

Political protests can lead to more responsive political parties, study finds

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In 2001, riots in Argentina protesting President Fernando de la Rúa's economic decisions overthrew him from office and killed almost 30 people. Latin American protests have resulted in numerous deaths and national crises since the 1970s, but also democratic reforms. Now, a MU researcher has found that although political protests can be violent, they can lead to stronger political parties and more responsive policies.

"Many of these recent protests in Latin America have led to changes in policies and the direction of the government," said Moises Arce, associate professor of political science in the MU College of Arts and Science. "It appears that in some cases, protests may ultimately be helpful for democracy. Some of the established parties may be taking some things for granted. Political protests become forms of street accountability. The change that we have seen after many of these protests is the creation of new parties that better represent the popular interests of society, and, therefore, serve as more effective communication channels for political discourse."

Arce studied the political activity and parties in 17 Latin American countries since 1978. He found that most protests were fueled by the creation of economic policies that favored the business sector. Most recent policies have given Latin America large-scale economic stability but little improvement from the general public's perspective. There is still a high level of unemployment, and the public has become more knowledgeable of political corruption, he said.

"In some of the major protests, people have died, so it's extremely unfortunate that some positive government reforms happened that way," Arce said. "Currently, almost all Latin American countries have left or left-leaning presidents. Left or left-leaning presidents tend to be more responsive to popular demands and will create a new political equilibrium between those popular demands and the business sector."

Arce said that although people often argue that protests are disruptive and should be channeled in a different way or that the time for protests has passed, the reality is that these protests are happening and they're not necessarily hurting democratic stability. More people in Latin America have become tolerant of protests, Arce said, and they've started to argue that maybe you need both parties and protests in a democracy.

Arce's research has been published in *Party Politics*. He hopes to complete more detailed research on the consequences of Latin American political protests.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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