

Presidential Failure—or Party Failure? A Review Article

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Abstract

Why Presidents Fail: Political Parties and Government Survival in Latin America by Christopher A. Martínez is a rigorous and innovative contribution to the study of presidential instability. In it, Martínez argues that the institutionalization and relative strength of political parties, particularly the president's own party, are central to understanding why some presidents are removed from office whereas others survive political crises. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and a mixed-methods approach, the book reframes conventional accounts of executive failure, emphasizing long-term partisan dynamics over immediate economic or social triggers. Although the book is empirically rich and theoretically valuable, this review also highlights some limitations, including the omission of key extra-institutional actors like the military and the exclusion of relevant cases outside Latin America. Nonetheless, Martínez's core insight, that party institutionalization plays a pivotal role in democratic stability, offers both a timely scholarly intervention and a normative call to strengthen party systems across the region's fragile presidential democracies.

Keywords: presidential survival; impeachment; party institutionalization; presidentialism; Latin America

Presidential removals, whether through impeachment, resignation, or extraconstitutional processes, continue to spark significant debate in international politics. Controversies around them often involve disputes over their legality, instrumentalization for political gain, and whether their use contributes to democratic backsliding. In Latin America, for instance, the use of presidential vacancy procedures has triggered concerns over the line between legitimate accountability and elite-driven ousters that bypass popular will. These cases also raise pressing questions, such as what makes some presidents more vulnerable than others, and why some systems experience recurring executive breakdowns while others appear more resilient.

Christopher A. Martínez's book, *Why Presidents Fail: Political Parties and Government Survival in Latin America*,¹ offers a novel party-focused explanation of presidential instability. Martínez is part of a small group of scholars who have

The views expressed in this review are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of or endorsement by the U.S. Naval Academy, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

¹ Christopher A. Martínez, *Why Presidents Fail: Political Parties and Government Survival in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).

dedicated themselves to the examination of these “presidential failures”: the removal of presidents without democratic breakdown. Building on a career of work, he argues here that political parties—especially their degree of institutionalization and the relative strength of government and opposition political parties—play a central role in determining whether a president survives or falls. He proposes that there is a nonlinear relationship between party institutionalization and presidential failure, in which presidents who rule countries with moderately institutionalized parties are at greater risk of early removal from office than those who govern places with highly or even weakly institutionalized parties. Complementing this, Martínez also argues that the relative difference in strength between the government and opposition parties can make or break a presidency, with more highly institutionalized opposition parties being better positioned to remove a president.

A majority of the world’s presidential democracies are located in Latin America, as are an overwhelming number of presidential failures, and comparative research on the topic tends to focus on the region. This book is no exception: Martínez tests his hypotheses through a series of survival models using data from the region between 1985 and 2020, and the case studies that make up the remainder of the book also come from Latin America. The latter explore the causal intricacies of both presidential failure and presidential survival and deploy the knowledge of the more than one hundred expert interviews Martínez conducted in the course of his research.

While much of the scholarly literature has focused on destabilizing economic or social factors or executive-legislative relations, Martínez’s contribution is in reframing the discussion about the long-term development of party systems and their capacity to stabilize executive-legislative relations. In doing so, the book contributes not only to scholars’ understanding of presidential failure but also to a broader conversation in political science about why strong, well-rooted political parties are fundamental to democratic stability.

In what follows, I situate *Why Presidents Fail* within the broader literature on presidential instability and party institutionalization, drawing out the book’s most compelling theoretical contributions while also highlighting some of its limitations. I argue that Martínez’s account, grounded in extensive fieldwork and an innovative party-centered framework, offers a powerful lens through which to understand executive survival in Latin America. At the same time, I make a case for why I think the book would have benefitted by including some other key dimensions, such as the role of the military and the role of democracy, in its theoretical framework. Furthermore, I argue that expanding the empirical universe beyond Latin America would have helped overcome some of these constraints and clarified the extent to which Martínez’s findings travel across contexts. Still, *Why Presidents Fail* stands as a major contribution to comparative politics, offering an empirically rich and conceptually ambitious intervention into the study of presidential breakdowns and making a persuasive case for why political parties remain indispensable to democratic resilience.

