

# Agents of Representation: The Organic Connection between Society and Leftist Parties in Bolivia and Uruguay

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/pas](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/pas)**Santiago Anria***Dickinson College***Verónica Pérez Bentancur***Universidad de la República, Uruguay***Rafael Piñeiro Rodríguez***Universidad Católica del Uruguay***Fernando Rosenblatt***Universidad Diego Portales***Abstract**

Parties are central agents of democratic representation. The literature assumes that this function is an automatic consequence of social structure and/or a product of incentives derived from electoral competition. However, representation is contingent upon the organizational structure of parties. The connection between a party and an organized constituency is not limited to electoral strategy; it includes an organic connection through permanent formal or informal linkages that bind party programmatic positions to social groups' preferences, regardless of the electoral returns. This article analyzes how the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism, MAS) in Bolivia and the Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) in Uruguay developed two different forms of relationship with social organizations that result from the interplay of historical factors traceable to the parties' formative phases and party organizational attributes. Party organizational features that grant voice to grassroots activists serve as crucial mechanisms for bottom-up incorporation of societal interests and demands.

**Keywords**

organic connection, social actors, popular sectors, political parties

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Parties are central agents of interest intermediation in democracies. The party politics literature and the democracy literature hold that elections provide the way for citizens and organized interests (principals) to keep party leaders (agents) accountable.<sup>1</sup> This is the basic assumption that underpins different approaches to the study of political parties and democratic competition. In the Downsian approach, electoral incentives, derived from citizens' preferences, drive the parties' policy positions.<sup>2</sup> In the structural approach, party stances reflect social structures and cleavages.<sup>3</sup> Both approaches have important limitations and blind spots. While the Downsian approach fails to recognize that parties' policy positions are also explained by parties' organic connection with societal organized interests, the structural approach assumes this connection is automatically determined by the social structure. However, the type of party-society connection and the way organized interests can hold party leaders accountable are contingent upon parties' organizational structure. How do party organizational structures shape interest incorporation in modern democracies?

According to interparty competition theory, democratic political competition is set by institutions, the political economy, and the preferences of the electorate at large. These three components are crucial in determining parties' electoral decisions. Especially in dependent economies, parties are more prone to tensions between remaining responsive to their core constituency and retaining positive electoral returns and policy outcomes.<sup>4</sup> However, under similar institutional and political economy contexts, some parties remain responsive to their core constituency whereas others undertake policy switches that differ sharply from the preferences of their social bases.<sup>5</sup> In turn, it is also possible to find parties that, under very dissimilar conditions, remain responsive to their core constituency. What, then, are the mechanisms that make this continued responsiveness possible?

There has been little systematic comparative analysis of these organizational features, and, yet, the features of a party organization and the type of linkages it has with organized social interests shape the way parties carry out intermediation and representation. More broadly, the policies that parties pursue in government and in opposition are neither exclusively strategic decisions oriented to win elections nor the direct translation of the preferences of its core constituency. Parties' behavior in government and in opposition depends on their organizational traits and their organic linkages with social organizations. Parties that have organic connections constrain the ability of party leaders to adopt short-run electoral strategies that affect the long-term legitimacy of the party in the electorate. Strong organic connections reduce the likelihood of "bait and switch" decision making and sustain the consistency of the party "brand," which may affect the stability of the overall party system.<sup>6</sup>

Roberts specified three models of party-movement connections: the "vanguard" model rooted in the Leninist tradition; the "electoralist" model, or vote-maximizing parties that reach beyond organized social constituencies "to attract the mass of unorganized and often independent voters"; and the "organic" model, in which parties function as a direct expression of social movements.<sup>7</sup> We take this typology a step further and theorize about the importance of organic connections. The connection between a party and an organized constituency is not limited to electoral strategy or

organizational sponsorship. Rather, it includes an organic connection through formal or informal permanent linkages that bind party programmatic positions to social groups' preferences, regardless of the electoral returns.<sup>8</sup>

Parties' organic connection refers to the existence of formal or informal linkages with autonomous organizations of the core constituency and to the party organizational traits that grant power to social actors in the party to constrain leaders' decisions. For leaders (agents) to be constrained by a party's core constituency organizations (principals), the latter should be autonomous. The autonomy of organizations implies that they have the capacity to set and communicate their preferences, regardless of the opinions of the party leaders. To constrain leaders, autonomous organizations also must hold significant clout within parties, regardless of their contingent electoral power. This is achieved when party organizational structures and rules empower these social organizations within parties.

In this article, we analyze the Bolivian *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement toward Socialism, MAS) and the Uruguayan *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front, FA) as two parties that developed organic connections that, in turn, effectively translated bottom-up energies into public policies. Our analysis of the MAS and the FA allows us to elucidate the inner workings of the organic connection between party organizations and social movements and unions, as well as their mutual influences. In both the FA and the MAS, the party's linkage with its core constituency does not manifest itself only during electoral cycles and is not explained by its electoral power. Party leaders are constrained by an organizational structure that is open and internally responsive to unions and social movements. In both cases, party organization matters. It limits leaders' ability to make short-term strategic decisions that might lead to drastic policy switches.<sup>9</sup> Social movements and unions constrain party leaders through their formal and informal linkages with the party organization. Therefore, both parties' capacity to incorporate the popular sectors' demands is stable because it is not subject to the unconstrained will of the leadership.

Despite their similarities in channeling bottom-up incorporation, these two cases also illustrate that organic connections can be achieved in different ways. Organizational rules facilitate bottom-up input in decision-making processes in Uruguay's FA. By contrast, in the case of Bolivia's MAS, societal influence is enabled by the power granted to grassroots movements in candidate selection procedures. The MAS also differs from traditional European mass parties of the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> It offers a path to organic connection different from the one theorized by Bartolini, which focused on European leftist parties and unions.<sup>11</sup> The two cases reveal the importance of providing channels for wielding influence within parties. Parties that weaken bottom-up channels for wielding influence might retain linkages with organized constituencies but lose their organic connection to these constituencies. The case of the Brazilian Worker's Party illustrates this trajectory.<sup>12</sup>

Examining the internal life of parties adds to one of the most underdeveloped literatures in comparative politics, namely, the debate about what happens inside the "black box" of parties.<sup>13</sup> While recent scholarship has focused on the conditions that affect parties' abilities to take root and reproduce over time and survive,<sup>14</sup> it has not addressed

the internal organizational traits that explain parties' ability to incorporate demands and interests. We open the black box of party organization and party-movement ties to better understand the processes of incorporating different popular sectors' interests and demands in the context of the expansion of rights in Latin America.

