systems in Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Peru culminated in the rise of outsider politicians. As Mainwaring (1999 in Torcal, 2015: 9) asserts, a weakly institutionalized system entails parties lacking autonomy, becoming mere extensions of individual leaders or oligarchic elites. Similarly, Mainwaring and Scully (1995: 102) and Ruiz and Otero (2013: 168) warn that weak institutionalization increases the likelihood of outsiders and/or populists entering the political arena, heightening personalist politics and disincentivizing programmatic party structuring (O'Donnell, 1994).

The arrival of outsiders can strain Executive-Legislative relations by promoting *a)* gridlock due to difficulties in fostering collaboration with other legislative factions (Linz, 1990; Pérez-Liñán, 2007) or *b)* executive overreach when holding a legislative majority (Basabe-Serrano, 2017), enabling their political movements to become relevant parties within the system (Mainwaring, 1993). Both paths fuel political instability and high electoral volatility (Pedersen, 1979 in Carreras, 2012: 1454). Structural explanations for their emergence, rooted in party system crises, include historically unmet socioeconomic demands. Corrales (2008) finds that voters facing economic hardship are more prone to support outsiders, driven by long-term economic memory and punitive voting against establishment parties (Fiorina, 1981; Benton, 2005 in Carreras, 2012: 1460) through negative or antiestablishment identities (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019).

Outsiders may be new politicians without prior careers who form new parties —often mere electoral vehicles (Mainwaring, 1993)— or compete within traditional parties (Carreras, 2012: 1456). As Carreras (2012: 1455) cautions, internal distinctions among outsiders complicate attempts to homogenize the term, particularly when scholars like Linz (1994 in Carreras, 2012: 1455) conflate outsider traits with populism and antiestablishment rhetoric. Thus, it is critical to differentiate: not all outsiders are populists, nor are all populists outsiders. Nonetheless, as Siavelis and Morgenstern (2009) argue, presidential behavior is shaped by the processes that bring leaders to power.

Regarding populism, perspectives are divided. Laclau (2005) contends that populist leaders forge direct, unmediated communication with followers, consolidating unmet demands into a "single democratic subject" and promising redress in exchange for loyalty. Critics, however, identify risks. Levitsky and Loxton (2019), Arato and Cohen (2019), and Urbinati (2019) view these practices as distorting democracy, stifling freedoms of association and expression under leader oversight. Scholars further assert that the PC aligns with populist performativity (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013) and ideational frameworks (Hawkins, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira, 2017), where politics is mediatized and dramatized (Amadeo, 2016; Dinatale & Gallo, 2010).

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Murillo (2018: 166) identifies three root conditions for Latin American populism: "the construction of popular sovereignty, historical state weakness, and the impact of political-economic cycles." These conditions explain enduring patterns, such as invoking an imagined community inclusive of historically excluded groups, unfulfilled campaign promises due to institutional fragility, and widening inequalities amid economic uncertainty (Murillo, 2018: 169-171). The concept emerged from the 1930s-40s regional phenomena studied by Gino Germani (1965 in Murillo, 2018: 167-168). Since then, ideologies have evolved, adapting populist strategies from *a)* classical 1930s-40s populism to *b)* 1990s neopopulism and *c)* 21st-century radical populism under "socialisms of the 21st century" (Murillo, 8: 168).

Analyzing radical populism through Murillo's (2018) historicist lens requires acknowledging that inequality drives populist leaders to homogenize "the people" against the establishment via unifying yet confrontational identities (de la Torre, 2021: 33-34). As Roberts (2007) explains, economic decline and market reform uncertainties during democratic transitions weakened mass parties and labor organizations, creating space for outsiders and populists. Finally, studies across populism's three phases highlight populists as media innovators. Their power lies in rhetoric and charisma, legitimizing their rule while symbolically dismantling critical media (de la Torre, 2021: 35-36). As Conaghan and de la Torre (2008) conclude, populists ultimately deploy PC strategies and plebiscitary presidencies, necessitating analysis of both their discourse and practices.

Political money, electoral financing, shareholdings in government activism, and media patrimonialism

The PC, as a governmental communication strategy, requires substantial political funding to achieve its objectives (Heclo, 2000: 26), which in turn entrenches economic interests in politics. The PC represents an investment by politicians in themselves and the media, as "campaigns have grown large and permanent because the government has grown large and permanent" (Heclo, 2000: 27). Hess (2000: 44) and Corrado (2000: 93) term this the media economy, where the PC necessitates costly, highly competitive organizations to secure million-dollar contracts —for advertising slots, public works, or service delivery tied to campaign promises. These causal factors of the PC are independent of any leader's transient personalism, as they normalize practices like lobbying (Heclo, 2000: 29).

