

Congresses versus *caudillos*: The untold history of democracy in Latin America, with special emphasis on New Granada (Colombia), 1830-60. A new research agenda¹

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SUMMARY

Since its origins, congresses played significant roles in the emerging states of Latin America following independence from Spain. Yet their protagonism has been overshadowed by the so-called *caudillos*, the strongmen who seem to have dominated the politics of the region during most of the nineteenth-century. This article argues that congresses were central political actors in Latin America during the century and it does so by examining their various functions. Congresses served to form governments, to define the legislative agenda, to limit the power of the executive. Congress was the institution around which political parties and their leaders were formed, while the practices of representative government developed.

‘*Caudillaje* was a true political system’ that emerged in Spanish America following independence, Eric Wolf and Edward C. Hansen concluded after identifying the politics of the region with the violent domination of some individuals on horseback, the *caudillos*, tied to the economic structures of the rural estate.² The words ‘congress’ or ‘parliament’ were notably absent from their piece. It should not be surprising. Although there were cases where congresses existed under the manipulation of individuals close to Wolf’s and Hansen’s stereotype, a system where congress had a notable protagonism may contradict the very essence of *caudillaje*. By revising the significance that congresses had in the region, this article, like the rest of this special number, aims at broadening the study of nineteenth-century Spanish

¹ I wish to thank the Centro de Estudios de Historia (CEHIS) of the Universidad del Externado in Bogotá, and its Director María Teresa Calderón, for their encouragement and generous support. Versions of this paper have been presented at a seminar on the history of congress in Colombia, co-organised with the Andes and Externado universities in Bogotá in 2014; at the Latin American Studies Association congress in Chicago, also in 2014; and at the 68th conference of the ICRHPI in Palma, Mallorca, 2016.

² E. Wolf and E. C. Hansen, ‘Caudillo Politics: A Structural Analysis’, *Comparative Studies in Society and Politics* 9, (1967), p. 177.

American politics, which has tended to be centred on the role of the *caudillos*.³ I focus on the Republic of New Granada (Colombia today),⁴ but I do so from a regional, comparative perspective.

The modern historiography of nineteenth-century congresses in Spanish America is still relatively thin. No ‘Namier’s revolution’ has taken place in the field, although there are some valuable prosopographical works for the case of Mexico, whose congressional historical experience seems overall to be the most studied.⁵ Chile, where a semi-parliamentary system prevailed from 1891 to 1925, has also been the subject of scholarly attention, including some innovative work on the committee system of the Chilean legislature,⁶ but the internal workings of congresses in the region remain by and large unknown. Studies based on roll-call analysis, so prevalent for long in the United States,⁷ are scarce though again we do count on some relevant work, including David Bushnell’s on the religious question in Gran Colombia.

³ The historiography on *caudillos* is extensive, but see J. Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America, 1800-1850* (Oxford, 1992).

⁴ Before its emergence as an independent separate state, New Granada was part of a wider polity together with Venezuela, Ecuador and Panamá, which the historiography refers to as Gran Colombia (1819-30). Following the disintegration of Gran Colombia, the country was named the republic of New Granada, until 1858, when it became the Confederación Neogranadina. It was renamed again in 1863 as the United States of Colombia until 1886, when it finally adopted its current name, the Republic of Colombia.

⁵ For a brief historiographical overview of the ‘Namier’s revolution’: I. Sharifzhanov, ‘Modern Parliamentary History: in Search of Methodological Consensus’, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 21, (2001), pp. 17-9. For a useful review of the Mexican literature, see I. Arroyo, ‘Miradas contemporáneas: el congreso mexicano del siglo XIX’, in M. L. Argudín and M. J. Rhi Sausi (eds), *Repensar el siglo XIX. Miradas historiográficas desde el siglo XIX* (Mexico, 2016), pp. 115-44. While there are no prosopographical studies for Argentina, however, there is some information on the social and educational background of congressmen between the 1880s and the 1940s, in D. Cantón, *El parlamento argentino en épocas de cambio: 1890, 1916 y 1946* (Buenos Aires, 1916). I owe this information to Laura Cucchi.