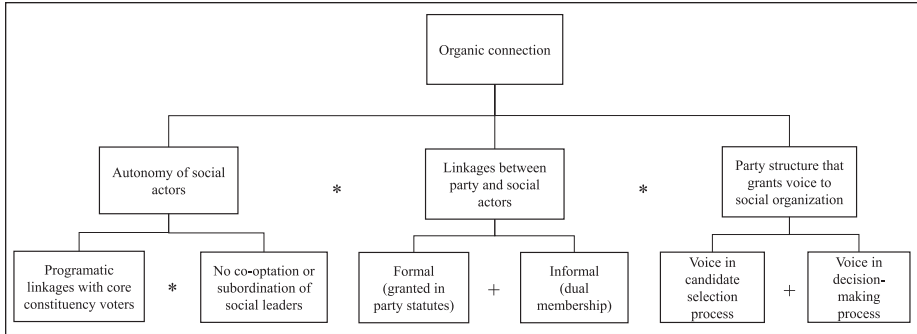
The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we discuss the political incorporation of popular sectors in Latin America during the early and mid-twentieth century and the process of reincorporation in the aftermath of the neoliberal wave. Second, we discuss our case selection and the outcomes we seek to explain. Third, through an analysis of the Bolivian MAS and the Uruguayan FA, we identify the organizational mechanisms that facilitate the channeling of popular sector demands.

## **The Centrality of Organic Connections**

Political parties are key vehicles for political interest intermediation and the translation of ideas and programs into policies. They provide a vital link between states and societies. Although the recent party politics literature has paid little attention to the role of organizational traits, it is critical to understand how parties channel interests and demands that emanate from society. Different party structures influence representation beyond the dynamics of interparty competition; the internal structure of parties, whether the parties are in power or in opposition, shapes the quality of representation and affects public policy outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, studying their organizational structures can yield a high analytical payoff. If parties are a key mechanism of representation and interest intermediation,<sup>16</sup> how do they do it? Existing theoretical approaches cannot account for the observed differences in the decisions parties make regarding whether to remain responsive to a core constituency while in government and in opposition.

The literature has theorized two main ways to understand parties' role in the process of interest intermediation: one that is centered on the strategic decisions of candidates and parties and the dynamics of political competition; and a second perspective that emphasizes how the social structure determines the representation of interests through parties. In the former, parties make strategic decisions depending on the calculated electoral gains of those choices. Thus, citizens' preferences are incorporated by default in the electoral competition because parties are exclusively oriented to maximize electoral results.<sup>17</sup> In the latter, political parties reflect social cleavages; hence, parties are the automatic translation of existing societal divisions.<sup>18</sup> Both theories are usually considered as opposing perspectives on democratic competition. However, rather than opposing views, these theories can be seen as approaches that focus on different aspects of democratic competition. Parties represent societal interests, and, at the same time, party leaders have short-term competitive pressures that push them to change programmatic positions to win elections.

When the preferences of parties' core constituencies are aligned with the preferences of the median voter, parties do not face tensions regarding how to match the representation of their core constituency with their electoral goals.<sup>19</sup> However, in cases where the electoral interests of the party leaders collide with the interests of the core constituency, party leaders face a trade-off between representing the party's



**Figure 1.** Attributes of organic connection.

core constituency and pursuing their electoral objectives. In such cases, the representation of interests is not automatic or taken for granted and depends on the existence of an organic connection that constrains party leaders as agents of the core constituency of the party.

Our proposed concept of organic connection has three main attributes: first, the existence of autonomous social actors who constitute the core constituency of the party; second, the presence of formal or informal linkages between the party and these social organizations; and third, a party structure that grants power to social organizations' interests in constraining leaders' decisions (voice). These three dimensions of the concept are necessary and jointly sufficient attributes for the existence of an organic connection (see Figure 1).

The autonomy of social actors implies a programmatic connection between the party and its core constituency. Autonomy also implies that the leaders of the social organizations of the core constituency are not co-opted by party leaders. Autonomy in both dimensions is the condition for social organizations to formulate their preferences and communicate them regardless of the opinions of the party leaders. When the linkage between the party and its core constituency voters is based on clientelism, voters face a trade-off between voting programmatically and accepting the clientelistic exchange.<sup>20</sup> Clientelistic linkages involve coercion by the party toward voters and voters' concomitant loss of autonomy.<sup>21</sup> Clientelism diminishes voters' ability to monitor leaders' decisions and the policies that parties promote in government or in opposition. This allows party leaders to pursue policies opposed to the interest of its core constituency to satisfy the interest of other constituencies that have the capacity to monitor the leaders.<sup>22</sup> A second necessary condition for the autonomy of social organizations is that leaders of these organizations are neither subordinate to nor co-opted by party leaders. Co-optation or subordination prevents leaders of social organizations from formulating and expressing preferences.<sup>23</sup>

Organic connection also requires formal or informal linkages between the party and social organizations of the core constituency. Formal linkages imply that party statutes institutionalize the participation of social organizations or movements in the party

structure, as in the traditional social democratic or labor-based parties.<sup>24</sup> Linkages can also be informal and occur at the leadership level or at the grassroots activists' level. Leaders and grassroots activists can directly participate in the party structure and, thus, have dual membership. Alternatively, social organizations' leaders can have strong informal ties with party leaders.<sup>25</sup> These informal ties may also involve looser connections (such as fluid alliances) characterized by relations of exchange and negotiation, where parties and their social bases are independent entities that, at times, may have contrasting—or even conflicting—interests.

The organic connection requires that social actors be able to have voice and veto in the party structure decision-making processes,<sup>26</sup> regardless of their electoral power. When party structures grant power to social actors, leaders are constrained by their core constituency in what they can do. Party organizational rules can grant voice to the core constituency, regardless of the formal or informal nature of the linkage. Voice can manifest itself in the inclusion of grassroots or social organization leaders in the party's processes of candidate selection or in the party's decision-making bodies and leadership structures.<sup>27</sup>

The family resemblance structure of the attributes "linkages between party and social actors" and "party structure that grants voice to social organizations" yields variation in the ways an organic connection might be established.<sup>28</sup> That is, the fact that each attribute has multiple components, none of which is logically necessary, yields different ways to grant voice and to maintain linkages between parties and social actors. For example, parties can have informal linkages with social actors and grant voice through candidate selection, as in the case of the MAS in Bolivia. Alternatively, they can have informal linkages but grant voice to social actors through the decision-making process, as in the case of the Uruguayan FA and the social democratic parties in Europe. Parties also can have formal linkages with social actors but grant voice in different ways. Moreover, a political party may have formal or informal linkages and grant voice in both the decision-making and candidate selection process, as in the case of the Argentinean Justicialist Party before 1987.<sup>29</sup> Finally, parties can change the manner in which they maintain the organic connection over time.