Electoral reforms have sought to level the playing field during election years in Canada. However, this has incentivized governing parties to plan elections in non-electoral years by increasing advertising spending (Kozolanka, 2014 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 15) under the premise that in those periods, "there are no spending limits, no advertising restrictions, no polling blackouts, and no need to define what constitutes an electoral

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expense" (Carson, 2014 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 19). This explains rising government advertising expenditures despite efforts to ensure electoral fairness (Savoie, 2010: 96 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 10). Consequently, public funds are routinely diverted for partisan purposes, such as campaign messaging, appointing partisan loyalists to bureaucratic roles —politicizing public administration— billing legislators for overtime spent on party duties, or funding persuasive campaigns to sway public opinion ahead of the next electoral cycle (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 9, 13, 21). The boundaries between political, partisan, and governmental spheres are thus erased (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 7).

In Latin America, media patrimonialism is a persistent practice. "By treating public communication resources as broadcast licenses and state funds as private property, the rule of law is further weakened" (Waisbord, 2013: 119). As Waisbord (2013: 114) has noted, media patrimonialism reflects a commercialized media system without abandoning partisan allegiances, enabling opposition-led permanent campaigns. The ties between media and governments legitimize such actions through deep, mutually beneficial connections.

Emergence of communication technologies and politics

Technological advancements and their political-communicative influence cannot be overlooked. As discussed, technologies like television, radio, and social media have expanded audiences for political messaging (Heclo, 2000: 23). This approach underpins electoral communication studies, exemplified by the Nixon-Kennedy televised debate, which revealed that voters prioritize appearances over substance (Druckman, 2003).

While these technologies can democratize information, they also birth political and electoral marketing (Canel & Sanders, 2010: 17; Kaid, 2004b). Tools for polling and governance management (Bowman, 2000) enable politicians to tailor proposals to voter concerns (Germano, 2018). The rise of polling industries also spawned political PC and marketing consultants (Heclo, 2000: 24-25), echoing Ornstein and Mann's (2000: 231) critique of partisan interests in plebiscitary democracy.

In Canada, Marland, Lennox and Giasson (2017: 18) note that social media, blog-driven news cycles, and 24/7 information access have accelerated the political cycle. Political communication thus becomes a network linking politicians, citizens, and media (Elmer et al., 2012 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 15). Mouchon (1998) observes that television centralized public attention on legislative and presidential initiatives, while the professionalization of communication experts —evident in the growing ranks of campaign consultants and advertising specialists— has entrenched "war rooms" and Prime Ministerial communication offices (Savoie, 2010: 96; Delacourt, 2016 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 9-10).

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The legitimization of exclusive campaign tools for governance —to fulfill electoral promises (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 5)— permeates the political-electoral cycle. Electoral strategies infiltrate governmental communication via voter databases and opinion polling to pinpoint flexible partisans or *paradestinatarios* (Craft, 2017; Patten, 2017). Electoral laws even mandate regular voter data sharing with parties (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 19). Market-researched targeting of donors and patrons (Marland & Matthews, 2017) exposes Canadian citizens to continuous pre-electoral advertising framed as official government communication, yet promoting ruling-party agendas (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 21).

Negative campaigns and media control

The logic of perpetual campaigning extends beyond promoting the ruling party's achievements. Canadian studies on the PC identify widespread negative campaigns against opposition parties (Savoie, 2010: 96 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 10) and a contentious, restricted relationship with media. On the latter, the executive grants access to a limited pool of journalists for inquiries, requiring pre-submitted questions to control responses. Press conferences are replaced with staged photo ops and moderated Q&A sessions with handpicked allies (Lawlor, 2017). Pro-government journalists dominate, reducing media to relaying official narratives post-facto (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 13).

This Canadian reality parallels Latin American populist leaders' electoral and governance practices. Populist candidates frame politics as an antagonistic struggle, simplifying it into a "Schmittian friend-enemy logic" (Laclau, 2005). Once in power, they govern through Manichean hostility, symbolically "killing" opponents (Finchelstein, 2019; Laclau, 2005; Levitsky & Loxton, 2019; Urbinati, 2019; Weyland, 2019). They exclude the old elite, crafting a new one under the guise of reclaiming popular sovereignty (Laclau, 2005) —embodied solely in the leader (Arato & Cohen, 2019). Social mobilization is homogenized into a binary discourse (pro/anti-government), depoliticizing citizens (Urbinati, 2019) as the leader claims to represent the whole (*pars de toto*) (Arato & Cohen, 2019; Urbinati, 2019), erasing democratic pluralism. Conaghan and de la Torre (2008) note that 21st-century socialist populists institutionalize state-controlled media and communication laws to sustain the PC.