What We Know About Presidential Failure

Article II, Section 4, of the U.S. Constitution provides that, “The President, Vice President and all civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office

on Impeachment for, and Conviction of, Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.” Yet, the Constitution never defines the meaning of “high Crimes and Misdemeanors,” making it open to interpretation. This ambiguity is not unique to the United States; many presidential constitutions in Latin America similarly provide broad and underspecified grounds for removal, which leaves room for legislatures to act on political, rather than strictly legal, motivations.

This is a dynamic clearly borne out in many contemporary cases, including those examined in the book. For instance, Ecuador’s use of the “mental incapacity” and “abandonment of office” clauses to declare the presidency vacant and Peru’s use of “permanent moral incapacity” to remove presidents highlight how loosely constitutional language can be applied to justify politically motivated removals. Rather than treating this and other types of presidential failure as a neutral legal end point, Martínez places it within the broader logic of partisan competition, elite coordination, and institutional strength. This approach not only clarifies why some presidents fall while others survive under similar conditions, it also highlights the ways in which political actors interpret and instrumentalize constitutional tools in pursuit of power. It also shows that Martínez understands presidential failure and impeachment as inherently political processes, setting his approach apart from more legalistic or procedural accounts of presidential removal.

Fixed terms for presidents and legislators are one of the primary features of presidentialism.² Still, an array of executive challenges to this fixed term arise via constitutional processes such as impeachment and legislative removal and via extraconstitutional routes, including forced resignation or military coup.³ Since the late 2000s, scholars have been drawn to these not-so-exceptional exceptions to the rule: presidents who fail to complete that fixed term. They find many common causes. Specifically, cross-national analyses reveal that economic crises, elite scandals, and mass protests often trigger these failures, while the size of the president’s legislative support is ultimately determinant in cases involving that branch of government.

In the first respect, scholars have often suggested that levels of economic development, rates of economic growth, and economic crisis, including inflation and recession, can have a destabilizing effect on politics. This is one of the key factors repeatedly highlighted in the coup d’état literature.⁴ The evidence for economic determinants of impeachment is less consistent, although some conclude that the level of development and prolonged recessions have an important impact on both outcomes, whereas others find that higher per capita income and economic growth reduce the risk of challenges against presidents.⁵

² Juan J. Linz, “The Perils of Presidentialism,” *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990): 51–69.

³ Leiv Marsteintredet and Einar Berntzen, “Reducing the Perils of Presidentialism through Presidential Interruptions,” *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 1 (2008): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041508X12911362383714>.

⁴ e.g., Taeko Hiroi and Sawa Omori, “Causes and Triggers of Coups d’état: An Event History Analysis,” *Politics & Policy* 41, no. 1 (2013): 39–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12001>; John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, “Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power,” *World Politics* 42, no. 2 (1990): 151–83, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2010462>.

⁵ Michael E. Álvarez and Leiv Marsteintredet, “Presidential and Democratic Breakdowns in Latin America: Similar Causes, Different Outcomes,” in *Presidential Breakdowns in Latin America. Causes and Outcomes of Executive Instability in Developing Democracies*, ed. Mariana Llanos and Leiv Marsteintredet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33–52; Kathryn Hochstetler and Margaret E. Edwards, “Failed Presidencies:

The literature also explores the role that popular protest plays in presidential failure, especially for legal removals. Triggers for protest may include the aforementioned economic conditions or executive scandals, which are linked to a higher incidence of impeachment.⁶ The most extreme example of this takes the form of large-scale protests and antigovernment demonstrations, which are consistently identified as precipitating presidential failure.⁷ Regardless of what sets it in motion, social mobilization lowers public opinion and encourages legislators to turn against the executive.