The organic connection explains the difference in party reactions to pressures and incentives derived from the electoral connection. Organic connection reduces party leaders' room to maneuver in pursuit of short-term strategic adaptation. Party structures that do not constrain leaders allow them to more freely decide the direction of the party's policy stances. They do not involve grassroots empowerment and often lead to political co-optation and clientelistic exchanges. Burgess and Levitsky emphasize that strong bureaucratic structures (especially in Latin America) have prevented certain parties from adapting to exogenous changes.<sup>30</sup> Yet, what the authors conceive of as rigidity and lack of adaptability is also what keeps parties responsive and reliable to citizens because policy switches are less likely. In contrast, when there is an organic connection between the party and its core constituency, leaders' positions and authority are constrained. In such contexts, it is less likely that the party will become a vehicle to advance the goals of party cliques or even of a single personalistic leader. This connection makes the party permanently permeable to the demands of its core

constituency and facilitates the continuous entrance of demands of social actors who otherwise lack electoral power or the capacity to lobby in Congress. In short, it strengthens the ability of the core constituency to shape the political agenda. While this constraint on party leaders might at times endanger the party's electoral performance, it facilitates the channeling of societal interests and demands over time. Thus, organic connections contribute to the institutionalization of parties, as citizens come to treat them as legitimate agents of representation.<sup>31</sup>

The theory of the cartel party depicts the evolution of parties as a process of gradual distancing from society driven by the attractive force of the state.<sup>32</sup> As parties become more intermeshed with the state, party organizational structures lose value and the party gradually cuts its ties with society. Advocates of the cartel party thesis argue that the dependence on state funding rather than on member contributions has brought about extreme forms of professionalism, bureaucratization, and hierarchical control in parties, generating an increasing gap between parties and organized constituencies. However, not all parties have responded similarly to the trends highlighted by Katz and Mair.<sup>33</sup> As in the case of party adaptation guided by electoral incentives, party cartelization faces an opposing force in the organic connection, which anchors the party in society. In other words, even if parties have taken major steps toward strategies of electioneering, it would be a mistake to downplay the significance of organic connections. As Skocpol and Tervo note, "Ongoing relationships and connections matter in politics, especially when buttressed by formal organizational capacities."<sup>34</sup> Below, we turn to our two cases, which show how organizational configurations, relationships, and processes channel societal demands. They also present empirical evidence regarding the organic connection that links social constituencies to national politics and governance—evidence that is crucial for understanding political representation and how parties actually work.

## Cases

Parties have undergone deep changes in the wake of democratization and market reforms. The canonical mass-based party with strong societal roots and organic linkages with interest associations, as described by Duverger,<sup>35</sup> is largely defunct—in Latin America and beyond. Yet, both new and established parties still develop organic connections with organized constituencies that swell the parties' ranks and enhance their mobilizational power. Some groups, such as informal sector workers, have developed ties with parties that channel their claims in the formal political arena. Others, such as indigenous or peasant groups, have even formed their own political parties to compete in elections and gain access to the levers of policymaking.

We analyze the Bolivian MAS and Uruguayan FA because they are cases of bottom-up incorporation of popular sectors' interests and demands based on organic connections. In both cases, the incorporation was conditioned by structural factors (e.g., inequality and the historical nature of the state-labor relationship) and was facilitated by the institutional and organizational setting in which it took place. Both of these dimensions have received analytical attention in the literature. Instead, we focus on the

role played by the organic connection between the party and society during the “second incorporation.”<sup>36</sup>

The literature on the left turn in Latin America has usually classified the MAS in Bolivia as a member of the radical Left and the FA in Uruguay as a moderate leftist party.<sup>37</sup> However, the MAS governments in Bolivia and the FA governments in Uruguay shared important similarities in the realm of incorporation that make the cases stand out. In the first place, they both achieved the most significant reductions of inequality in the region and achieved the greatest expansion of the middle classes.<sup>38</sup> The incorporation of indigenous peoples in Bolivia has been remarkable when viewed within the long arc of Bolivian history. Bolivia has among the greatest proportion of indigenous people and peasants in Latin America.<sup>39</sup> However, these groups historically have been systematically excluded from the political process at the national level. The recognition of the Bolivian state as a “plurinational” polity attempted to redress this historical inequality. The MAS governments designed and implemented policies that directly benefited these previously marginalized sectors.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the political incorporation of Bolivia’s multicultural population marks a major transformation in Bolivian history.<sup>41</sup>

In Uruguay, the FA governments (2005–10, 2010–15, 2015–20) furthered the incorporation of formal workers through an increase in unionization rates and the revival of corporatist institutions. They also incorporated categories of informal workers who had not been included in the first incorporation, such as rural and domestic workers. Also, the incorporation in Uruguay included the demands of the feminist and LGBT movements, leading to an expansion of the welfare state with a gender perspective. Thus, the Uruguayan case combines both material and postmaterial incorporation.<sup>42</sup>

Both cases incorporated demands and interests from organized civil society in bottom-up fashion. Both the MAS and the FA were central agents of the second incorporation process, and both achieved a reduction of inequality as well as the inclusion of different material and postmaterial interests and demands. These societal changes reflect both governing parties’ organic connection, which produced responsiveness to their social constituencies, which, in turn, constrained the parties’ decisions and provided policy inputs.