⁶ I. M. Obando Camino, ‘The Congressional Committee System of the Chilean Legislature, 1834-1924’, *Historia* 44, (2011), pp. 165-89. See also his *Legislative Institutionalization in Chile, 1834-1924* (Albany, 2009).

⁷ See the dated but still useful review by M. S. Thomson and J. H. Silbey, ‘Research on 19th Century Legislatures: Present Contours and Future Directions’, in *Legislative Studies Quarterly* IX, (1984), pp. 319-50.

Electoral history flourished in the past decades, but the tendency has been to focus more on presidential elections, and on electoral sociology rather than on electoral institutions; it is still hard to find systematic studies of congressional electoral systems. Therefore there have been some significant advances. However, considering their long existence since their establishment in a large number of countries from the 1810s, the dearth of studies about Spanish American congresses continues to be striking. This is particularly striking in the case of Colombia, where congress has existed with just very few interruptions since independence. David Bushnell did examine the early attempts to build congressional institutions during the Gran Colombia period (1821-30); he also studied, as mentioned above, the religious cleavage in congress at the time.⁸ But his pioneer efforts have been generally overlooked or indeed ignored by historians.

The origins of congress in New Granada date back to 1810, whose earlier life is examined in some aspects by Jorge Luengo in this issue. I look here at its developments from 1830, when New Granada emerged as an independent separate state after the disintegration of Gran Colombia. I argue that congress was a central political actor in nineteenth-century: by looking at its functions between the 1830s and 1860s, this article shows that congress formed governments, limited the powers of the executive, defined the legislative agenda, and provided the main setting for the formation of political parties and leaders, and the development of the opposition, while serving to socialise the practices of representative government. Indeed the

⁸ D. Bushnell, *El régimen de Santander en la Gran Colombia* (Bogotá, 1996; first English edition in Newark, Del., 1954), pp. 72-81; and 'The Religious Question in the Congress of Gran Colombia', *The Americas* 31, (1974), pp. 1-17. A valuable study from the social sciences which gave significance to the history of Congress is J. Payne, *Patterns of conflict in Colombia* (New Haven, 1968). For an old fashion but useful account, see Guillermo Fonnegra Sierra, *El parlamento colombiano* (Bogotá, 1953). For a recent study that examines the very first attempts at building congresses, see G. Ossa, *Representación e independencia, 1810-1816* (Bogotá, 2007).

Spanish American congresses of the nineteenth century should be incorporated in any research agenda wishing to revise the history of modern democracy in the region.⁹

Before examining the various congressional functions in New Granada, the following section offers an overview of the institutional framework under which congress operated, highlighting its relative stability during the period.

The institutional framework of congress

Between 1832 and 1860, the congress in New Granada enjoyed three decades of almost uninterrupted existence, under six successive different administrations, an experience only paralleled in Spanish America to that of the Chile, both in sharp contrast with the cases of Argentina, Peru, Mexico and Spain.¹⁰

Even in war conditions, as during the civil conflict of 1839-41, there were extraordinary efforts to convene congress: in 1841, for example, the government freed a rebel deputy from prison after the latter agreed to attend the session, thus completing the required quorum for the deliberation of the legislature, inaugurated in March that year, as stipulated in the constitution. Some representatives from the provinces travelled to Bogotá on foot, overcoming transport barriers: one Elías González, from Salamina, reached the city with his ‘feet so swollen that he had to

⁹ Histories of democracy tend to ignore the Latin American nineteenth-century experience. A recent revisionist view that incorporates it, however, focuses on the ‘caudillos’: J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London, 2009), pp. 374-454. For other attempts to incorporate the regional experience into the general history of democracy, see J.S. Valenzuela and E. Posada-Carbó (eds), *Origins of Democracy in the Americas. The Formation of Electoral Institutions in the 19th Century*, (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, 2018); Posada-Carbó, ‘Democracy’, in J. Kinsbruner (editor in chief), *The Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* (Detroit, 2008), and ‘La independencia y los orígenes de la democracia en Hispanoamérica’, in H. Calvo and A. Meisel Roca, (eds), *Cartagena de Indias en la independencia* (Cartagena, 2011), pp. 13-56; J. E. Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World. Creating Modernity, Nation and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham and London, 2014).