The concentration of power in the executive: hyper-presidentialism, caudillismo and clientelism

Canadian scholarship observes that, despite parliamentary systems vesting popular legitimacy in the legislature, power increasingly concentrates in the executive through persuasive

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communication (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 22). Expanding executive agencies —political, marketing, and communication consultants (Savoie, 1999 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 10)— orchestrate government messaging under strict party discipline (Esselment & Wilson, 2017).

Party discipline empowers the Prime Minister to enforce unified communication among legislators while leveraging partisan influence (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 8). Governance becomes a "message machine" promoting official narratives (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 13). Legislators act as compliant "customer service agents," marketing government programs to voters (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 21). This entrenches ruling-party advantages, stifling democratic alternation (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 22).

In Latin America, executive power concentration is analyzed through hyper-presidentialism (Basabe-Serrano, 2017), rooted in caudillismo (strongman rule) and clientelism. Menéndez-Carrión (1986) notes these traits define weakly institutionalized party systems, distinguishing clientelism —paternalistic vote-for-services exchanges— from populism. Clientelism relies on localized trust networks, contrasting with populism's mass electoral machinery. Yet, populist leaders in power often exploit existing clientelist networks to entrench caudillista hyper-presidentialism, as seen in Ecuador (Bowen, 2020).

Process tracing as a method for generating exploratory causal theories

Process tracing —PT hereafter— responds to within-case inference, aiming to deepen case studies (Goertz, 2017: 2). According to Zamora (2018: 27), PT prioritizes the temporality of events by emphasizing in-depth case research design (George & Bennett, 2005 in Collier, 2011: 823), as it involves tracing causal mechanisms (Bennett, 2008: 704). Glennan (1996: 52 in Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 1) defines a causal mechanism as "a complex system that produces an outcome through the interaction of its parts." Thus, PT entails, in George & Bennett's (2005: 206-207) terms, "attempts to identify the intervening causal process —the causal chain and mechanism— between an independent variable and the outcome of the dependent variable."

Using this method allows observing causes and effects, probing mechanisms, chains, and causal forces (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012) as systems (Beach, 2016 in Zamora, 2018: 28), while considering time as a causal factor (Falleti, 2016) and contextual conditions (Kreuzer, 2016). It also serves as a tool for testing and refining theory through scientific realism and configurational thinking (Zamora, 2018: 28). PT assumes asymmetric causality: it does not explain the absence of cause or effect but focuses on the cause and outcome of interest. Finally, it examines conditions, not variables (Beach & Pedersen, 2016a: 3-4). Conditions derived from theoretical concepts form causal mechanisms, opening the black box of causal

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relationships to explain "a theorized connection between cause(s) and effect, where each part of the mechanism is clearly described in an ordered sequence […] of entities engaging in activities that transfer causal forces" (Beach & Pedersen, 2016b: 4). In this framework, PT seeks to construct explanations as follows:

$$X \rightarrow MC\ (A, B, C, \ldots, N) \rightarrow Y$$

Where:

X: cause
MC: causal mechanism composed of N conditions
Y: effect

Process tracing is not a historical narrative of events (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 33-35). Opening the black box of causal mechanisms involves transforming empirical narratives into generalizable causal mechanisms —middle-range theories (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 61). Narrating events thus becomes a way to observe empirical manifestations for formalization and subsequent falsification in other cases, acknowledging causal heterogeneity precludes sufficiency claims (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 34). A deterministic, mechanistic view of causality accounts for complexity and asymmetry (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 25-26). Mechanistically constructing a causal mechanism requires moving from the above representation to identifying links through entities (nouns) executing activities (verbs) that transmit causal forces in a specific sequence until reaching the outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 50). Additionally, prior conditions (priors) must be considered when conceptualizing triggers (Little, 1996: 37 in Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 49-50).

Four types of PT exist, based on objectives and case selection (Beach & Pedersen, 2019: 9): *a)* theory testing, *b)* theory building, *c)* theory revision, and *d)* outcome explanation. This article employs the second type (see Figure 3) at an exploratory level, recognizing its inductive nature —starting from facts to propose middle-range theories (Beach & Pedersen, 2013: 16-18, 60)— to be tested and refined in future studies using theory-testing or theory-revision PT. Theory-building PT is used when a potential cause-outcome relationship is suspected, but the linking mechanisms remain unknown (Beach & Pedersen, 2019: 10).