The two parties differed, however, in their organizational structure. The MAS party organization is less structured in formal party bodies, and the top leadership plays a more significant role in determining the direction of the party and in the government’s decision making, even if, at times, the party’s organized social bases wield significant countervailing influences.<sup>43</sup> In the FA, the channeling of demands and interests from below is guaranteed by a set of organizational rules that facilitate and promote grassroots members’ participation and afford them a significant voice in the party’s decision-making structure. The FA also includes a diverse set of social movements that all have strong, yet informal, ties with the party.<sup>44</sup>

The FA and the MAS thus present two positive cases of popular sector incorporation led by party organizations in the aftermath of the neoliberal wave. However, the parties achieved this common result with differing organizational structures, both of which successfully channeled constituent demands in a bottom-up fashion. Our



in-depth analysis of these cases identifies two different mechanisms that led to the same outcome (equifinality): both achieve the organic connection. We provide a thick description of two mechanisms that connect party organizations and social movements. These mechanisms facilitate the bottom-up participation and channeling of demands that led to the social transformations observed in both countries. Our analysis does not seek to systematically control for potential confounders, which is, in any case, impossible to achieve with a small *n*. Our analytic goal, rather, is to identify the mechanisms of the organic connection in both cases. Thus, we aim to contribute to theory building.<sup>45</sup> The analysis in this article does not imply the existence of other cases that also have organic connections. The evidence for this article draws on our previous extensive research regarding both the MAS and the FA.<sup>46</sup> In our research, we have conducted in-depth interviews—with party grassroots activists as well as with leaders of social movements, unions, and political parties—and we have reviewed party documents and press materials.

## The Bolivian MAS

The Bolivian MAS emerged in 1995 as an electoral arm of a rural social movement. A distinctively bottom-up party in its genesis, the MAS captured the presidency ten years after its founding and governed for fourteen years. It was forced out of power in 2019 and returned to power quickly after losing it—an impressive electoral comeback. This comeback can be partly explained by the realignment of major movements behind the MAS or by the party's ability to repair the organic connections between the leadership and its social bases after those ties had greatly frayed. This comeback also revealed that the MAS cannot be reduced to a personalistic tool for a charismatic leader or understood simply as a co-optative machine under the tutelage of a unified leadership. It performs classic representative functions for major segments of Bolivia's population and remains the country's only national-level force that is anchored in Bolivia's popular sectors. Currently, the MAS is undergoing a sea change and renovation—a “return to the origins” type of dynamic—while outliving its dominant leader.

Following the reverse dynamic of party formation theorized by Aldrich,<sup>47</sup> the MAS was formed by densely organized social constituencies as a small, localized “political instrument”—a term that indicates the founders' dislike of political parties. A sponsoring group, namely, a rural social movement of coca producers,<sup>48</sup> generated its own leadership, formed an electoral vehicle to compete in elections, and maintained some degree of political autonomy and leadership accountability.<sup>49</sup> More than twenty years since its founding, coca producers still conceive of the MAS as their “political instrument” under their control, even though the party expanded territorially and organizationally to become an “instrument” for a broader set of urban and rural movements representing subordinate social groups.

Much of this expansion happened by establishing organic linkages with those movements, for example, through the opening of party lists to local movement leaders who would run for electoral office under the MAS ticket.<sup>50</sup> This not only allowed

the MAS to benefit from grassroots knowledge of local dynamics, but it also helped to ensure massive turnout for the party's candidates.<sup>51</sup> Such a linkage approach, in turn, served as a channel for political incorporation: it led to the large-scale inclusion of representatives nominated by subordinate groups linked to the MAS and their increased ability to shape decision making.<sup>52</sup> The creation of these associational linkages promoted the political support of these diverse local organizations and created incentives to develop close ties between local elites and the party, which facilitated party building.<sup>53</sup>

Movements shaped the MAS party life from the beginning. Even before the MAS took power at the national level, the party leadership "consulted regularly with its social movement bases through assemblies and congresses" and encouraged grassroots participation in the development of party programs, candidate selection, and electoral platforms and strategy.<sup>54</sup> In its rapid march to power, between 1995 and 2005, the party became a hybrid fusion of party and movement networks and developed at least two distinctive social coalitions. The central coalition—the party's core constituency—is highly stable and targeted; it is based in Bolivia's rural sector and consists of the coca growers in the Chapare region, as well as three national-level peasant associations, which still conceive of the MAS as their creation under their tutelage and which still today largely provide financial resources, guidance, and mobilization power to the MAS.

The MAS has maintained strong organic connections to its core constituency, and there are permanent interactions between grassroots leaders and party leaders, who work closely together selecting party candidates and defining party electoral strategy. This often happens in meetings called *ampliados*. From the point of view of the party leadership, *ampliados* and other forms of union meetings, like *cabildos*, serve not only to shape party strategy but also to collect valuable information from the rank and file. In those meetings, there are also strong pressures from below to keep the leadership accountable to the rank and file over aspects of policy, a pattern that is closely associated with the movement origins of the MAS and the legacies of social mobilization that forged the party organization since its inception. However, it bears noting that the idea of strict bottom-up control in this segment is not always empirically accurate. As has been well documented, the MAS's top leadership does not always respect the wishes of the social bases, and tensions and challenges of coordination between the rank and file and the party leadership over aspects of party strategy and policy were common when the MAS was in power.<sup>55</sup>

In its vertiginous march to power, the MAS also developed a larger peripheral coalition with a broad set of urban-popular organizations in Bolivia's largest cities, where neighborhood associations, trade unions, cooperatives, and other forms of local organization play a key articulatory role. The expansion of the party to urban areas took several paths. On the one hand, the MAS opened party lists to local leaders who ran for electoral office under the MAS ticket at three levels of government (national, departmental, and local).<sup>56</sup> This allowed the MAS to expand organizationally, diversify its base, and incorporate new groups into its structures. This strategy also created strong incentives for mutual cooperation.

On the other hand, social protests against neoliberal reforms, which shook the country between 2000 and 2005,<sup>57</sup> helped to extend the reach of the MAS to urban areas and expand its base. The MAS swelled in size by channeling much of the political energy behind those massive, largely indigenous anti-neoliberal protest movements. It used the crisis context and adopted a “supraclass strategy” of electoral recruitment akin to the one theorized by Przeworski and Sprague.<sup>58</sup> Evo Morales played a key role—mostly via charismatic appeals—uniting a diverse set of subordinate actors into a powerful rural-urban coalition that coalesced around the MAS.<sup>59</sup> While the MAS did not lead the protests, it used the period of social mobilization to perform a classic representative and programmatic function: it bundled issues together by finding common programmatic ground with a diverse set of constituencies, which allowed the party to make important inroads in urban areas. By adopting the discourse of the most mobilized groups during these popular struggles and including their claims and demands in its party program, the MAS became an instrument “anchored” in a broader set of subordinate social actors. These movements ultimately toppled two presidents, swept aside traditional parties, challenged Bolivia’s free-market development model, and carried Morales to the presidency in 2005 behind the largest share of the vote in Bolivia’s modern democratic history. Morales and the MAS assumed national power with a mandate for deep, inclusive change—an agenda of mass popular empowerment developed by the movements that sponsored the party and others that helped to propel Morales to the presidency.