In these circumstances, removal is ultimately a consequence of the size of the president's coalition—whether that be with the legislature, civil society actors, business elites, or the military—and that coalition partner's preferences. For impeachments, scholars broadly agree that the deciding factor in a president's survival is the presence or absence of a “legislative shield,” or the congressional bloc large enough to protect the president during the legislative vote.⁸ Simply put, if a president can gain sufficient legislative backing in a vote of removal, they survive; if not, they fall. Yet, other types of actors can also be decisive. Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich, for instance, show that elite radicalism matters for all types of presidential removals, proposing that radical actors generate polarization and instability.⁹ They write that while radical opponents seek to overthrow the government by all means possible, radical governments may block legal channels against the executive to maximize the probability of survival. This process displaces moderate forces and may even invite military intervention.

Still, none of these works really investigates variation in the difficulty of building legislative support not only to block removal by the assembly but to avoid calls for presidential removal altogether. Enter *Why Presidents Fail*, which suggests that attempts to remove presidents in places as diverse as Brazil, South Korea, and the United States may reflect failures of these countries' political parties as much as failures of their presidents.

A Party-Focused Explanation of Presidential Failure

Martínez's party-focused explanation offers a compelling and original twist on Aníbal Pérez-Liñán's influential argument that a president's survival during an impeachment crisis depends on their ability to construct that legislative shield.¹⁰ Whereas Pérez-Liñán emphasizes the contingent formation of protective coalitions

Identifying and Explaining a South American Anomaly,” *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 1, no. 2 (2009): 31–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X0900100202>.

⁶ Young Hun Kim, “Impeachment and Presidential Politics in New Democracies,” *Democratization* 21, no. 3 (2014): 519–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.751973>; Aníbal S. Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown: Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷ Kathryn Hochstetler, “Rethinking Presidentialism: Challenges and Presidential Falls in South America,” *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 4 (2006): 401–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20434009>; Kim, “Impeachment and Presidential Politics in New Democracies”; Young Hun Kim and Donna Bahry, “Interrupted Presidencies in Third Wave Democracies,” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 3 (2008): 807–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080778>; Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*.

⁸ Hochstetler, “Rethinking Presidentialism”; Kim and Bahry, “Interrupted Presidencies in Third Wave Democracies”; Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*.

⁹ Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and John Polga-Hecimovich, “Explaining Military Coups and Impeachments in Latin America,” *Democratization* 24, no. 5 (2017): 839–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1251905>.

¹⁰ Pérez-Liñán, *Crisis Without Breakdown*.

within congress, which are often shaped by shifting political calculations and elite preferences, Martínez brings the concept of party institutionalization and the relative strength of parties to the forefront, arguing that the nature and potency of the party system shapes the very possibility of forming such shields. In other words, rather than focusing solely on the short-term strategies presidents deploy during moments of crisis, this book explores how long-term patterns of party development condition the structure and reliability of legislative support in the first place.

By examining how institutionalized parties constrain elite defection, promote intraparty discipline, and establish clear reputational costs for abandoning the executive, Martínez reframes the legislative shield not as an ad hoc construct but as a reflection of deeper partisan structures. In systems with weak or fragmented parties, like those of Peru and Ecuador, legislative shields are more brittle, more easily dismantled by shifting alliances and opportunistic behavior. But in systems with strong, institutionalized parties, like those in Chile, presidents are more likely to be buffered by loyal and disciplined congressional allies, even under duress. This insight offers a valuable refinement of existing theories of presidential survival by linking short-term political maneuvering with long-term institutional development, and it opens the door for a richer understanding of how party systems mediate executive-legislative conflict.

