

The Inner Circle of Presidents

El círculo íntimo de los presidentes

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ABSTRACT

Who belongs to the inner circle of presidents remains understudied. Preceding research has mostly focused on advisors and ministers separately, and has not integrated other groups who also influence presidents. I argue that families, advisors, and ministers are members of the inner circle of presidents and support the leaders' affective, intellectual, and political needs, respectively. I also propose that the inner circle becomes more functional when its three component groups work with a clear division of labor, are diverse, and combine hierarchical and horizontal relations with presidents. Semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 former Latin American presidents support that inner circles are composed of family, advisors, and ministers, although more evidence is needed to assess what constitutes a functional inner circle.

Keywords: Presidents – inner circle – presidential families – advisors – ministers.

RESUMEN

Quién pertenece al círculo íntimo de los presidentes ha sido poco estudiado. Las investigaciones precedentes se han centrado

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principalmente en asesores y ministros por separado, y no han integrado otros grupos que también influyen en los presidentes. Argumento que las familias, los asesores y los ministros son miembros del círculo íntimo de los presidentes y apoyan las necesidades afectivas, intelectuales y políticas de los líderes, respectivamente. También propongo que el círculo íntimo se vuelve más funcional cuando los tres grupos que lo componen trabajan con una clara división del trabajo, son diversos y combinan relaciones jerárquicas y horizontales con los presidentes. Las entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas con 24 ex presidentes latinoamericanos respaldan que los círculos íntimos están compuestos por familiares, asesores y ministros, aunque se necesita más evidencia para evaluar qué constituye un círculo íntimo funcional.

Palabras clave: Presidentes – círculo íntimo – familias presidenciales – asesores – ministros.

I.- INTRODUCTION

Who belongs to the presidents' inner circle, and what functions do they serve? The role of presidential advisors has been prolifically studied, yet we lack a thorough conceptualization of which individuals most closely influence presidents despite presidentialism being present in more than fifty countries and almost 250 years old. This paper attempts to advance the study of the presidents' inner circle by examining its main component groups. I argue that the inner circle is composed of family members (romantic partners and relatives), advisors, and ministers, who primarily support the affective, intellectual, and political needs of presidents, respectively. Furthermore, I propose that the presidents' inner circle is more functional when families, advisors, and ministers have a high division of labor among them, leaders choose diverse subordinates, and have a combination of hierarchical and horizontal relations with them.

"The buck stops here," read American President Harry S. Truman's sign on his desk, alluding to his role as the ultimate decision-maker in his administration. Presidential power is exercised through decisions, and the primary function of the inner circle is to influence presidential decision-making. Therefore, it is necessary to understand presidential performance to unpack the inner circle.

Presidents avoid common challenges that average citizens face, yet they experience unique pressures. Presidents rarely have to worry about their finances, and they count on assistants to avoid chores like paying bills, buying groceries, cooking, cleaning, driving cars, and maintaining homes. Presidents receive help in planning their agenda and the logistics of their schedule. However, their days are spent navigating an array of unique challenges. Presidents face numerous demands from voters, political parties, the media, and organized domestic and international actors. Furthermore, presidents serve several challenging functions, including being heads of state and government, party and bureaucracy leaders, legislators, commanders in chief, and top diplomats. Presidents must regularly speak publicly on a diverse range of subjects, and their actions and omissions are thoroughly scrutinized.

The inner circle can exacerbate the challenges presidents face by pushing them to make wrong decisions, and by draining their time, mental energy, and physical resources when they could be more efficiently used elsewhere. At the same time, a functional inner circle can mitigate the numerous difficulties presidents have to deal with by providing them substantial support for the decisions they must make.

The prevailing literature about the inner circle has centered chiefly on advisors (e.g., Preston 2001; Link 2002; Dickinson 2005; Hess and Pfiffner 2002). Significant research has been conducted about presidential cabinets (e.g., Amorim Neto 2006; Chasquetti 2008; Martínez-Gallardo 2014; González-Bustamante and Olivares 2016), but few works have examined ministers as members of the inner circle and their interaction with other inner circle groups (exceptions are Arana Araya 2012 and Jofré & Villar Mena 2023). Similarly, except for case studies, few works have examined the influence of presidential families on presidents. Although there is active research on first ladies (e.g., Balcácer 2010, Guerrero Valencia and Arana Araya 2018, 2019), how families influence presidential decision-making remains unclear. In sum, at varying speeds and depths, the literature on presidential advisors, ministers, and families has grown mostly independently of each other—certainly not as part of an integrated research agenda on the inner circle.

This paper proposes that we can clearly distinguish three groups of inner circle members. While presidents can surround themselves with a variety of people, three groups should be standard across time and space: family, advisors, and ministers. Families are the closest group to presidents and include romantic partners (if any) and relatives (friends akin to being relatives

can also fall in this group). Presidents have a family that knows them intimately and supports their emotional needs. A second group is composed of advisors. Presidents routinely rely on interdisciplinary groups of advisors who provide counsel on general and specialized matters. Although advisors support presidents as politicians, their advice transcends politics. I define the input of advisors as mainly intellectual because their contributions to presidents often cover different fields of knowledge and combine strategic and tactical support. Presidents often select this group based on a mix of technical expertise and personal relationships. Some advisors can be friends or relatives of presidents, but leaders rely on them mainly due to their intellectual support. The third group is the most political and personally distant from presidents: ministers. While ministers can also be friends of presidents or provide intellectual advice, their primary function is to implement the policies that represent the presidents' preferences. Among the three groups, ministers are in the most vulnerable position. They are not connected by blood or love to presidents as families are and are not insulated from public scrutiny as advisors frequently are. Furthermore, ministers are more exposed than families and advisors to political pressures and public scrutiny.

I also propose that the inner circle is functional when these three groups

have a high division of labor, are diverse, and have a combination of hierarchical and horizontal relations with presidents. This means that the affective, intellectual, and political boundaries among the groups remain clear; that inner group conflict tends to remain minimal; that presidents are exposed to different viewpoints; that the groups offer presidents general and specialized advice and a combination of holistic support with internal criticism and disagreements.