As a creative and iterative process, it is not possible to develop a step-by-step manual, as Beach & Pedersen (2013: 17, 2019: 270) assert. However, the authors propose a three-step sequence beginning with *1)* evidence collection, followed by *2)* inference of observable manifestations for corroboration, leading to *3)* inferring the existence of a plausible causal mechanism. These steps are complemented by two case types determining methodological rigor based on research objectives: *a)* studies focused on illuminating potential links in the causal chain, or *b)* studies focused on how causes generate the outcome of

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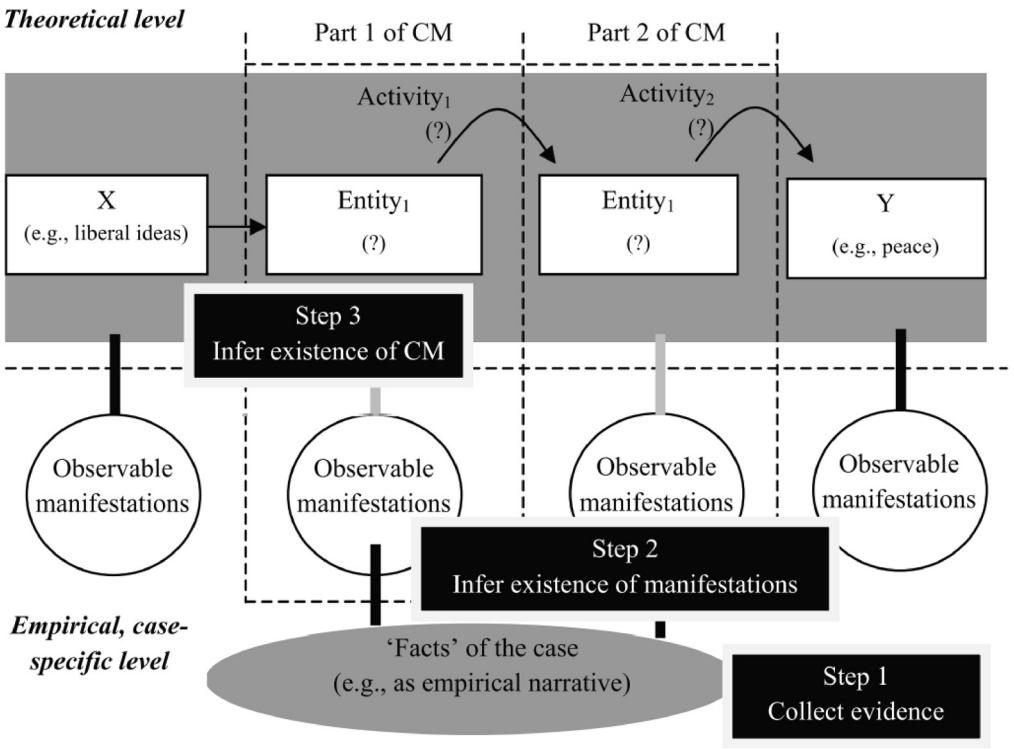
interest. This article, as exploratory theoretical work, adopts the first approach. It uses evidence and observable manifestations from theories and concepts across the three cases (Canada, the U.S., and Latin America) to infer causal mechanisms for future testing, exemplified by Chávez-Cabrera's (2024) Ecuadorian case study. A methodological caveat guiding this study is the absence of a widely recognized middle-range theory for Latin America, prompting a regional exploratory proposal. Future research should test, and refine, this theoretical framework across regional blocks or country groups with shared institutional characteristics.

Figure 3
Process tracing of theory building



Beach & Pedersen (2013: 17)

Finally, Beach & Pedersen (2019: 271) recommend reviewing existing theoretical and empirical literature across disciplines, identifying explanatory frameworks that focus analytical attention on structural, institutional, ideational, or psychological levels (Parsons, 2007: 96).

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This advice informs the organization of three potential causal chains per case: *1)* a political-institutional process, *2)* a socio-structural process, and *3)* a media process, aligning with Mazzoleni's (1998) classification of political communication actors.

Exploratory Construction of Causal Mechanisms for the Permanent Campaign

Theoretical Causal Mechanism for the U.S.

Figure 4 presents a graphical proposal of the causal chain links for the U.S. case, the simplest model in this research. The first process, centered on the political-institutional sphere, identifies two priors. On one hand, selected candidates fail to retain voters due to the party system's loss of legitimacy amid the exclusion of certain populations (Heclo, 2000: 19). On the other, ideological radicalization within a bipartisan system emerges. These elements drive candidates to abandon party loyalty —no longer a career safeguard— and adopt personalist strategies to gain power (Heclo, 2000: 19-20). Once elected, these personalist presidents continue leveraging informal practices, using persuasive power (Neustadt, 1986) to secure political funding for government marketing (Heclo, 2000: 26) and voter preference data (Heclo, 2000: 23-25), culminating in the PC.