¹⁰ See G. Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea de Colombia* (Bogotá, 1990), 12 volumes. Published originally in six volumes, between 1918 and 1935, Arboleda’s *Historia* is a rich source for the study of Congress. For general accounts on the politics of the period, see M. Palacios and F. Safford, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (Oxford, 2001), and Malcolm Deas, ‘Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador: the first half-century of independence’, chapter in Leslie Bethell, (ed), *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, 11 vols (Cambridge, 1984-2008), vol. III (1985).

attend the first sessions in sandals'.¹¹ In the provinces dominated by the rebels, some loyal deputies managed to find their way out of their sieges to attend congress: from Cartagena, a Caribbean port, for example, loyal deputies embarked to Jamaica and then to Maracaibo, from where they followed their land journey to the capital city. The importance of fulfilling the constitutional formalities in the new republic did not escape the attention of contemporaries. For the likes of José Manuel Restrepo, a leading politician who wrote one of the first histories of the country, the fact that congress was able to meet in the middle of the war in 1841 served to consolidate 'the principle of legitimacy'.¹² Such principle was again put to test a decade later, in 1854, when an army general led a barracks rebellion and took power for a few months in Bogotá. On that occasion, congress moved to Ibagué, a main city in the neighbouring province, from where its sessions continued and the government's forces were able to restore constitutional order. Leading publicists and politicians took pride in registering the implementation of such formalities, contrasting the experience of New Granada with that of Venezuela where the meetings of congress did not seem to follow the pre-stipulated constitutional calendar.¹³ The meeting of congress in Ibagué in 1854 was praised as a 'demonstration' of how rooted in the country were 'the practices of the representative system, under the form of a democratic republic'.¹⁴ Thus the first point to be noted is that the emergence and development of New Granada as an independent state went hand in hand with the

¹¹ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 2, pp. 366-7.

¹² There were more extraordinary episodes. When a senator became ill, thus depriving the senate of the quorum, the senate decided to move the sessions to his home. For Restrepo, having fulfilled the constitutional mandate of convening Congress 'saved the republic from complete dissolution'. See J.M Restrepo, *Historia de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá, 1952), 2 vols, vol. 1, pp. 222, 224, 227, 263.

¹³ 'Crónica', *El Neogranadino*, 28 February 1852.

¹⁴ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 3, p. 218.

establishment of congress which, by 1860, after several decades of continuous existence, had achieved significant levels of institutionalisation.

The congress in New Granada was bicameral, composed by a senate and a house of representatives, a general design followed in the region during the nineteenth century, with some exceptions – ‘a federal unicameralism’ was established in Mexico between 1857 and 1874.¹⁵ In the 1830s, there were 31 senators and 68 representatives; a reform in 1846 reduced its size to 26 senators and 58 representatives – all elected through an indirect system by electoral assemblies in 20 different provinces.¹⁶ The New Granadian congress seems to have been similar in size to that of Argentina and Chile in the 1860s, but smaller than the Mexican Congress, which in the 1840s and 1850s had up to 63 senators and 129 deputies.¹⁷

Although in theory members of congress represented the nation, not their respective provinces, from which they could not receive ‘orders or instructions’, in practice most were elected from their provinces of origin. From the start, the New Granadian congress was therefore a site of significant regional representation. In its composition, it differed substantially from the Chilean congress studied in this issue, where deputies came overwhelmingly from the capital city; it resembled instead the one in Mexico.¹⁸

¹⁵ The Chilean congress was bicameral since 1828. I owe this information to Juan Luis Ossa.

¹⁶ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 3, pp. 88-90, and 171; and *Decreto del poder ejecutivo* (Bogotá, 5 October 1835).

¹⁷ The size of congress in Mexico, however, varied significantly from the 1830s, when it was similar to that of New Granada, to the 1840s. The unicameral congress after 1857 had up to 227 deputies. I wish to thank Israel Arroyo for this information. In the 1860s, there were 20 senators and 72 deputies. See J. Heise, *Historia de Chile: el período parlamentario, 1861-1925*, 2 vols (Santiago, 1982) vol. 2, p. 65.