To examine the plausibility of the argument, I systematically examined the answers that 24 former Latin American presidents from ten countries

gave in semi-structured interviews I conducted in nine countries. Presidents were asked about numerous subjects, but in this case, I focused my analysis on the questions related to their inner circle. In particular, I asked presidents about their decision-making process, the potential influence of their civil status on their performance, and whether they could name life events that changed their understanding of politics. The responses strongly support the proposition about the composition of the inner circle but leave further room for study on its ideal organization.

2. INFLUENCES ON PRESIDENTS

According to Neustadt (1990), the president's actual influence on government outcomes is exerted predominantly through negotiations. The system of checks and balances forces presidents to negotiate with institutions (e.g., Congress) and organized actors (e.g., the press and interest groups) to achieve their goals. Therefore, examining the influences on presidential decision-making is important to understand presidential negotiation skills.

Previous studies centered in Latin America have associated executive decision-making with factors such as the

presidents' leadership style (Whitehead 2010), relation to the ruling party (Corrales 2002), parties' characteristics (Levitsky 2003), patterns of legislative careers (Ames 2001), constitutional powers (Arana Araya 2022), and public opinion polls (Stokes 2001).

There has also been a proliferation of works centered on different groups that influence presidential decisions, such as advisors and ministers. These works have examined how advisors and ministers relate to presidents, but neither group has been studied as part of the inner circle of presidents (see Arana Araya 2012 and

Jofré & Villar Mena 2023 for exceptions). In this section, I briefly describe what is known about the groups that surround presidents.

Family

Curiously, despite presidential families being the closest group to presidents, their influence on leaders remains largely a mystery. Research on the relatives of presidents remains primarily based on case studies (Kellerman 1978 is an exception). The depth and details of case studies are excellent for exploring and understanding complex processes and generating hypotheses. However, they tend to lack generalizability due to their focus on specific contexts. A larger sample must be examined to identify cross-national trends and achieve generalizability.

Recent years have seen a substantial increase in Large-N research on first ladies, likely due to their increasing campaign participation. For example, Arana Araya and Guerrero Valencia (2022) documented that between 1999 and 2016, former first ladies ran twenty-six times for the presidency, vice presidency, or Congress in Latin America. The candidates were highly successful; they were elected nineteen times. As the authors claim, former first ladies are unique candidates because they receive significant media coverage and have substantial public recognition; they enjoy privileges that allow them

to expand their political capital; and their personas are always tied to a former president. These characteristics allow them to become highly competitive candidates.

Some first ladies have held political offices before and after serving in the executive, and have also exercised active influence in governments. Guerrero Valencia and Arana Araya (2019) documented that among the eighty-eight first ladies who served in Latin America between 1999 and 2016, sixty-six actively worked on public policies. In sum, it is clear that first ladies are “much more than companions” to sitting presidents (Guerrero Valencia & Arana Araya, 2018). However, how exactly first ladies influence presidential decision-making remains underexplored.

Advisors

Thus far, most literature about the presidents’ inner circle has centered on presidential advisors. For example, Preston’s (2001) book *The President and His Inner Circle* only examines the advisory group of six American presidents to understand foreign policy decision-making.

Presidents have relied on a close group of aides since the inception of presidentialism. Perhaps the first time that advisors received thorough public attention was during the

administration of American President Andrew Jackson (1829-1837). Contemporary politicians named Jackson's unofficial advisors the "kitchen cabinet," alluding to the influence the group was believed to exert on the president instead of his formal cabinet.

Presidential advisors can be of various kinds: friends, academics, technicians, political operatives, former bureaucrats, or a combination of these roles. Advisors hardly hold formal charges or make public statements. In contrast to legislators or ministers, advisors avoid public controversies because their role demands discretion to perform effectively. Most of the time, presidential advisors are unknown to the public, and therefore, the rights or wrongs of their proposals and tasks do not transcend the threshold for public scrutiny.

Preceding research suggests that presidents can organize their staff of advisors in hierarchical, competitive, or collegial ways (Johnson 1974). In a hierarchical structure, chief advisors coordinate with subordinate advisors and decide what information reaches the president. In the competitive style, presidents position themselves as referees and allow the duplication of duties among advisors, who compete for the leaders' attention. Finally, in the collegial style, the president leads a discussion group, encouraging collective decision-making.

Progress has also been made in examining the composition, number, and rotation of advisors. Dickinson (2005, p. 135-173) found that if the advisory team is highly technical, it will tend to underestimate the political implications of the president's decisions. Similarly, advisors with more political than technical expertise tend to undervalue technical challenges.

Presidential studies have also documented a systematic expansion in the number of presidential advisors (Hess & Pfiffner 2002). For some authors, the expansion responds to the growing demands placed on presidents due to a larger and more complex government. Inácio and Llanos (2015) found that since the 1980s, the Argentinian and Brazilian presidential offices have tended to grow as presidents face increasing political challenges. Others, such as Dickinson (2005), propose that presidents have increased their advisory groups to reduce the uncertainty surrounding political negotiations via more specialized and accurate information. Lewis (2008) provides another perspective, claiming that presidents attempt to expand their control over specific policy areas through personal counselors.

The rotation of the presidential advisory group causes discontinuity in a team that needs to be routinely coordinated to assist the president. Research on the American presidency has revealed at least two causes of

advisors' rotations. Before elections, presidential candidates need a group of specialists in candidate-centered, highly mediated campaigns who are not necessarily versed in state administration. Therefore, once elected, presidents tend to replace their campaign advisors (Dickinson & Tenpas 2002). Another rotation often occurs near the end of presidential terms, as presidents need to resolve more issues, leading leaders to interact with a narrower group of advisors (Link 2002). Light (1999) also claims that conflicts among the American president's advisors usually intensify when presidents begin to focus on reelection or near the end of their terms. Similarly, Walcott and Hult (1995) found that presidents replace organizational types that promote more sources of information and advice when they deal with political uncertainty.

Certainly, more research should be conducted to uncover the composition and internal dynamics of the presidents' advisory group. Although studies have examined diaries and presidential agendas to try to unravel the real influence of advisors on presidents, it is difficult to estimate the advisors' effect because the available data about their characteristics and performance tends to be limited (Link 2002, 235-261). There is much to learn about the advisors' demographic and professional characteristics, routines, and patterns of interaction with leaders.