In this context, the curvilinear relationship between party institutionalization and removal is somewhat unexpected: why would strongly and weakly institutionalized parties be equally likely to protect presidents? For Martínez, the explanation hinges on accepting that with low levels of party institutionalization, opposition parties are too weak, disorganized, and unfocused to remove a sitting president.¹¹ However, this line of reasoning overlooks the fact that opposition coalitions and governing coalitions are not the same. Specifically, voting to depose an unpopular opposition politician (or even an unpopular copartisan) should be much easier for legislators than defending an unpopular leader from their own party. Whereas the latter requires a disciplined and cohesive presidential party, the former does not. It will be useful to track if this relationship holds as the number of presidential failures increases, or if it is an artifact of the data.

With that said, Martínez should be lauded for the conceptual and empirical care he takes. Party institutionalization is a notoriously multidimensional concept, typically encompassing aspects such as organizational stability, routinized internal procedures, societal rootedness, and the legitimacy of parties as vehicles of representation. However, studies often conflate or privilege one dimension over others, leading to inconsistent operationalizations. For example, a party may exhibit high electoral stability but weak organizational structures or volatile internal leadership, raising the question of which traits are most central to institutionalization. Conscious of this, Martínez takes pains to stress three dimensions in his explanation: organizational features, time horizons, and civil society linkages. All are central to his theoretical story and are individually examined throughout the case studies in chapters 3–9.

This is also true of the empirics. To test his hypotheses, Martínez uses the Varieties of Democracy indicator of party institutionalization. However, he also recognizes that measurement of this concept is often based on proxies that may not fully capture the underlying dynamics of institutionalization (e.g., low

¹¹ Martínez, *Why Presidents Fail*, 10.

volatility might reflect stable voter loyalties in some systems but could also mask limited competition in dominant-party regimes). Taking this into account, he disaggregates the institutionalization variable to run robustness checks with the three component dimensions of his central concept, showing that the hypothesized relationships hold.

Beyond the theoretical contributions, one of the book's most impressive strengths lies in its deep and methodologically rigorous fieldwork. Martínez conducted more than one hundred interviews with politicians, public servants, and scholars across seven Latin American countries—an ambitious undertaking that reflects both dedication and a firm grasp of the political realities he seeks to explain. These interviews and resulting expert surveys yield rich, firsthand insights that engage directly with the perceptions, motivations, and constraints faced by key political actors. In doing so, Martínez brings texture and credibility to his empirical chapters, grounding his analysis in the lived experiences of those operating within a variety of party systems.

At a moment when the social sciences increasingly reward big data, formal modeling, and computationally intensive methods, this return to classic “soaking and poking”¹² feels both timely and necessary. The case studies, in fact, play a central role in testing and refining Martínez's theoretical claims. In particular, they strengthen the case for the party-specific variables highlighted in his hypotheses and help elucidate the distinct causal pathways that lead to presidential failure across different contexts (something he summarizes in the concluding chapter). Rather than assuming institutions function uniformly, these chapters reveal how partisan dynamics, informal norms, and elite interactions shape the likelihood and nature of executive breakdowns.

Indeed, a major benefit of the case studies in chapters 3 through 9 is to illustrate the idiosyncratic or individual-based explanations for presidential failure that are difficult to capture in an econometric model. As Martínez demonstrates, presidential action (or inaction) also plays a central role in presidential failure or survival. While institutional or social factors, such as weak ruling parties (Ecuador and Peru), weak party linkages with society (Bolivia and Chile), and sociopolitical or elite-driven conflicts (Ecuador, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile), create vulnerabilities, Martínez also explains in the concluding chapter that presidents' abilities to navigate those conditions can significantly shape both the likelihood of facing a crisis and their ability to survive one. Specifically, political acumen, strategic coalition-building, effective communication, and crisis management skills can all help a president maintain elite and public support, thereby forestalling attempts at removal. As these cases demonstrate, leaders known for erratic behavior, corruption, or authoritarian tendencies may face quicker erosion of support when crises emerge. So, while institutional design and context matter, the president's own choices and political skill are often decisive in whether they survive challenges to their rule.