¹⁸ As far as I can tell, there are no prosopographical studies of congresses in New Granada. But a cursory reading of Arboleda’s listings of congressmen indicates that their regional origins were varied. On Mexico, see for example, V. M. Núñez García, ‘Liberal parliamentarism in Mexico. Notes for reflection: the parliamentary representation of the State of Puebla in the Mexican National Congresses, 1833-56’, in *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 33, (2013), pp. 45-65.

As mentioned, congressional elections in New Granada were indirect, in a two tier system: residents in the parishes with the right to vote (*sufragantes*) elected members of the electoral assemblies (*electores*) in each district, and these electoral assemblies in turn elected senators and representatives. *Sufragantes* were restricted to economically independent males over 21 years old, who had resided in the respective province at least a year. *Electores* were additionally required to be older (over 25 years) and literates. Senators and representatives were required to have a certain amount of rent or income, while senators had to be over 35 years old. Elections to both chambers were staggered, renewing their composition by halves: every other year in the senate, and every year in the house of representatives – senators were elected for four years, while representatives for two years.¹⁹ They were elected in proportion to the population of each provinces according to criteria stated in the constitution. Their posts were incompatible with other jobs in the executive and the judiciary, and enjoyed immunity during their periods of sessions. These were public, and ordinarily lasted sixty days every year (extendible up to ninety days), from their inauguration on every 1 March. Each chamber met independently, except for special occasions when they met as a single body, as in the verification of the presidential elections.²⁰

¹⁹ See *Constitución del Estado de la Nueva Granada dada por la Convención Constituyente de 1832* (Cartagena, 1832), pp. 2-18; and *Constitución política de la república de la Nueva Granada, reformada por el Congreso en sus sesiones de 1842 y 1843* (Bogotá, 1843), pp. 2-8.

²⁰ Each chamber had its own internal regulation. The 1836 and 1840 *Reglamentos* of the chamber and senate respectively had some 155 articles regulating all aspects of their procedures. See *Reglamento para el régimen interior de la Cámara de Representantes del Congreso de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá, 1836), and *Reglamento para el régimen interior de la Cámara del Senado del Congreso de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá, 1840). I wish to thank Luis Gabriel Galán for providing me with copies of both documents. The regulation of the house of representatives in 1878 was richer in details, including the dress code: all congressmen had to attend the meetings in ‘black suits’. It was also a longer document: All in all it contained 339 articles. See *Reglamento de la Cámara de Representantes para su régimen i policía interior* (Bogotá, 1878). According to Fonnegra Sierra, ‘those who dominated parliament at all times were precisely those who mastered their knowledge of its internal regulations’; *El parlamento*

The functions of Congress

What then did Spanish American congresses do? What in particular were the functions of the congress in New Granada between 1830 and 1860? How meaningful was its role in the political life of the country? And how did the New Granadian congress compare to the other congresses of the region? Constitutions listed in detail its faculties and responsibilities, and I will be referring to some of them below. But rather than offering a comprehensive account of the relevant constitutional texts, this section looks at some selected tasks as a way to examine the extent to which congress played an active and central role in the politics of the country.

Congress and the formation of governments

Up to 1856, the presidential (and vice-presidential) elections of New Granada were indirect, every four years without the possibility of consecutive re-election. Primary voters first elected deputies to 1,600 electoral assemblies, which gathered independently to cast their votes for presidents (and vice-presidents).²¹ If in the final tally of all the electoral assemblies none of the candidates received an absolute majority of the votes, the decision rested with congress. Out of the six presidential elections during the period 1830-56, only two were won outright by the leading candidates, in 1831 and 1853. The other four, in 1837, 1841, 1845 and 1849, were all defined in congress, in highly disputed contests that were often resolved only after

colombiano, p. 13. Thomas Jefferson's *Manual of Parliament*, translated to Spanish in 1827, seems to have been widely used by congressmen. See Thomas Jefferson, *Manual del Derecho Parlamentario o resumen de las reglas que se observan en el parlamento de Inglaterra y en el Congreso de los Estados Unidos para la proposición, discusión y decisión de los negocios* (translated by Joaquín Ortega, Paris, 1827). The Luis Angel Arango Library in Bogotá keeps several copies of this edition.