Ministers

Ministers have traditionally not been studied as part of the inner circle, but research on cabinets has been prolific. For example, there is evidence that in multiparty systems, presidents tend to appoint ministers from other parties to maximize their legislative support (Amorim Neto 2006; Chasquetti, Buquet, & Cardarello 2013). Amorim Neto (2006) also showed that presidents appoint ministers considering variables such as the relative strength of parties in Congress and the formal legislative powers of presidents.

Mejía-Guinand, Botero, and Solano (2018) examined the strategies presidents follow to minimize the agency loss that happens when they appoint ministers from other parties. The authors find that the percentage of ministers who do not belong to the ruling party is a good predictor of the number of changes that presidents will introduce to their executive offices to monitor the work of their ministers.

A meaningful subject has been cabinet rotation. Martínez-Gallardo (2014) proposed and found supportive evidence that Latin American presidents change ministers to deal with unanticipated shocks and to adjust their administrations to changes in the political and policy environment. She also found that weak presidents (i.e., those with limited formal powers and low political support

and popularity) are more inclined to change ministers strategically. González-Bustamante and Olivares (2016) analyzed the survival of 180 ministers in Chile between 1990 and 2010. The authors found that critical events such as corruption scandals and economic crises explain cabinet turnover and that particular individual characteristics of leaders, such as profession and sex, also explain their survival rate, although it varied by decade.

Researchers have also addressed the relative importance of ministries over time. Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo (2022) claimed that ministries gain relevance when they are allowed to execute public policies relevant to governments, influence the political agenda, allocate discretionary funds, and intervene in the performance of other ministries. Tumeglero (2021) recently used social network analysis tools to examine 484 interactions recorded in the Brazilian President's Daily Diary to examine whom President Jair Bolsonaro relied on in the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. She found that Bolsonaro bypassed the Ministry of Health despite the ministry's formal management of the public health emergency. Instead, Bolsonaro relied heavily on ministry-level offices that support the presidency, such as the Civil House, to acquire information.

Finally, there has been a consistent trend in studying the individual

characteristics of ministers in different countries, such as Argentina (Camerlo 2013), Brazil (Amorim Neto 2000), and Uruguay (Chasquetti, Buquet, & Cardarello 2013). These works have examined the formation and change of presidential cabinets considering variables such as party affiliation, previous political experience, and the technical expertise of ministers. This research shed light on who is appointed to cabinets and their performance in them.

However, an area that remains underexplored is the relationship ministers have with advisors (Arana Araya 2012). There are plenty of opportunities for direct conflict between both groups. Ministers have reasons to distrust advisors because they enjoy presidents' trust and have frequent and direct access to the leaders. From their privileged position, advisors can oppose ministers' preferences and policies. As Mejía-Guinand, Botero, and Solano (2018) showed, presidents are tempted to use advisors to minimize the information asymmetry that ministers have due to their superior knowledge of the departments they lead. Presidents may request advisors to oversee and assess what ministers do, and may replace them for specific tasks when ministers underperform. Although advisors may also have preferences that deviate from the leaders', they have strong incentives to follow presidential agendas because they can be dismissed at will.

Despite limited research on the interaction between ministers and advisors, recent research has started to examine both groups jointly. Jofré and Villar Mena (2023) studied the trajectories and personal characteristics of seventy-seven ministers and

forty-six advisors of five Chilean presidents between 1990 and 2022. The authors found that ministers tend to have stronger political capital than advisors and that their profiles are also more similar to those of the leaders.

3. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE INNER CIRCLE

The previous section showed that presidential advisors and ministers have been prolifically studied by researchers of the presidency, and that there is a growing research stream on first ladies. However, these bodies of knowledge have not been sufficiently integrated as part of a research agenda centered on the inner circle of presidents. In this section, I propose that presidential families, advisors, and ministers should be jointly studied as members of the presidents' inner circle. Then I propose how these three groups that support presidents can maximize presidential decision-making.

Table 1 summarizes similarities and differences among families, advisors, and ministers. The personal closeness to presidents is a relevant variable. *Ceteris paribus*, individuals closest to presidents have the potential to influence them the most and are less likely to be removed. Family members should be closer to presidents than advisors, and advisors closer than ministers. Family links tend to be intimate because they are based on familial bonds and love.

Presidents do not need to be close to all their relatives, but all relatives in the inner circle should be loyally committed to the well-being of the leaders and receive their attention, trust, and personal esteem.

Presidents choose advisors based on their trust in their expertise, but personal trust is also relevant. Therefore, presidents often choose advisors that are moderately to highly close to them, including friends, relatives, colleagues, and scholars who they knew before taking office. The personal closeness of ministers to presidents tend to range from none to moderate. Although presidents may appoint relatives or friends as ministers, in multiparty systems, presidents tend to appoint ministers from pro-government parties to gain or maintain legislative support (Amorim Neto 2006; Chasquetti, Buquet, & Cardarello 2013). It is not uncommon for presidents to appoint ministers they know little about or do not even trust.

Table 1. Inner Circle's Characteristics

	Personal Closeness	Nature of Support	Diversity	Type of relationship	General input	Specialized input
Family	Very high to intimate	Affective	Low	Horizontal	High	Low
Advisors	Moderate to high	Intellectual	Unclear	Horizontal or hierarchical	High	Moderate
Ministers	None to moderate	Political	Moderate to high	Hierarchical	Moderate	High

A second relevant difference among the three groups is the nature of the support they give to presidents. While each group can provide affective, intellectual, and political support, families mostly serve the first, advisors the second, and ministers the third function. Presidents regularly make decisions under pressure and that significantly impact the lives of citizens. They also face numerous unforeseeable crises and undesirable situations. All of this is emotionally draining on the presidents. Families can provide much-needed emotional support, but can also worsen the toll. Family disputes, scandals, and divorces have destabilized presidencies. For example, after Susana Higuchi distanced herself from Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, she accused his relatives (and later, the president himself) of corruption. She also claimed intelligence agencies tortured her, and created her own political

party with the aim of running for the presidency to compete against Fujimori. The public disputes between the two lasted several years (Godoy 2021).