This ten-year period of rapid growth and extension into urban areas—and the evolution of the party apparatus in power, with growing access to patronage resources—posed important challenges to the party’s bottom-up organizational characteristics and threatened the autonomy of sponsoring and allied groups. The party expansion fostered not only the emergence of top-down mobilization strategies, especially in urban areas, but also the co-optation of community and social-movement leaders into mid-level government positions—a process that at the same time compromised the autonomy of many civil society groups.<sup>60</sup> Although expansion posed important challenges to the party’s bottom-up foundational characteristics, the party’s grassroots social bases found ways to preserve relative autonomy and replicate the party’s genetic imprint as expansion occurred. In doing so, they found ways to counteract Michelsian oligarchic tendencies, at least partially.

The weak bureaucratic development of the party provided opportunities for the party’s movement bases to act autonomously, with few bureaucratic constraints. At the same time, the party became increasingly dependent on the leadership of a dominant figure, Morales, who concentrated a great deal of power in his own hands and served as a crucial arbiter-in-chief in internal conflicts and as a source of cohesion.<sup>61</sup> The centrality of his leadership cannot be overstated. Yet, although Morales often had the last word in party affairs, the provision of channels for voice and veto in internal party affairs and policy making was critically important to preserve unity within the party and maintain political and programmatic coherence.<sup>62</sup> Charismatic leadership alone was insufficient to sustain cohesion, which involved a great deal of negotiation and compromise over disagreements.

It also bears noting that, because the MAS never developed strong bureaucratic structures, the ties between the party and movements have often taken different forms. The movements of the core coalition early on formed the key organizational pillars of the party and have been virtually indistinguishable from one another. Other movements have been formally affiliated with the party and have become integrated into the formal party structures, and, through these links, members of those movements have become party members.<sup>63</sup> Still other movements, like the Bolivian Workers' Central, have simply allied themselves with the party temporarily—a pragmatic political alliance where movement leadership mobilizes movement members to vote for the party and movement leaders are included in the party's electoral roster. In short, because the MAS did not invest in robust party structures, movements and popular organizations wielded significant power within the party and also retained autonomous mobilization capacity.

Power within the party meant that movements gained privileged access to decision making once the MAS captured the presidency. In fact, the party's rise to power in 2006 enabled a circulation of political elites that deeply transformed the composition of legislative bodies and state bureaucracies at the national and subnational levels, allowing a wide range of subordinate groups greater voice in national politics.<sup>64</sup> Using O'Donnell's term, Morales's Bolivia can be described as an "incorporating political system."<sup>65</sup> Such a system is defined as one "that purposely seeks to activate the popular sector and to allow it some voice in national politics" or one that "without deliberate efforts at either exclusion or incorporation, adapts itself to the existing levels of political activation and the given set of political actors."<sup>66</sup> This, however, needs to be elaborated further.

The social composition of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly (as Congress was renamed in the 2009 Constitution) has changed dramatically since Morales first came to power.<sup>67</sup> As the MAS exercised power, a key mechanism of political incorporation consisted of how the MAS selected candidates for elective office. Even as the party consolidated power and became electorally dominant, the MAS remained open to bottom-up influence in the realm of candidate selection, particularly in districts where civil society is densely organized, united, and politically aligned with the MAS.<sup>68</sup> A greater degree of grassroots control over the selection of candidates has been consequential in Bolivia's political arena: it led to the large-scale arrival of representatives nominated by popular groups, some of whom have great mobilization and electoral power. A study by Zegada and Komadina reached similar conclusions.<sup>69</sup> It found not only that the sociodemographics of elected representatives have changed since 2006—with increasing numbers of women as well as members of indigenous, peasant, and urban-popular groups—but that, in today's Bolivia, the most important attribute for nomination is having been a leader of a grassroots social organization.<sup>70</sup>

This political incorporation also meant that MAS-affiliated movements continued to influence, constrain, and hold power-holders accountable as the party consolidated itself in office—often steering public policy in their desired direction by either proposing policies or using their mobilization power to veto government initiatives. We do not claim that newly incorporated groups gained complete control over the national

agenda; rather, we suggest that popular sector interests, demands, and priorities became increasingly harder to ignore. The growing presence of well-organized interest groups in representative institutions gave voice to sectors that used to have little influence on how the country was run. In some cases, their behavior served as a check on executive power by providing an oversight function. However, this decentralized mode of incorporation rests on a highly particularistic relationship between the MAS and allied groups and, as such, hinders the ability of representative institutions to work for the common good. The emerging pattern of interest intermediation can be described as one of contentious bargaining. For example, while the Morales administration certainly had its own agenda, it related to allied groups and their demands through policy responses to the mobilization (or threat of mobilization) of those groups.<sup>71</sup> Silva calls these two-way feedback channels between the party and popular movements a “contestatory interest intermediation” regime.<sup>72</sup>

Social movements served as both a source of pressure on and a source of support for the MAS. This combination enabled the party to pass important policies when it confronted a highly mobilized opposition during Morales’s first term (2006–9), such as nationalization of industries and an agrarian reform. Furthermore, social movements served as a partial countervailing force against concentrated presidential authority, particularly since Morales’s second term (2009–14). At times, MAS-affiliated social movements, in their role as pressure groups, helped to pass important redistributive policies, such as *Renta Dignidad* (Dignity Rent) in 2007 and a pension reform in 2010.<sup>73</sup> At other times, MAS-affiliated movements helped block or modify government proposals, keeping Morales more accountable to organized mass constituencies. Examples include the widely discussed “gas riots” of 2010, which forced Morales to reverse his proposal to end the subsidies on gasoline, the TIPNIS crisis, which forced Morales to suspend an infrastructure project, and the virtual blockade of Morales’s proposed general labor law.<sup>74</sup> In all of these instances, and in many others, movements were decisive in changing the course of policy from the bottom up.