Implications for Party Institutionalization

Beyond its immediate focus on presidential failure, *Why Presidents Fail* makes a broader and significant contribution to the literature on democratic stability by

¹² Richard F. Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: Longman, 1978).

reinforcing a foundational insight of political science: strong, institutionalized political parties are essential for the health and resilience of democracy. By demonstrating how party institutionalization and the relative strength of the president's party shape the likelihood of executive breakdown, the book stakes a claim that parties are not just vehicles for competition or coalition-building, they are core institutions that structure elite behavior, manage conflict, and uphold democratic continuity. As Martínez articulates, in systems with well-rooted, programmatic parties, political actors are more likely to play by the rules of the game, pursue long-term goals, and avoid extraconstitutional maneuvers. By contrast, weak or fragmented party systems leave presidents vulnerable to shifting alliances and opportunistic defections, increasing the risk of crisis and rupture. In this sense, the book's findings echo and extend a longstanding theme in comparative politics: that quality of democracy depends not only on formal rules and procedures but on the strength and legitimacy of the parties that animate them.

Interestingly, the nonlinear relationship Martínez finds between party institutionalization and presidential survival is somewhat at odds with the larger party institutionalization scholarship. The conventional wisdom suggests democratic systems almost always benefit most from moderate to high levels of party institutionalization, because institutionalized party systems ensure stability and foster predictable political competition and performance. Mainwaring (whom Martínez cites in his work) argues that weakly institutionalized democracies—especially in presidential systems—are more prone to outsiders as well as less experienced politicians who are less accountable to their parties, more likely to engender conflict in the legislature, and crucially, are less committed to democratic values and norms.¹³ Martínez agrees, writing that “less-institutionalized parties are associated with the rise of amateur politicians” who have not developed the requisite skills to bargain with opponents, forge political support coalitions, and otherwise engage in the critical aspects of governing.¹⁴

This intuition is backed by historical experience. Casal Bértoa uses historical data from western Europe to show that party-system institutionalization improved the prospects for democratic survival in Europe, and that there is a threshold of systemic institutionalization necessary for countries to avoid democratic collapse—which, in the context of presidentialism, would constitute an extreme form of failure.¹⁵ Beyond its relationship to democracy, other scholars highlight the positive externalities associated with higher party-system institutionalization, including policy stability, lower corruption, and more predictable government formation.¹⁶ Notably, none of these works posits a curvilinear relationship, in which moderate levels of party institutionalization are the most dangerous to stability.

¹³ Scott Mainwaring, “Party System Institutionalization, Predictability, and Democracy,” in *Party Systems in Latin America. Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse*, ed. Scott Mainwaring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71–101.

¹⁴ Martínez, *Why Presidents Fail*, 6.

¹⁵ Fernando Casal Bértoa, “Political Parties or Party Systems? Assessing the ‘Myth’ of Institutionalisation and Democracy,” *West European Politics* 40, no. 2 (March 4, 2017): 402–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1216921>.

¹⁶ Lee Savage, “Party System Institutionalization and Government Formation in New Democracies,” *World Politics* 68, no. 3 (2016): 499–537, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887115000477>; Conor O'Dwyer and Branislav Kovalčík, “And the Last Shall Be First: Party System Institutionalization and Second-Generation Economic Reform in Postcommunist Europe,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02800469>; Petra Schleiter and Alisa Voznaya, “Party System

Martínez's central finding is unfortunate for Latin America's presidential democracies and those in other regions as well, because it presents a sobering but realistic normative implication: it suggests many of the region's political systems may be stuck in a "danger zone" where parties are too weak to ensure executive stability but not weak enough for other actors to fully take over crisis management. Normatively, this is troubling. It means that many Latin American democracies exist in institutional limbo where parties are present but fragile, coalitions are unstable, and the rules of the game are not fully internalized by elites or citizens. Presidents in these systems face higher risks of removal, not necessarily because they are less legitimate or more corrupt (although many Latin American citizens may beg to differ), but because the institutional environment is ill-equipped to manage political conflict predictably and constructively. This dynamic can generate a cycle of instability, erode trust in democratic institutions, and empower extrainstitutional actors or populist outsiders who promise order but often undermine democratic norms.