Presidents choose advisors to support their decision-making in areas they feel have a deficit or need particular attention. Although advisors support presidents as politicians, their function extends beyond the day-to-day political support. I propose that advisors serve as intellectual complements that help presidents with their overall strategy—what they want to achieve in their terms—and tactics—the specific steps presidents must take to achieve their long-term goals. Although political considerations are a permanent concern for advisors, they also tend to support a wide spectrum of presidential decision-making. Advisors can aid with abstract reasoning to develop logical, effective, and efficient

solutions to unforeseen problems. Additionally, they can aid leaders with moral, philosophical, and ideological reflections they must consider. Advisors often have a technical expertise in areas such as the economy, law, communications, security, military, and diplomatic matters, that they permanently work on—sometimes aided by other staff members—to support presidential decision-making.

Ministers' support for presidents is largely political because their main mission is to execute the leaders' vision in the departments they oversee. Ministers should be experts on the ministries' focus areas, have an acute sense of how to navigate the political context, and strong negotiation and management skills. Ministers' tasks are varied and challenging. They formulate, implement, and oversee the execution of government policies; negotiate with multiple actors, from unions to legislators to other ministries; manage budgets; distribute resources; and lead a large number of civil servants.

A relevant challenge for presidents is to appoint ministers committed to their goals. Ministers are often invested in expanding their own political capital; several aspire to the presidency, and many reach it. Furthermore, ministers may have competing principals: the president and their parties. The ministers' parties may have policy views that differ from those of the

president, and thus push ministers to deviate from presidential orders.

The diversity of the three groups in the inner circle also differs. Family in the inner circle tends to be homogeneous. Presidents choose their romantic partners and the relatives that surround them. Assortative mating theory suggests that people often choose as partners individuals similar to them (Schwartz 2013). Presumably, presidential partners and close relatives share the leaders' political worldview.

Whether advisors represent diverse viewpoints depends on how presidents select them. Advisors surely represent homogeneous views when leaders choose "yes-men," but they may also lack diversity when they share similar backgrounds. Presidents often need to make a conscious effort to successfully build diverse teams. Thus, the diversity of advisors remains unclear.

The diversity of cabinets tends to be moderate to high. Presidents are under strong pressures to select a diversified cabinet. In multiparty systems, presidents typically have to accept ministers from other parties due to their coalitions' requests. This guarantees some ideological diversity. Furthermore, the specialization and size of ministries (e.g., Brazil has thirty-one ministries) demands professional and technical diversity. Finally, the cabinet is under the permanent scrutiny of the public

and the media, which sometimes creates pressure to align the cabinet with the national demographics in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, and socio-economic background.

Research has shown that the personality of presidents strongly explains their behavior (Arana Araya 2023). Personality traits may determine, to a large extent, whether leaders relate to others hierarchically or horizontally. Hierarchical relations are vertically oriented, with authority and autonomy concentrated at the top. Power and decision-making are centralized, and communication and decision-making follow a top-down flow. In contrast, when presidents choose to have more horizontal relations with subordinates, they promote an egalitarian approach that encourages cooperation, shared decision-making, informal relations, and organic leadership. Different views are regarded as complementarian rather than competitive, encouraging innovation. The flow of information is more fluid and decentralized.

Due to the familial or romantic nature of their relationships, family relations tend to be horizontal. Because several advisors tend to be personally close to presidents, their relationships may also be horizontal. However, this depends on the leaders, who can choose to keep a strictly hierarchical relationship. In contrast, the relationship

between presidents and their cabinet tends to be hierarchical, even if some ministers may be personal friends of presidents. Ministers are legally subordinated to the president and if they do not perform their duties, they can be easily dismissed.

I also distinguish between the general and specialized input leaders are likely to receive from their inner circles. Family members are more likely to share their views over general topics based on their values, ideas, and emotions. The bases of their input will most likely come from their critical thinking applied to their personal experience and anecdotal evidence. Advisors should have access to the same information as presidents, including private polls, focus groups, and private information, to which they can apply their expert knowledge. Thus, their unique position allows them to provide general and specialized input. Finally, ministers must provide detailed input about the departments they lead to presidents. However, because ministers are also politicians that participate in their governments' general strategies, they may occasionally provide general input to presidents. This likely varies by ministry and throughout the term, as not all ministries are equally relevant and specialized (Camerlo & Martínez-Gallardo 2022). For example, the ministry of interior or internal affairs has a much broader scope than the ministry of sports. Also,

since the relative importance of ministries varies over time (Tumeglero 2021), the value of ministries' input ebbs and flows throughout presidential terms.

I propose that the combined characteristics of presidential families, advisors, and ministers can explain whether presidents will count on a functional inner circle. More specifically, I argue that a functional inner circle is one where families, advisors, and ministers have a high division of labor, presidents choose diverse subordinates, and presidents have a mix of hierarchical and horizontal relations with them.

By a high division of labor, I refer to families providing mostly affective support, advisors providing mostly intellectual support, and ministers providing mostly political support. This division of labor allows presidents to increase the efficiency and productivity of their output. The efficiency increases because each group provides support relating to its own set of tasks and thus do not deviate resources to meddle in other areas. Working in their respective areas without major disruptions allow families, advisors, and ministers to improve their productivity by gaining knowledge, speed, and accuracy.

By rationalizing resources, the division of labor also minimizes conflict within the inner circle. As Arana Araya

(2012) proposed, the level of potential conflict increases when presidents promote competition and appoint ministers who do not belong to the leaders' party. When partisan ministers and advisors overlap in their functions, the government is more likely to design and implement contradictory policies, laws, and administrative rulings. The government agenda loses clarity and coherence, and presidential leadership may be seen as incoherent and weak. If presidents sideline partisan ministers, they risk losing legislative support. Moreover, if leaders fire their advisors, they may lose much needed intellectual support. Clearly, the lowest degree of conflict between advisors and ministers occurs when the president promotes division of labor between the two groups and freely chooses ministers that will not have other parties as principals.