A second simultaneous process stems from socio-structural explanations. Here, the priors include a historically fragmented U.S. society with excluded groups seeking full citizenship rights since the 20th century (Heclo, 2000: 20-21). Expanded voting rights and inclusion policies prompt parties to poll these groups, deploying political technologies and consultants to win votes during elections and governance (Heclo, 2000: 23-25). However, as noted in the political-institutional process, parties also require political funding. Opinion polling technologies thus identify pressure groups willing to fund government marketing, influencing policy decisions and campaign promises. This transforms the PC into a systemic, multibillion-dollar political investment rather than a fleeting personalist tactic (Heclo, 2000: 27-29).

A third concurrent process involves the media system. As Heclo (2000: 21-23) details, media commercialization and new technologies expanded reach, prioritizing audience retention. This prior fuels the "telenovelization" of politics, where media assign roles to politicians during elections. Some media entities, acting as de facto pressure groups, profit from government advertising contracts (Heclo, 2000: 27-29).

In sum, these three processes produce the PC —understood in the U.S. context as governing through communication, prioritizing legitimacy and presidential popularity for reelection over substantive governance (Heclo, 2000: 2). Heclo (2000: 18) condemns this practice as unconstitutional, eroding democracy, exacerbating party system failures, and homogenizing public opinion.

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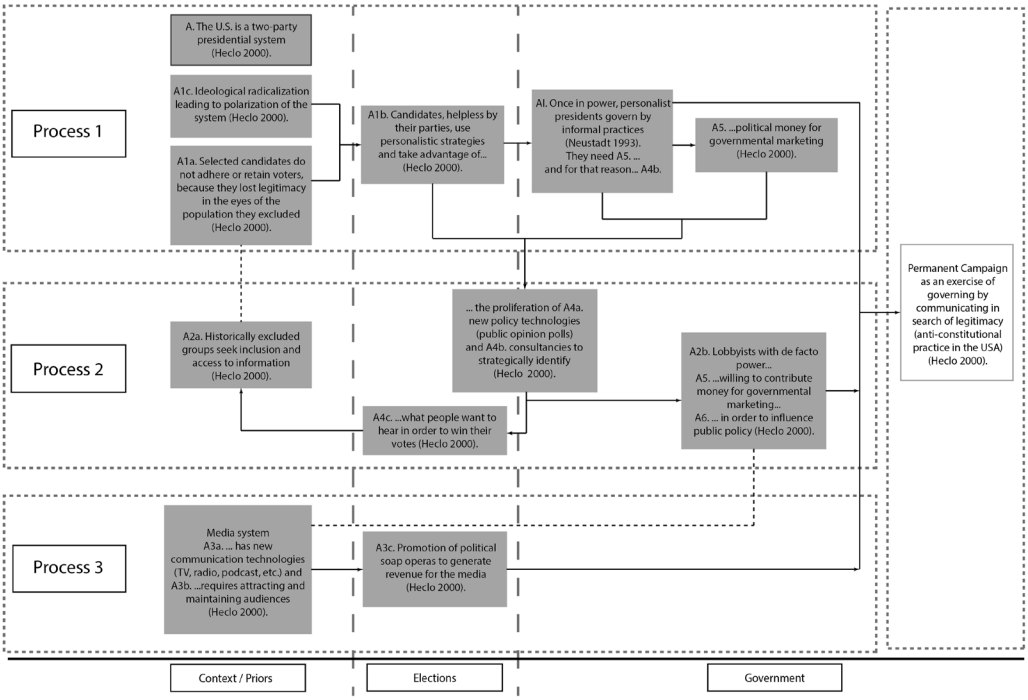
Figure 4
Theoretical causal mechanism of the permanent campaign for the U.S.



Based on Heclo (2000) and Neustadt (1993), taken from Chávez-Cabrera (2024: 142).
Note: Light gray refers to the U.S. Code "A" refers to the U.S., followed by link coding.