From the perspective of political parties, Martínez's findings offer both a warning and a call to action. It is not enough to simply have parties that contest elections or form governments. Instead, what also matters is the quality of party institutionalization—specifically, according to the book, its organizational features, time horizons, and civil society linkages. Parties that operate primarily as electoral vehicles or platforms for personalist leaders will exacerbate instability. For Latin America's democracies to become more resilient, parties must invest in building long-term organizational capacity, cultivating programmatic identities, and reinforcing democratic norms within their ranks. The challenge is that this kind of institutionalization is slow, unglamorous, and often undercut by short-term political incentives. Nonetheless, Martínez's analysis makes clear that without it, presidentialism in the region and elsewhere will remain vulnerable to crisis.

Extraconstitutional Actors and Democracy

With all of this said, the book is so focused on parties that it gives short shrift to extrainstitutional actors—especially the military. To his credit, Martínez writes that in places with low party institutionalization, parties have little impact as crises unfold, adding that "in this case, it is not unlikely that political actors other than parties (e.g., Catholic Church, international organizations, courts, business associations, etc.) may take on a more active role during presidential crises."¹⁷ However, he notably omits the military from this list, a striking oversight given the decisive role armed forces have historically played in presidential removals across Latin America (this absence is all the more glaring considering that neither the words "military" nor "armed forces" appear in the book's index). In many cases, especially where institutions are weak or political norms unsettled, the military serves as an arbiter of last resort, either pledging support for a beleaguered president or, conversely, refusing to support an unpopular leader.

This omission limits the explanatory power of Martínez's framework. Militaries can play both stabilizing and destabilizing roles, either bolstering presidential

Institutionalization, Accountability and Governmental Corruption," *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (2018): 315–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000770>.

¹⁷ Martínez, *Why Presidents Fail*, 10.

Consequently, the absence of this concept and its implications from Martínez's theoretical argument and statistical regressions in his book is notable because it overlooks a critical, cumulative dimension of political development that shapes

¹⁹ John Gerring, P. Bond, W. T. Barndt, and C. Moreno, "Democracy and Economic Growth: A Historical Perspective," *World Politics* 57, no. 3 (2005): 323–64, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2006.0002>.

presidential survival over time. By excluding this variable, despite Martínez's own prior work highlighting its importance, the book potentially attributes too much explanatory power to proximate institutional factors like party-system institutionalization and ruling parties' comparative strength, while underestimating potentially deeper, path-dependent effects of democratic experience. This omission limits the theoretical scope of the argument and may obscure why some countries with strong parties still experience presidential failure, whereas others with similarly structured institutions do not. Including democratic stock could have enriched the analysis by accounting for the broader historical context in which institutional resilience and elite behavior are cultivated.

Presidential Failure as a Story of Presidentialism

The book's focus on Latin America as its laboratory of study may limit its reach. That would be a shame. Presidential failure is a story of *presidentialism*—and maybe even semi-presidentialism—and not one of region. Although Martínez's list of presidential failure consists of 22 Latin American cases from 1985 to 2020, presidents can (and do) fail to complete their mandates in countries outside Latin America. Since 2000, there have been at least three cases of heads of state in presidential systems removed via coup d'état (Moussa Dadis Camara in Guinea in 2008; Laurent Gbagbo in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011; and Alpha Condé in Guinea in 2021); four presidents removed via impeachment (Joseph Erap Ejercito Estrada in the Philippines in 2001; Abdurrahman Wahid in Indonesia in 2001; and Park Geun-hye and Yoon Suk Yeol in South Korea in 2017 and 2024, respectively); and at least six cases of presidents who resigned early due to scandal, instability, or weak mandates (Robert Guéï in Côte d'Ivoire in 2000; Eduard Ambrosiyevich Shevardnadze in Georgia in 2003; Pierre Buyoya in Burundi in 2003; Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia in 2007; Mohamed Nasheed in the Maldives in 2012; and James Michel in the Seychelles in 2016).