Party-movement interactions were not without their tensions, however. They have strained considerably since 2009, when the MAS became electorally dominant, and especially after the 2011 TIPNIS conflict. This dispute led to the splintering of important movements, including some of the indigenous movements that had propelled the MAS to the presidency, into “loyalist” and “dissident” factions. It also weakened their mobilizational capacity.<sup>75</sup> Accounts of Morales’s political demise, in fact, tend to claim that this demobilization was a crucial contributing factor behind the 2019 political crisis. Those accounts rightly point out that only small segments of the party’s social bases took to the streets in the 2019 postelection protests and only offered weak countermobilization to defend their own government.<sup>76</sup>

But, claims of severe demobilization and weakening of the organizational power of Bolivian social movements are overstated. Consider how quickly the MAS reorganized after the coup and the exit of its top leadership, including Morales—a real stress test of the party’s organizational model. Consistent with our understanding of the MAS, sponsoring and allied movements showed independence of action; they at times challenged Morales’s guidelines and deployed strategic behavior, and even prudence

in response to the violently repressive regime that replaced Morales's. After an initial period of confusion in the wake of Morales's ouster, they pushed vigorously to reclaim ownership over the "political instrument" and to revitalize the party's organic grassroots connections. In the process, they also clashed with Morales over tactical positions (especially over how to confront the interim government of Añez) and posed bottom-up pressures to renew the party leadership,<sup>77</sup> experiencing both some successes and setbacks.

The MAS returned to power in 2020 quickly after losing it—with Morales in exile, with limited access to public resources, and facing violent persecution. In that context, most analysts expected that the MAS would collapse and splinter. But it did not. The counterfactual is simple: had this been a typical example of a caudillo-led, clientelistic, and top-down party, it would have been difficult to repair the relations between the leadership and the rank and file to come back and retake power via the next election. Although the repairing of relationships is far from settled,<sup>78</sup> and although new divisions have emerged within the party,<sup>79</sup> the MAS remains vibrant. It remains strongly connected with social movements and is the country's most effective vehicle for channeling popular sector demands.

## Uruguay's Frente Amplio

The FA was born in 1971 as a coalition of political organizations and as a movement of self-organized grassroots activists. Thus, FA leaders and activists usually refer to the FA as a combination of "coalition and movement." One part of this dual structure is the coalition of political organizations known as "factions"; the other is the grassroots members who organize in Base Committees—what the FA calls "the movement"—who are not necessarily affiliated with any of the factions.<sup>80</sup> The FA coalition and movement structures are synthesized in a pyramidal organization with bodies at three levels: the grassroots level, the intermediate level, and the national level. The main body of the party, the National Plenary, comprises delegates of Base Committees and delegates from the party factions, in equal proportion. This composition is replicated in all the other party bodies, commissions, and ad hoc task forces. This interaction between factions and grassroots activists is peculiar and promotes checks and balances and a diffuse power distribution. This complex organizational structure of the FA grants grassroots activists a significant role in party decision making that, in turn, affects the decisions of the party in Congress and in government.<sup>81</sup>

The FA channels and aggregates collective demands via an organic connection with autonomous social actors (unions and social movements). This connection occurs informally at two levels: first, the dual membership and personal ties of social actors' leaders with party leaders; and second, the dual membership of grassroots activists. The latter is complemented by organizational rules that grant voice to grassroots members and, in turn, to social actors' demands. This second level grants power to social organizations regardless of their mobilization capacity and leaders' personal ties. This organic connection limits strategic decisions of party leaders and facilitates the incorporation of demands that permanently emanate from society. The process of

incorporation of social actors' demands or preferences is not exempted from conflicts between the social actors' interests and demands and the strategic goals of party leaders. These conflicts arise when there is a trade-off between pursuing the preferences and demands of social actors and the electoral goals of party leaders.

Social actors with organic connections to the FA are autonomous from the party. Leaders of the social movements are not co-opted, and the party has a programmatic linkage with voters of its core constituency. The FA was born and has always been an ally of the union movement, but the union movement is independent of the party.<sup>82</sup> The FA has also developed strong relations with social movements (e.g., feminists, human rights, LGBT, cooperatives, and students). However, the FA is not a movement party; it is neither the party of the unions (as the Social Democrat party is in Europe) nor the party of a social movement. The social movements have independent structures and authorities that are not controlled by the FA. Although, during the FA governments, some union leaders occupied positions in the administration, the union movement was not co-opted.<sup>83</sup> The electoral competition in the Uruguayan party system is programmatically structured.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the social movements' constituencies are programmatically oriented to the party.

There are strong informal linkages between the party and social actors. There is a deep connection between movements and the FA through the dual membership of elites<sup>85</sup> and grassroots activists;<sup>86</sup> they belong to the party as well as to unions, social movements, or civil society organizations at the local and the national levels (from neighborhood associations to national movements). At the elite and grassroots levels, there is also a deep personal connection. For example, one faction leader of the FA illustrated the relationship that many FA Congress members have with feminist organizations: "We were all close friends, fellow activists for gender equality issues for many years" (personal interview with Marisa Marmisolle). Personal ties and trust also develop at the grassroots level. Juan Castillo, former general secretary of the PIT-CNT (Uruguay's unique central union) and former vice president of the FA, said this in a personal interview with the authors:

We always found, from the unions, during my time, that the grassroots activists were our main ally. They spoke our language, we played by heart. On many occasions, the initiatives on which we [unions and grassroots activists] ended up working together were the result of the united work of the grassroots activists of the FA and the union movement.

Dual membership at the grassroots level acquires relevance because the party organization grants a significant role to grassroots activists in the decision-making bodies of the FA. In this vein, social actors' members, qua grassroots activists of the FA, can promote their agendas and interests within the party. In the FA, grassroots activists send delegates to all the decision-making bodies of the party, including to the most important ones (Congress, the National Plenary, and the National Political Board). The FA has a vertical structure that connects grassroots activists with the party decision making. Moreover, their presence in the FA decision-making bodies is significant. In the National Plenary (the highest decision-making body of the party), half of the

delegates are grassroots activists (Base Committees delegates). In the National Political Board (the executive permanent direction), almost half of the members come from Base Committees. Finally, the FA Congress essentially comprises Base Committee delegates. In this instance, the party defines the ideological and programmatic positions and authorizes the presidential candidates of the party for the open primary presidential elections.

The organic connection of the FA with social actors of its core constituency explains party positions and government reforms during the three FA governments, which were not necessarily aligned with the preferences of the party leaders or of the median voter. This was made possible by the interplay of the three attributes that define the organic connection. Below, we illustrate the role the organic connection (through the dual membership of leaders or the dual membership of grassroots activists) played in three important decision-making processes of the party during the FA governments.