Theoretical causal mechanism for Canada

Canada's causal mechanisms reflect the complexities of its multiparty parliamentary system. The political-institutional process originates in hyperpartisanship under a "winner-takes-all" logic (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 21) and the declining legitimacy of party systems (Clarke et al., 1979; 2009 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 18). This environment necessitates minimal coalitions for governance and fosters flexible parties (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 18). Once in office, Prime Ministers consolidate power, embedding electoral tactics into governmental communication (Savoie, 2010: 96; Delacourt, 2016 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 9-10). They exploit interelectoral periods, using budgetary loopholes to divert public funds for partisan advertising (Kozolanka, 2014 in Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 15). Strict party discipline enforces unified messaging and legis-

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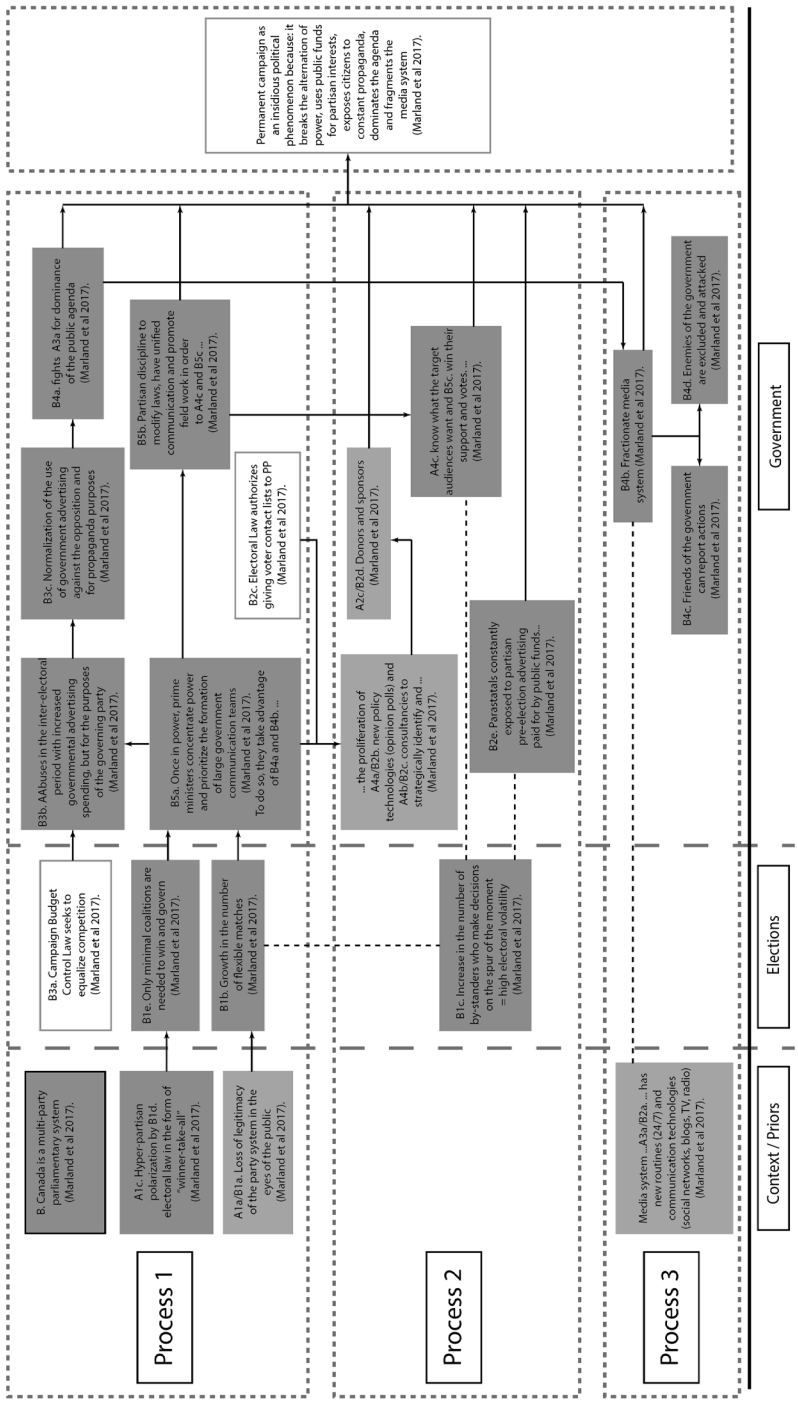
Figure 5
Theoretical causal mechanism of the permanent campaign for Canada



Aggregation of Figure 4 from Marland, Lennox, & Giasson (2017), taken from Chávez-Cabrera (2024: 143).
Note: Light gray refers to the U.S.; medium gray refers to Canada. Code "A" refers to the U.S.; code "B" refers to Canada, followed by link coding.

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lative maneuvers to secure future electoral advantages (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 9, 13, 21), institutionalizing the PC.

The structural process highlights voter disillusionment with parties, driving volatility and creating *paradestinatarios* (Craft, 2017; Patten, 2017). Electoral laws facilitate voter data sharing (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 19), while legislators adopt roles as "customer service agents" to promote policies and secure reelection (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 21). Publicly funded pre-electoral propaganda blurs lines between governance and partisanship (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 7), saturating citizens with partisan messaging.