When conflict is avoided, leaders spend less time and energy resolving internal battles. The division of labor also results in presidents keeping family very close, advisors somewhat close, and ministers further away. Family members will be less likely to interfere with policymaking, ministers will be less focused in fighting advisors, and advisors will not develop an exceptionally close relationship with leaders.

An inner circle that enjoys division of labor should also provide presidents a balanced combination of general

and specialized support. Leaders need to permanently align their tactics to their strategies, associating their day-to-day decisions to the main goals they have established for their terms. This means that presidents often need to make a multitude of tactical concessions to achieve their strategic goals. If presidents focus on their strategy but do not spend enough resources planning the paths needed to achieve their governmental goals, they will underperform. Similarly, a disconnection between tactics and strategy can push presidents to mispend their time on an incoherent agenda and develop an excessive focus on short-term victories at the expense of their overall strategy.

Despite its advantages, the division of labor among the three groups risks falling into groupthink. This concept has been mostly developed by psychologists and alludes to situations in which group members attempt to increase cohesion by prioritizing consensus over critical thinking and avoiding the examination of alternative viewpoints. Groupthink risks suboptimal and irrational decisions becoming normal because group members suppress their differing views.

To minimize this problem, presidents should select diverse teams of advisors and ministers willing to assert their ideas (families, as discussed, tend to be homogeneous). There are different types of diversity. In this case,

the diversity I am referring to is variation in professional background and expertise, although cultural, ethnic, religious, age, gender, and sexual diversity also tend to bring an array of worldviews. To maximize this diversity, presidents need to promote the critical evaluation of ideas and facts, encourage direct and open communication, and guarantee that dissenting views will not be penalized. This proposition aligns with the robust evidence that increased workplace diversity improve outcomes (Gomez & Bernet, 2019).

Finally, presidents should combine a mix of hierarchical and horizontal relations with their inner circle to maximize functionality. Horizontal relations may enhance the affective support presidents need, but presidential leadership will likely be too frequently challenged and ineffective if leaders maintain horizontal relations with the entirety of their inner circle. Similarly, strictly hierarchical relations are likely to push toward groupthink and a deficit of the internal disagreements and criticism necessary to adapt presidential decision making to challenging situations. Overly hierarchical relations will likely undermine the leaders' affective, intellectual, and political support that they need by creating a false sense of agreement, obedience, and loyalty.

4. THE PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

To understand presidential behavior, between 2011 and 2019, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-four former Latin American presidents from ten countries. Most of the interviews were conducted in 2011, when I traveled by bus to conduct field research in six Latin Central American countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

I tried to interview as many former presidents as possible. I identified fifty-two Central American leaders alive, of which thirteen were unreachable because they were living in other countries, in poor health, in prison, or incumbents. I worked to obtain the contact information for the remaining thirty-nine leaders most often by calling national newspapers and asking for the leaders' contact information. Some former presidents never replied, were unavailable, or declined to be interviewed. In the end, I interviewed eighteen former presidents. Then, between 2011 and 2012, I interviewed three former Chilean presidents during a trip to Chile, a Colombian ex-president during a trip to Bogotá in 2018, and two former rulers invited to deliver talks at Carnegie Mellon University in 2017 and 2019.

The result was a diverse sample. Most presidents were democratic but I also interviewed a former dictator

(Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala). The list also included one woman (Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica), one impeached and exiled leader (Abdala Bucaram of Ecuador), two puppet presidents (Francisco Rodríguez and Nicolás Barletta of Panama), one leader overthrown (Manuel Zelaya of Honduras), and one Nobel Prize winner (Óscar Arias of Costa Rica; see the list in the appendix).

In all cases, I attempted to ask twenty-four questions that included topics such as the leaders' relation to the constitution, their personal characteristics, the relationship between the presidency and the individual characteristics of presidents, and the political context in which they governed. The questions were followed up by related questions, conditional on the leaders' answers. The length of the interviews ranged from thirty to eight-eight minutes. For this study, I used the answers to three questions in which presidents directly and indirectly discussed the inner circle:

- “Would you mention any circumstances of your life that influenced your understanding of politics?”
- “Suppose you want to make a decision but do not have all the background information you would like to have to make an informed decision. What would you do?”

Would you follow your instincts, ask for advice, or refrain from making a decision?

- “Did your marital status influence your performance as president? If so, how?”

The interviews show that presidents tend to feel over-demanded in their roles as decision makers and rely heavily on the support of others. According to several leaders, presidents have very limited access to the information they need. Miguel Ángel Rodríguez of Costa Rica was categorical in his response: “Every day I had to make decisions with an information deficit.” The problem is that presidents cannot easily abstain from deciding; most former presidents agreed that avoiding making decisions entailed very high costs. Ricardo Lagos of Chile said that being prudent when deciding is wise, but that presidents need to make decisions even when they have little information. “If I have to decide within twenty-four hours because the world may fall, I may try to ask for some advice, but if it is not possible, well, hell, presidents make decisions all day. You try to get as much information as you can, but sometimes the cost that you pay for not making a decision is enormous.” Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala claimed that “one of the fundamental problems of many Latin American governments is that presidents do not decide, or do it late or unclearly. This leads to overwhelming

pressures.” Ernesto Pérez of Panama agreed: “More time allows you to get better information...[But] there comes a point where the time [available] has passed, and you have to make the decision with the information you have.”

The permanent information deficit in which presidents govern makes the need to understand the inner circle a pressing matter, given that the closest groups to presidents influence their decision-making through the information they share with the leaders.

Family

Several interviewees remarked that their early family socialization into politics contributed to their performance in office. Many presidents belonged to political families and entered politics as minors. Such was the case for Roberto Micheletti of Honduras, Nicolás Barletta of Panama, Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala, Abdalá Bucaram of Ecuador, Armando Calderón Sol of El Salvador, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez and Rafael Calderón of Costa Rica, and Eduardo Frei of Chile. The latter two, in fact, were sons of presidents.