The labor reforms of the FA governments illustrate the effect of the organic connection through informal linkages resulting from social organization leaders' dual membership and their personal ties with party leaders. These reforms were one of the major policy transformations of the three FA governments. In total, more than forty bills concerning workers' rights were approved. These policies led to a significant increase in real wages, the formalization of workers, and the empowerment of the union movement derived from the increase in the unionization rates, especially among private sector employees.<sup>87</sup> One of the most important labor policies was the reinstatement of collective bargaining at the sectoral level (i.e., within various sectors of economic activity). Collective bargaining was also expanded to rural workers and housekeepers.

There is a long history of mutual coordination between the labor movement and the FA through informal linkages (dual membership and personal ties). The organic connection that has existed since the FA's founding consolidated during the 1990s, when the FA and the union movement together opposed market reforms.<sup>88</sup> In those years, the union movement and the party were close partners on different referendums to repeal privatization laws or other pro-market reforms.<sup>89</sup> This collaboration and coordination continued once the FA won the national elections in 2004 and became the governing party. Eduardo Bonomi, a former labor and social security minister during the FA's first government and interior minister in the second and third FA governments, was, in the years before the FA assumed office, the chair of a commission of the FA on the relationship between the party, the government, and civil society. That commission prepared various documents that resulted from meetings with members of the PIT-CNT. A final document was approved in the FA Congress, and, according to Bonomi, that document provided the platform that guided the work of the first labor ministry of the FA (personal interview with Eduardo Bonomi). Eduardo Bonomi describes the crucial role of the unions in the policymaking process:

The majority of the planks in the electoral platform, not only those related to labor policies, were developed with the union movement and, in fact, many of them became signature policies of the FA's first government. This also explains the number of union



leaders who occupied significant positions in the new government, including several ministries.<sup>90</sup>

The reforms implemented by the FA governments were negotiated in an informal space at the local branch of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. This meeting convened union and party leaders, FA representatives and senators, and ministers.<sup>91</sup> The reforms were possible because of the dual membership of union leaders and the personal ties between them and party leaders, built on a shared trajectory of activism against the authoritarian regime and neoliberal reforms since the 1980s. According to Bonomi, even though the final decision was made by the government, “all was discussed” in those meetings (personal interview with Eduardo Bonomi).

The decision to join the campaign to annul the “Ley de Caducidad” (15,848 Ley de Caducidad de la Pretensión Punitiva del Estado, or the Law on the Expiration of the Punitive Claims of the State) illustrates another mechanism through which the organic connection can affect policy outcomes. In this case, as opposed to the labor reforms case, the organic connection occurred mainly through grassroots activists’ dual membership.

The Ley de Caducidad was enacted in 1986, during the first democratic government after the authoritarian regime. It resulted from an agreement between the traditional parties, the Partido Colorado (Colorado Party), and the Partido Nacional (National Party). It established amnesty for crimes committed during the authoritarian regime (1973–84) by the military and the police. Those who supported the bill argued that it was a way to pacify the country. For those opposed (the FA and some minor groups within the traditional parties), the bill granted impunity to those who committed crimes and violated human rights during the dictatorship. In 1989, civil society organizations and the FA successfully called for a referendum to repeal the law, although the referendum failed to receive the necessary votes.<sup>92</sup>

In 2007, in a different political context, civil society organizations again argued the need for a plebiscite to repeal the law, because repealing it through Congress (the FA had the necessary parliamentary majority to do so) would not yield the desired retroactive effects and would not allow the government to put the responsible military personnel on trial. By contrast, annulling the law through a plebiscite that would establish a constitutional amendment included the retroactive effects, among which was the “negation of *res judicata*.” For FA leaders, it was politically difficult to argue for the annulment of the law for two main reasons. First, the Congress of the FA prior to the 2004 national elections decided not to proceed with this because it was a delicate issue at a moment when the FA had a good chance of winning, for the first time, the national elections. Second, Tabaré Vázquez (the first FA president of Uruguay, 2005–10) argued against it, claiming that he would honor his campaign promises.<sup>93</sup>

At the FA’s fifth Congress of 2007, a motion was approved that called on the members to participate in the campaign, initiated by social organizations, to gather the required number of signatures to annul the amnesty law. This resolution was approved almost unanimously by the 1,400 grassroots delegates attending the Congress, and it resulted from the synthesis of around ten different motions, all of which supported the

campaign already set in motion by the social organizations.<sup>94</sup> The position of the party was consolidated at the National Plenary on April 5, 2008, when a voting majority—eighty-one in favor, fifty-three abstentions, and nine opposed—decided to support the campaign to gather the required number of signatures.

The representatives of the grassroots members were decisive in changing the position of the party, putting it in opposition to the president's preferences. The FA's major factions and their leaders—José Mujica's *Movimiento de Participación Popular* (Popular Participation Movement), the *Frente Líber Seregni* (Danilo Astori's *Líber Seregni Front*), and the *Partido Socialista del Uruguay* (Socialist Party of Uruguay)—were aligned with Tabaré Vázquez's position and voted against the FA taking part in the signature-gathering campaign.<sup>95</sup> Although the labor movement and human rights movement decided to start a campaign to promote the plebiscite, the FA's main leaders were reluctant to join the campaign. The pressure exerted by the human rights and union movements' leaders was not enough to change the position of the leadership. Grassroots activists, exercising their voice, granted by FA rules, were responsible for the change in the position of the party to join a campaign that the leadership believed would inflict electoral costs.

The organic connection between the FA and the feminist movement was crucial in winning approval of the legal abortion law in 2012. Discussion within the party regarding the legalization of abortion illustrates the existence of informal ties with civil society at the grassroots and at the leadership level. These linkages pushed the party to promote the decriminalization of the termination of unwanted pregnancies. This initiative was not among the main concerns of the FA faction leaders. It was essentially supported and pushed by feminist organizations, FA women grassroots activists, and—mainly female—legislators.

Legal abortion was one of the feminist movement's main grievances after the democratic transition in 1985, and it has been especially so since the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, Uruguayan feminist activists could never organize massive demonstrations in support of legal abortion. As one feminist leader stated, "We were not able to mobilize in the streets. In one of the major demonstrations, we were two hundred people, and I think I am being generous with the number of people. We were very few. We had many social organizations that had signed our declaration, but we could not mobilize people on the streets" (personal interview with Soledad González Baica). Their influence was possible because of their informal ties and close linkages with the FA structure.