Consequently, I think Martínez is telling a more universal story than the one that is framed here. For example, in Indonesia in 2001, President Abdurrahman Wahid attempted to dissolve parliament but was himself impeached and removed from office by parliament—an episode similar to the failed self-coup and subsequent impeachment and removal of Peruvian President Pedro Castillo by his country's congress in December 2022. In the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed falsely claimed in 2012 that a coup d'état had occurred and resigned during a period of political turmoil, echoing the behavior of several Latin American presidents. Including these cases in *Why Presidents Fail* would have provided more evidence of both similar and different mechanisms underlying stability across different types of presidential systems, while making it clear that this is a story that is not region specific. The addition of these examples may also indicate distinctive regional patterns in the type of presidential failure that tends to occur.

Even a single non-Latin American case would have been illuminating. South Korea, for instance, has been riddled with impeachment processes and presidential failure, and would have made a fascinating addition as a case study chapter. Under South Korea's 1987 Constitution, which enshrined a strong presidential system, impeachment is the only viable route for removing a sitting executive. While historically infrequent, the pace has quickened in recent years. In 2004, President Roh Moo-hyun was impeached but ultimately reinstated by the country's

Constitutional Court. More than a decade later, in 2017, President Park Geun-hye was removed from office following a corruption scandal, with the Constitutional Court unanimously affirming the legislature's decision. This precedent was echoed in 2024–2025, when President Yoon Suk Yeol was impeached for declaring martial law and committing grave constitutional violations, including ordering the arrest of judges and attempting to block legislators from convening. The Constitutional Court again upheld his removal. Yet the episode triggered further political turmoil, including the temporary impeachment of acting president Han Duck-soo and a succession of interim leaders, culminating in a snap election in June 2025. The Korean experience offers both contrasts and comparisons that would have enriched the book and broadened its potential audience.

From a pragmatic perspective, expanding the universe of cases would also have significantly strengthened the robustness of the book's statistical analysis. There are only 22 positive cases of presidential failure in Latin America during the period of analysis, including arguably marginal ones, such as the voluntary early resignations of Hernán Siles Zuazo (Bolivia, 1985), Raúl Alfonsín (Argentina, 1989), Joaquín Balaguer (Dominican Republic, 1996), and Carlos Mesa (Bolivia, 2005). (Notably, this raises a conceptual and definitional question of whether these are truly examples of "presidential failure.") As a result, Martínez faces clear limitations in terms of statistical power and generalizability. The inclusion of more cases would have allowed for more precise estimation of effects, reduced the influence of any outliers, and enhanced the validity of the empirical findings. A larger sample would also have enabled more nuanced subgroup analyses or robustness checks, deepening confidence in the book's core claims.

Where the Book Fits

Regardless of these criticisms, *Why Presidents Fail* is an ambitious, well-argued, and methodologically rich contribution to the study of executive instability in presidential democracies, and it should be an invaluable and oft-cited resource for scholars of presidential (in)stability. By foregrounding the level of institutionalization of political parties and the relative strength of the president's party, Martínez offers a compelling corrective to prevailing accounts that emphasize short-term political crises, institutional design, or economic triggers. His theory is conceptually coherent, his fieldwork is admirably deep, and his integration of qualitative case studies with statistical analysis reflects a level of scholarly rigor that deserves recognition.

In an era when many Latin American democracies are characterized by weak, fragmented, or highly personalistic parties, Martínez's findings amount to a warning: without stronger, more institutionalized parties capable of structuring political conflict, executive instability will remain a recurring feature of the region's presidential systems. For scholars of comparative politics, *Why Presidents Fail* raises essential questions about the conditions under which party systems stabilize governance and democracy. For policymakers and party leaders, it offers a sobering reminder that the long, slow work of party-building remains critical—not just for winning elections but for safeguarding the durability of democratic rule.