Eduardo Frei recognized that his father, who was president from 1964 to 1970, was vital for his engagement in politics. “I was three years old when my father was minister, seven when I accompanied him in his first legislative campaign, fourteen in his first

presidential adventure. I lived in the home of a great president, a great statesman, a great intellectual, and that was a school for me that you do not get anywhere else,” he said. Family ties were also relevant for Abdalá Bucaram: “when I was four years old, I carried cans of paint and painted the last name of my father and my uncles on [public] walls [for campaigning].”

Miguel Ángel Rodríguez decided to become president when he was 12 years old, after his grandmother strongly pushed him to become a politician. Rodríguez said he organized his entire life to become head of government. He studied law and economics to have the necessary knowledge of a statesman and worked as an entrepreneur to gain economic independence to fund his political ambitions.

Presidents revealed important insights when they were asked about their civil status. Few presidents denied that their civil status influenced their performance in office. That was the case of Óscar Arias of Costa Rica, Ernesto Pérez of Panama, and Manuel Zelaya of Honduras.

However, most interviewees recognized that their marriages—and to a lesser extent, their families—were fundamental in their private and public lives as presidents. The former presidents claimed that marriages provided them with emotional stability, moral advice, and made their lives easier.

Even Arias and Zelaya contradicted themselves right after saying that civil status does not influence presidential decision making. Arias said that “my wife in my first government helped me a lot and it helped me that she was a very intelligent and very determined person.” Zelaya claimed, “I have a lot of emotional stability, in my house, in my family, in my personal life, with my sons, daughters, wife... Of course, stability helps to live in the presidency... My family was constantly informed about what I did, we talked a lot about it.”

Most leaders were more open in acknowledging the contributions of their romantic partners. Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica acknowledged her husband’s support as an advisor in public security issues and in taking care of their family. “He managed the house, because I couldn’t. He was the one who went to [school] meetings with my son, took him to the doctor, went shopping, in sum, all those things.” Chinchilla added, “I was very lucky with my family... It was a blessing because they were very supportive. I don’t remember a single day, a single moment of complaining about why I had gotten involved in what I had gotten involved in. They were part of the project in some way, even though they played a very low profile. Emotionally speaking, they gave me a lot... You need, in the exercise of power, to be very emotionally balanced... God

forbid someone unstable, right? It impacts everything.”

Rafael Callejas of Honduras said that he faced a challenging situation during union strikes in 1990, and that in those moments he shared decisions with his wife. “The woman has a sixth sense, she influences,” he claimed.

Arnoldo Alemán of Nicaragua said that “It would be a lie if I told you that the person who sleeps with you, eats with you, [and] communicates with you has no impact on a politician... Women often have a sixth sense that we men do not have.” Alemán said that his wife advised him, accompanied him, and told him not to let his emotions get the best of him. “[One’s wife] is your closest person,” he reasoned.

Abel Pacheco of Costa Rica, who besides being a former president was also a psychiatrist, stated that “for anything in life, the civil status is very important. I had a very unhappy first marriage, and a second marriage in which I have been deeply happy. I have a woman who is wise, a companion, an artist, who is my friend, my lover, my advisor. She made it possible for me to maintain serenity through the presidency and through all the things in my life...The support of a good woman is essential.”

Advisors

Almost all interviewees recognized that they routinely relied upon advisors to improve their decision-making. “I had political, personal, legal, and economic advisors. I also consulted former presidents,” said Francisco Rodríguez of Panama. Arnoldo Alemán claimed, “Only dictators think that they are omnipotent and omnipresent. However, all democratic governments rely on a net of social, economic and interdisciplinary advisors.” Similarly, Rafael Calderón noted, “I always listened to many people. One of the things that you learn is not to rush your decisions, and to meditate on them. Patience, patience... I permanently relied on advisors.” Laura Chinchilla claimed that “listening to someone with experience is of utmost importance. Especially if we are talking of subjects I don’t know well.” Antonio Saca of El Salvador said, “It is expected that you trust the people you have close to you. That I trust them means they are loyal, something fundamental, and also that they know the subject for which I have taken them.”

Some presidents remarked on the need for advisors to better understand the scope of different subjects, but especially legal prerogatives and limits. “Given that I am not well versed in law, I had excellent advisors, who always advised me very well and always with the utmost respect for the law and, of

course, for the constitution,” said Abel Pacheco. “No one can rule a country alone. You need advisors, people orienting you to take the necessary steps. I leaned on legal, economic and all sorts of advisors,” stated Roberto Micheletti of Honduras.

Some presidents like Miguel Ángel Rodríguez and Ernesto Samper of Colombia revealed a complex structure of advisors. Ernesto Samper said that he was very organized and personally followed around 180 to 200 topics in different areas. He reviewed developments in these areas every Sunday. Then, he would meet every Monday at 8:00 am with his group of advisors to discuss all the topics of his concern. “I had a group of about twelve or fifteen presidential advisors who were actually the liaisons with the respective ministries,” he said. Miguel Ángel Rodríguez said he “tried to set up something similar to the [United States agency within the Executive Office of the President called] Council of Economic Advisers. [I had a] small group of advisors who were not involved in the daily administration, nor had contact with public opinion, nor were involved in discussions, but who were like a think tank to which I submitted the topics [in which] I wanted to get their support and opinions.” Rodríguez said he met twice a week for three to four hours with this group of five to six members.

Although all former presidents acknowledged having advisors, the responsibilities differed greatly depending on the president. Few presidents felt that the contribution of their subordinates was relatively marginal. Óscar Arias of Costa Rica stressed, “I did not rely much on advisors because before winning the elections I knew what I wanted to do.” In the same vein, Abdalá Bucaram, stated that despite having economic and juridical advisors, “I basically made decisions based on my political beliefs.” Armando Calderón Sol had a negative view of relying too much on advisors: “The tragedy of the presidencies in Latin America has been the new emerging political class that, relying on political scientists and polling firms, is all the time centered on the results of surveys and focus groups. Some presidents have stopped governing for their vision, for their people, and do it for the survey.” However, the fact that most of the presidents admitted to relying substantially on advisors suggests that the instances in which advisors were not utilized was more the exception than the rule.