Feminist activists have had a two-tiered relationship with the FA. On the one hand, many feminist activists were grassroots activists in the FA and participated in Base Committees; on the other hand, they had personal ties with FA leaders, especially women leaders. In 1985, a group of feminists formed *Cotidiano Mujer* (Everyday Woman), one of the most active NGOs at the time. They were also activists of the *Partido Comunista del Uruguay* (Communist Party of Uruguay) and the *Partido por la Victoria del Pueblo* (Party for the Victory of the People), which are factions of the FA. Even though, during the 1990s, some of these women abandoned active participation in the FA structure, they maintained close ties with (and thus had direct access to) FA

politicians, especially to the feminist caucus: Margarita Percovich, Mónica Xavier, Constanza Moreira, and Carmen Beramendi.<sup>96</sup>

Since 1989, women faction leaders, grassroots activists, and leaders of the feminist movement have lobbied within the party to include the legalization of abortion in the FA's electoral platforms. In the 2000s, the campaign for legal abortion was orchestrated by the *Coordinadora por el Aborto Legal* (Coordinator for Legal Abortion), which was the liaison to different social organizations that pushed for a legal abortion law. The FA was the only party that joined the efforts of the Coordinator for Legal Abortion, through the involvement of young activists and FA female legislators. These linkages were important during the process of negotiating the bill.<sup>97</sup>

At the beginning of the first FA government, the feminist movement coordinated with two senators, Margarita Percovich and Mónica Xavier, in drafting the legal abortion bill. Achieving passage of this bill was one of the toughest challenges the Left faced. Even though President Tabaré Vázquez opposed the bill, FA senators and the feminist movement convinced the party to support it.<sup>98</sup> The bill was approved in 2008 in Congress as a result of the pressure exerted by the feminist movement through the FA structure and their influence on FA legislators. The organic connection allowed FA legislators to promote the bill notwithstanding the previously announced opposition of the president, Tabaré Vázquez. The bill was approved in Congress with the votes of the FA caucus. However, Tabaré Vázquez kept his opposition to the reform and vetoed it. Finally, Senator Mónica Xavier reintroduced a similar bill during the second FA government of José Mujica (2010–15). The bill became law in 2012.

## **Conclusion**

This article highlighted the organic connection as a mechanism that links parties and the interests and demands of societal actors. The cases of the Bolivian MAS and the Uruguayan FA show the continuing importance of party organizational structures for channeling and aggregating social demands in a stable manner. These cases also show that organic connection can be achieved with different organizational structures that can be equally successful at processing bottom-up demands. In the FA and the MAS, the incorporation of social demands does not depend on the will or the strategic electoral needs of the party leaders. Beyond providing an “electoral connection,”<sup>99</sup> the representation of those demands occurs via a deep and ongoing relationship between the party organization and its constituent social organizations. Parties with strong organic connections are open, inclusive, and internally responsive, with more space for the grassroots activists to introduce their demands and shape parties' agendas. The organic connection requires a party organizational structure permeable to the popular sectors' demands. However, this permeability might also affect the party's decisiveness. Yet, the two cases show how granting voice within the party is compatible with high degrees of party discipline. The FA addresses coordination through internal rules, while the MAS achieves it through the role of the party leadership. In both cases, the organizational features that grant voice in the decision-making process confer legitimacy on the eventual winners and losers of

internal disputes. These features thus generate incentives for adherents to remain attached to the party and not to “exit.”

In the case of the MAS, the incorporation of social demands was largely driven from below via a mass party with deep roots and organizational sponsorship in social movements. The MAS’s weak bureaucratic development provided opportunities for the party’s grassroots social bases to act autonomously, with few bureaucratic constraints. This autonomy facilitated the emergence of forms of interest intermediation and feedback channels between the party and popular movements, which helped rural and urban movements to influence, constrain, and hold party leaders accountable. This autonomous mobilization capacity of the party’s movement bases also was a crucial mechanism pushing against bureaucratization of the party. It prevented a major distancing of the party from its movement bases.

In the case of the FA, the popular sectors and the party are connected through individuals’ dual membership and informal ties. The FA’s organizational structure is highly decentralized with different access points. Thus, since its origins, the FA has been a party permeable to different societal actors’ demands that emanate from below. The FA’s ties with these actors throughout its history has led to the incorporation of multiple, changing social demands in the party’s electoral platforms, especially demands of the unions, feminist organizations, and human rights organizations, among others. In this sense, this characteristic, combined with an organizational structure that grants voice to grassroots activists, has allowed the party to efficiently represent popular sectors’ interests that sometimes were not aligned with the preferences of the main leaders.

This article has unpacked the black box of party organization and discussed a way of understanding the processes of interest intermediation that is somewhat neglected in the literature on party-movement relations. The literature has essentially two main ways to understand parties’ role in the process of interest intermediation. One perspective is centered in the social structure and in the distribution of power among social actors and organizations; that is, the social structure determines how interests enter politics through parties. A second perspective is centered on the strategic decisions of leaders and the dynamics of political competition. In this second perspective, leaders dominate parties and make strategic decisions that bring them closer to or more distant from popular sectors’ interests depending on the calculated electoral gains of those choices. Notwithstanding the importance of these factors (social structures and strategic decisions), this article has shown how supply and demand are also determined and shaped by the organizational structures themselves. The study of party organizational structures is crucial to advance our understanding of the mechanisms that channel interests and demands from below; how leaders’ policy positions can be constrained or influenced; and how the organization gives significant voice to and institutionalizes the demands of the popular sectors. And yet, as this article shows, there is more than one way to achieve organic connection and effectively channel bottom-up influences.

Our conceptualization of organic connection increases the analytical leverage to address parties’ bottom-up incorporation of social interests in two ways. First, our conceptualization clarifies the attributes of organic connection. Unpacking the concept

improves the theoretical specification of its causes. Second, our conceptualization captures different forms of organic connection in different contexts. This enables us to build theories of how different social structures and institutional environments explain the emergence of different forms of organic connection. It also enables us to explain how different forms of organic connection might engender different outcomes in terms of discipline, stability, legitimacy, and party decay.

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  86. Grassroots activists in the movement structure of the FA are individuals who also participate in civil society organizations. Thirty-three percent of attendees participate in unions and 42 percent participate in neighborhood associations such as social or sport clubs, parent-teacher associations, etc. Pérez Bentancur, Piñeiro Rodríguez, and Rosenblatt, *How Party Activism Survives*.
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