The media process is shaped by 24/7 information access (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 18), prompting Prime Ministers to fragment media into allies and adversaries. Critical outlets face exclusion, while compliant media receive government advertising contracts contingent on favorable coverage (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 13). This strategy mirrors U.S. dynamics, where media commercialization prioritizes audience retention over impartiality.

These mechanisms align with Marland, Lennox and Giasson's (2017: 17) five strategic PC objectives, underscoring the systemic erosion of democratic boundaries in Canada.

Theoretical causal mechanism for Latin America

In Latin America, three complementary processes are observed, represented in Figure 6. The political process begins with the loss of party system legitimacy as parties detach from their social bases (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). This creates electoral opportunities for outsider or populist leaders to form personalized parties (Ruiz & Otero, 2013). Once in power, these presidents centralize authority under the banner of reclaiming popular sovereignty (Murillo, 2018) and prioritize large governmental communication teams (Waisbord, 2013). Power concentration manifests in two ways: *1)* political instability as presidents abuse partisan powers to alter laws and constitutions (Levitsky & Loxton, 2019; Mainwaring, 1993), and *2)* the normalization of mediatized politics to attack opponents and propagandize their governance (Waisbord, 2013). By dominating public agendas through plebiscitary democracy (Conaghan & de la Torre, 2008; Torcal, 2015), presidents institutionalize one facet of the PC. The structural process highlights Latin America's economic uncertainty and entrenched inequality, unaddressed by ruling elites (Laclau, 2005; Murillo, 2018). Disillusioned by unmet demands, voters punish establishment parties by supporting outsiders or populists through anti-establishment identities (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). This fuels volatility as *paradestinatarios* make contingent electoral choices (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). Executives exploit political technologies and public funds to saturate citizens with pre-electoral propaganda, a hallmark of media patrimonialism (Waisbord, 2013), further entrenching the PC.

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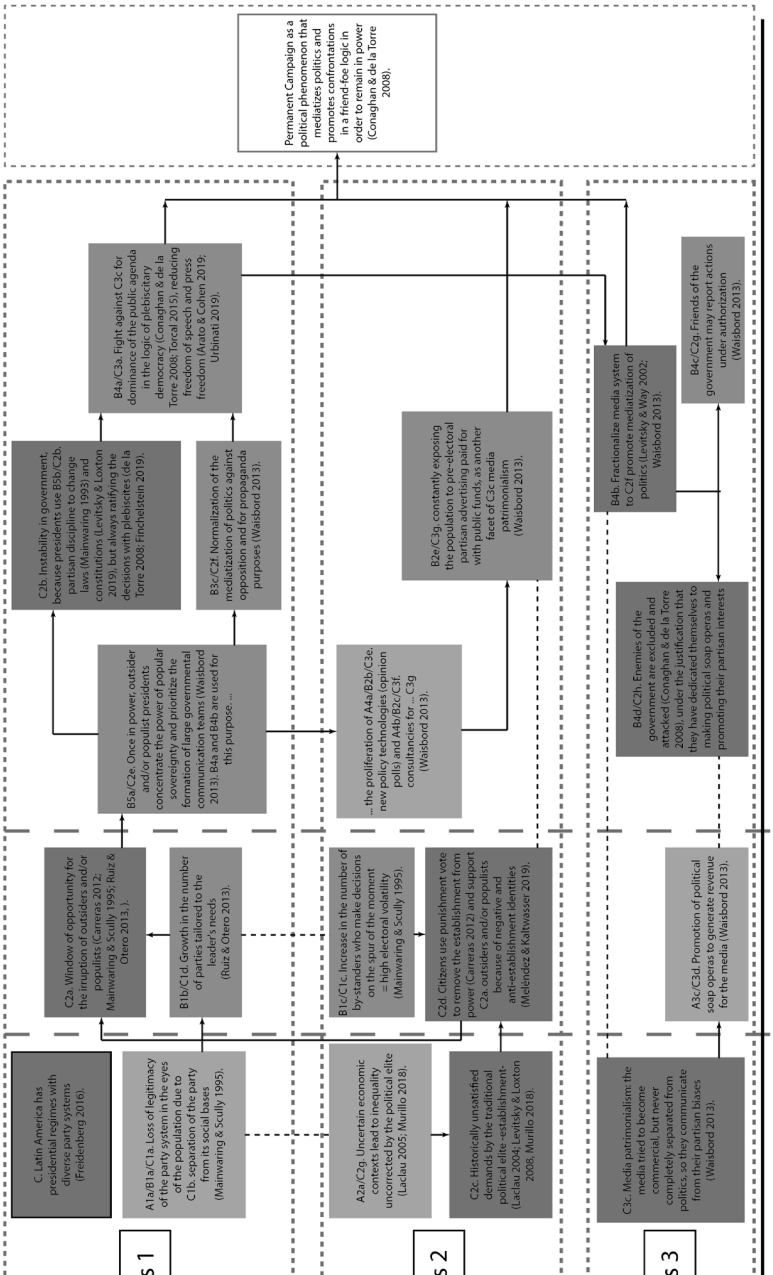
Figure 6
Theoretical causal mechanism of the permanent campaign for Latin America