Ministers

Some former presidents interviewed revealed that the influence of advisors on presidential decision-making was lower than that of the ministers. These statements reinforce the influence that ministers have on the executive. Eduardo Frei said, “[In my

government] we had various teams [of presidential support] ... But, essentially, I governed with my ministers." Similarly, Ernesto Pérez stated, "my advisors were essentially my ministers." Rafael Calderón said he mostly relied his decision-making on his Minister of the Presidency and his two vice presidents, who are elected in the same list with presidents in accordance with the 1949 constitution. "We had a very strong team in the essentials... The most important thing is to have very strong people at your side," he added.

As highlighted by the literature (Amorim Neto 2006; Chasquetti, Buquet, & Cardarello 2013), Latin American presidents regularly appoint ministers in exchange for legislative support in an attempt to build a legislative majority. The interviewees confirmed the need to include members from parties other than the ruling one in their cabinets, and remarked on their need to bargain appointments with their own parties or party coalitions. Abdalá Bucaram complained that "if you give a ministry, you get ten deputies... Legislative manipulations always occur." In more diplomatic terms, Roberto Micheletti said, "the president should not ever forget that he reaches the presidency thanks to a political party. Presidents need to balance forces. I did it in my government."

Presidents also discussed the difficulties of appointing a cabinet with ministers from diverse parties. Abel

Pacheco said that "since my election was the product of a very curious alliance," he "had ministers from the right and ministers from the left, and that was the tower of Babel at times. So people had to be fired, and I fired people." Pacheco faced the rebellion of ministers who did not belong to his party. He explained that "four ministers tried to convince the rest of the cabinet to resign" because he was not moving fast enough to reach a free trade agreement. Pacheco said that "the four of them [the ministers] resigned, and with that the press made a scandal that the government was falling". The rebel ministers "were imposed. They had been at least suggested by businessmen and by these newspapers... I had no concern about dismissing ministers. I always said this is not football, where I can only make three changes."

Interestingly, all the interviewees who led authoritarian governments said that they appointed their cabinet members trying to reflect the balance of political forces in the country and that they thoroughly relied on personal advisors. That was the case of Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala and Francisco Rodríguez and Nicolás Barletta of Panama.

Division of Labor

A group of former presidents described that they clearly divided the roles between advisors and ministers to minimize the tension between

them. Miguel Ángel Rodríguez said, “With my advisors I had a very clear understanding from the outset that they would not participate in public opinion issues, they would not make public statements and would not exercise executive functions. Ministers provided me the technical information of their ministries and defended their positions, while advisors proposed solutions to problems with their respective analysis of costs and consequences. They glimpsed future situations and did not get involved in operational issues or things of the moment, as ministers did.”

Interestingly, Vinicio Cerezo claimed that tension between subordinates emerges not only between groups, but also within groups. In fact, he said that when his cabinet was divided on an issue, he often went back to his advisors to reach a solution: “In the cabinet there were sometimes mixed, conflictive views. To make a decision based on the fundamental goals of my government, it was useful to listen to my advisor’s opinion.”

Presidents also discussed that, in many situations, family members got directly involved in presidential decisions. Enrique Bolaños of Nicaragua said, “I believe that in every marriage, if there is a lot of harmony, both influence each other... My wife influenced me a lot.” Then he discussed a situation in which his wife reversed his

presidential decision of firing the daughter of a political rival from an office in the executive. When he arrived to his home, at night, his wife started inquiring about the firing. When he explained it was political retaliation, she got angry. “She tells me, you saw what you did was wrong? Tomorrow you put her back in her place. No, that can’t be done, I told her. How not? You can [she replied]. You have to be aware and act right.” Bolaños faced internal opposition when he said he wanted to rehire the fired worker the next day. “I told them what Mrs. Lila said.” Then, “I called a press conference and restituted her [publicly]. And I did it because she [his wife] had a lot of moral influence on me.” Bolaños reasoned that “If I had been single, drunk, a playboy, I would have been a very different president. But I was a family man, moral, firm, Catholic. I have clear convictions.”

Miguel Ángel Rodríguez also recognized the active involvement of family members in executive politics. “My wife helps me a lot... While in the presidency, [she] had a vision of social issues that I would hardly have understood,” he said, alluding to his wife’s knowledge of women, children, and disability issues. Rodríguez added that his son, an economist who obtained a Ph.D. from Stanford, led a team of presidential advisors, and that his brother, a lawyer, also filled an advisory position.

Ricardo Lagos said about his wife that “we have a very similar view of the world.” He added, “I think the most successful things in this government were the things she did and not the things I did,” alluding to his wife Luisa Durán’s involvement in public policies. During Lagos’ term, Durán led social and cultural aid foundations and created and promoted numerous social policies. “I believe that a well-covered and functioning home front is very important. If I’m worried because I have a second or third woman out there or I’m worried because the marriage is bad or I have problems with the children, well, that part is very complex,” he said.

Interestingly, the presidents who discussed their wives’ involvement in the executive power did not describe the first ladies’ political involvement as problematic. However, presidents have strong incentives to avoid exposing sensitive information publicly.

Diversity

Several presidents—including Arnaldo Alemán, Rafael Calderón, Laura Chinchilla, Antonio Saca, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, and Enrique Bolaños—expressed they consciously decided to expose themselves to different perspectives, especially before making a relevant decision. Their main argument was to ensure they approached the issues from the proper perspective. Saca claimed, “many people just tell

you what you want to hear. If you have the ability to get out of the bubble of the presidency, you will succeed. You must be a good listener.”

Rodríguez said that the personal attributes that help a politician to win the presidency are not the same as those needed to govern. Therefore, presidents must know how to surround themselves with the right type of subordinates in the different stages of their careers. “To win the election, you must be a very good actor, and to rule, you must be a very good author... The one who is more convinced of himself and has more confidence in what he says, who believes that he has the whole truth in his head, convinces more people. The one who is a bit more scientific, and calmer knows that he has many fields of ignorance, recognizes the need to listen to others, balance criteria, and seek knowledge to make decisions... The first is very good to win elections, but the second is very good to govern,” he said.

Enrique Bolaños claimed that he relied on three different groups to be exposed to an array of views before making relevant presidential decisions. “In one group were the members of my cabinet, a multisectoral group that represented all points of view and served as a strainer. I convened another group formed by select friends. The third group was a ‘kitchen cabinet,’ with which I met three times a month.

With them I reviewed the big picture; we discussed all subjects.”

Hierarchical and Horizontal Relations

Certain former presidents interviewed were more inclined to exercise hierarchical relations with members of their inner circle. Óscar Arias said, “I never stopped making decisions, and I did not care if they were popular or not. I signed a free trade agreement with China and never asked Costa Ricans if they agreed. I did not rely much on advisors because before winning the elections I knew what I wanted to do.” Arias believed in strong leadership, including the capacity of politically retaliating dissenting pro-government politicians. “I believe I have been a strong leader, that people trusted me,” he said. “I have always exercised leadership. Leadership is exercised knowing that governing is educating, not pleasing,” he added.

Abdalá Bucaram stated that despite having economic and legal advisors, “I basically made decisions based on my political beliefs, in accordance with the law... Perhaps there was a bit of pyramidism in my role.” He added that “I do exactly what my conscience tells me, and in that sense, I do not think about tomorrow... I am a man who, when he believes in something, he does it.” Along the same lines, Luis Alberto Monge of Costa Rica said, “I

had a political instinct, and sometimes my advisors were not taking into account some factors that I was considering.” Manuel Zelaya stated that “there is only one person sitting in the presidency and you allow yourself to be influenced by whoever you want to be influenced by.”

Other leaders were more inclined towards horizontal relationships with members of their inner circle. Antonio Saca claimed that “to govern, you must listen and let people tell you... I always asked my advisors even when I was almost sure what I was going to do.” Nicolás Barletta stated that “I am of the belief of consulting one’s own group, listen them, absorb the suggestions and persuade. It’s not that one makes the decision and everyone follows.”

Other presidents, including Rafael Calderón, relied on personal assistants and on ministers interchangeably. “I learned to meditate upon my decisions and I consulted many people. I permanently leaned on the recommendations of the vice-presidents, the minister of the Presidency and a very good team (of advisors) that included a former Supreme Court justice and two other lawyers,” he said.

Ernesto Pérez stated that he pushed toward collective decision-making to develop a shared sense of responsibility, and that “in presidential regimes, the easy decisions are made by the

ministers... The decisions that the president has to make are those that have some political cost or are not pleasant, and [I] made them jointly with the cabinet so that there was at least an esprit de corps around what we decided.”

Eduardo Frei described a system that combined hierarchical and horizontal relations. He claimed that he significantly worked one-on-one with ministers, but he also had coordinated

teams of advisors. “I worked a lot with the ministers when I made sectoral decisions. I gave them all my trust... And I relied a lot on this internal audit team [too], which operated permanently at the level of the presidency. Through the Ministry of the Presidency, we had coordination teams in the different ministries that also worked very strongly, and we worked on several important laws with them.”

CONCLUSION

This paper addressed the composition and functionality of the presidents’ inner circle. While preceding research mainly alludes to advisors as inner circle members, I proposed that family members and ministers also belong to this select group. Furthermore, I proposed that to be functional, inner circle groups should have a high division of labor, be diverse, and combine horizontal and hierarchical relations with presidents.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with former presidents strongly supported the importance of families—especially first ladies—, advisors, and ministers as members of the presidents’ inner circle. The evidence for the proposition of a functional inner circle is weaker because presidents only indirectly addressed the functions of the inner circle during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews

with family members, advisors, and ministers should be conducted to fully assess the functionality of the inner circle. Such an exercise should shed light on the internal dynamics of the inner circle, helping to generate data to test my proposal further. Documenting the interactions within the inner group, member trajectories, and demographic characteristics should allow us to progress in solving the mystery of how individuals close to the most powerful politicians influence the leaders’ decision-making.

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APPENDIX

Table 2. Presidents Interviewed

President	Country	Term	Interview Date	Place	Length in minutes
Efraín Ríos Montt	Guatemala	1982-1983	7/19/2011	Guatemala City	79'
Vinicio Cerezo	Guatemala	1986-1991	7/20/2011	Guatemala City	54'
Armando C. Sol	El Salvador	1994-1999	7/25/2011	San Salvador	82'
Antonio Saca	El Salvador	2004-2009	7/26/2011	San Salvador	56'
Rafael Callejas	Honduras	1990-1994	7/28/2011	Tegucigalpa	48'
Manuel Zelaya	Honduras	2006-2009	7/29/2011	Tegucigalpa	38'
Roberto Micheletti	Honduras	2009-2010	8/3/2011	Tegucigalpa	55'
Enrique Bolaños	Nicaragua	2002-2007	8/5/2011	Managua	80'
Arnoldo Alemán	Nicaragua	1997-2002	8/6/2011	Managua	70'
Óscar Arias	Costa Rica	1986-1990 2006-2010	8/9/2011	San José	34'

Luis Alberto Monge	Costa Rica	1982-1986	8/9/2011	San José	88'
Abel Pacheco	Costa Rica	2002-2006	8/10/2011	San José	57'
Rafael Calderón	Costa Rica	1990-1994	8/11/2011	San José	55'
Miguel A. Rodríguez	Costa Rica	1998-2002	8/12/2011	San José	66'
Ernesto P. Balladares	Panama	1994-1999	8/16/2011	Panama City	30'
Francisco Rodríguez	Panama	1989	8/16/2011	Panama City	45'
Abdalá Bucaram	Ecuador	1996-1997	8/16/2011	Panama City	78'
Nicolás Barletta	Panama	1984-1985	8/17/2011	Panama City	65'
Patricio Aylwin	Chile	1990-1994	11/9/2011	Santiago	84'
Ricardo Lagos	Chile	2000-2006	1/18/2012	Santiago	55'
Eduardo Frei	Chile	1994-2000	5/3/2012	Santiago	64'
Laura Chinchilla	Costa Rica	2010-2014	11/1/2017	Pittsburgh	50'
Ernesto Samper	Colombia	1994-1998	8/21/2018	Bogotá	60'
Jorge Quiroga	Bolivia	2001-2002	3/20/2019	Pittsburgh	53'