Aggregation of Figures 4 and 5, based on Arato & Cohen (2019); Carreras (2012); Freidenberg (2016); Laclau (2005); Levitsky & Loxton (2019); Levitsky & Way (2002); Mainwaring & Scully (1995); Murillo (2018); Ruiz & Otero (2013); Torcal (2015); Urbinati (2019); Waisbord (2013), taken from Chávez-Cabrera (2024: 110).
Note: Light gray refers to the U.S. case; medium gray refers to Canada; dark gray refers to Latin America. Code "A" refers to the U.S.; code "B" refers to Canada; code "C" refers to Latin America, followed by link coding.

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The media process stems from media patrimonialism, where Latin American outlets commercialized without shedding partisan biases (Waisbord, 2013). Populist leaders, framing media as elite extensions, fragment systems to control narratives (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Critical outlets are excluded; compliant ones receive regulated state advertising (Waisbord, 2013), dramatizing politics (telenovelización) for profit. This third pathway sustains the PC. Together, these processes frame the PC in Latin America as a democratic threat (Levitsky & Loxton, 2019; Weyland, 2019). Like Canada, it subverts power alternation by mediatizing politics and fostering friend-enemy media dynamics, enabling incumbents to campaign interelectorally for reelection (Conaghan & de la Torre, 2008).

Conclusions

To conclude this state-of-the-art review and exploratory theoretical framework, which explains the permanent campaign (PC) across three geographically situated traditions, the research objective is revisited: organizing six common approaches into three causal chains with subtypes of mechanisms (political-institutional, socio-structural, and media-related). A shared concern among scholars is the PC's potential to become a path dependence that undermines democracy (Heclo, 2000; Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017; Urbinati, 2019). To test this claim through middle-range theories, the three exploratory hypotheses derived from this study —framed as causal mechanisms— converge on the same outcome despite institutional and structural differences, linking causes to the result of interest.

In the U.S. case, Heclo (2000: 18) condemns the PC as unconstitutional, arguing it distorts democracy, exacerbates party system failures, manipulates public opinion, and homogenizes citizens into a mass, resulting in plebiscitary presidencies. In Canada, the PC is seen as an insidious political phenomenon that disrupts power alternation, diverts public funds for partisan ends, bombards citizens with propaganda, and fragments media systems (Marland, Lennox & Giasson, 2017: 22). Similarly, Latin America's populist trends profoundly alter democracy by weaponizing direct mechanisms (e.g., plebiscites, referendums) under the guise of participatory governance (Urbinati, 2019). Altman (2005: 204) notes a surge in direct democracy tools since 1991, though top-down initiatives often serve authoritarian strategies. However, 21st-century socialist regimes have repurposed these mechanisms into plebiscitary presidencies fixated on popularity contests (de la Torre, 2013; Conaghan, 2008; Weyland, 2019; Torcal, 2015).

Having identified the institutionalized PC as a continental pattern, this article proposes future research agendas. First, refining these exploratory mechanisms through case-by-case analysis using historical institutionalism to test and revise theories. Regional or institutional bloc comparisons are also recommended. Crucially, researchers must demystify the PC as

a solely left-wing phenomenon by examining right-wing leaders' use of this strategy. Additionally, integrating opposition-led permanent campaigns —often amplified by biased media— could reduce bias in assessing unconstitutional path dependence claims. Finally, scholars should bridge political science and political communication to unravel how informal institutions like the PC emerge and reproduce.

About the Author

Cynthia Chávez-Cabrera holds a MA in Comparative Politics from Flacso Ecuador and a MA in Latin American Studies from UASB-E. Her research focuses on political communication, sociology of education, and (anti)feminisms. Her recent publications include: *Mujeres y poder en la Academia ecuatoriana: Trayectorias, disputas y redes de resistencia* (2025) UASB; "Kommerzialisierung des Staates durch Nation-Branding: Analyse durch die Flüssige Moderne von Zygmunt Bauman" (2017) in Anna Marcos Nickol, Melanie Schmidt y Sophie Zäper, *Sag es auf Deutsch! - ¡Dilo en alemán! Aportaciones al Primer Congreso Interdisciplinario en Alemán*. PUCE.

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