²¹ Other countries with similar indirect presidential elections had a smaller number of electoral assemblies: Venezuela in the 1830s, for example, had 200, eight times less than in New Granada.

several rounds of voting.²² Among these disputes, the 1849 election stands out by the level of animosity and public involvement, as congress convened to make its decision surrounded by a crowd estimated in thousands of partisans pressing congressmen to vote for their favourite candidates.²³ Thus congress had a pivotal role in the election of most presidents during the first decades of New Granada as an independent state. Some of its decisions, like in 1849, became important landmarks in the country's political traditions.

Congress and the power of executives

Since most presidents were elected in the end by congress, in processes that involved intense and complex negotiations, the power of those elected was limited from the origins of congress. Most presidents completed their constitutional terms, so their time in office required regular dealings with an institution they could not control at will. Bicameralism and the electoral system, in particular the staggered renewal of both chambers, were designed to further impede the possibility of such control. The 1832 constitution gave congress the faculty to grant extraordinary powers to the president in case of external wars or internal commotion, but only on limited subjects, for a limited time and under precise conditions.²⁴ Paradoxically a centralising and conservative constitutional reform in 1843 stated that congress could not delegate its constitutional functions – it did not include the possibility of granting extraordinary powers to the executive.²⁵

²² The results of these elections in the various electoral assemblies can be consulted in Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (ed.), *Historia electoral colombiana, 1810-1988* (Bogotá, 1988). These individual elections have received scant attention by historians.

²³ See E. Posada Carbó, 'New Granada and the European Revolutions of 1848', in G. Thomson (ed.), *The European Revolutions of 1848 and the Americas* (London, 2002), pp. 217-40.

²⁴ *Constitución del Estado de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá, 1832), pp. 30-1. The subjects were limited to convene the national guard, to negotiate loans, to issue arrest warrants, amnesties and pardons.

²⁵ *Constitución política* (Bogotá, 1843), p. 12

Such constitutional setting, in a context of competitive party politics and regional differentiations, helps to explain why presidents could not dominate congresses. Consider some of the limited powers president Francisco de Paula Santander (1833-7) had in his dealings with the legislature. In 1835, he failed to persuade congress to elect his preferred candidate, Vicente Azuero, to the vice-presidency. That year the senate passed a pardon bill against the wishes of his government, and refused to grant him extraordinary faculties. The following year, as the new presidential elections approached, the senate opposed important negotiations between the Venezuelan and New Granadian governments, provoking the resignation of Santander's cabinet.²⁶ Examples of the legislature opposing the executive abound. In 1841, the senate refused a government initiative to call for a constituent assembly. In 1844, the house of representatives also rejected a project of territorial division presented by the executive (42 votes against 22), and the senate opposed another project by the secretary of war that sought to increase the size of the army. According to Arboleda, such decisions were evidence of the independence of congress; 'even the public employees in the chamber were sometimes averse to the executive'.²⁷

Indeed, as the New Granadian experience illustrates, the idea that Spanish American congresses were mere rubber stamps for the executives' decisions is one of the commonplaces in need of revisionism. Systems of absolute domination, like the one Rosas managed to impose in Buenos Aires, were more the exception than the norm.²⁸ And both before and after Rosas, the Argentine congress was an important site of political contestation and debate. The literature on the Mexican congress

²⁶ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 2, pp. 101-4, 127.

²⁷ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 3, pp. 6, 200-1.

²⁸ See J. Lynch, *Argentine Dictator. Juan Manuel de Rosas, 1829-1852* (London, 1981).

demonstrates that until the rise of Porfirio Díaz, who ruled the country from 1876 to 1910, the legislature often prevailed over the executive. Even under military rulers, as Michael P. Costeloe has observed, ‘the generals and perhaps above all Santa Anna, were singularly unable to control the national congress which was always largely composed of popularly elected civilians’.²⁹ Similarly, the Peruvian congresses studied in this issue sometimes defied the rule of the *caudillos*. The historian Jorge Basadre referred to the occurrence of ‘parliamentary dictatorships’, for the experiences of 1833, 1857, 1858-9 and 1867.³⁰ In Chile, presidents exerted ‘limited control’ over congresses from the 1830s until the 1860s, a predominance that can be partly explained by the relatively high levels of centralisation of power around Santiago, and the possibility of consecutive presidential re-election, abolished in 1870.³¹ The picture that emerges from these examples is far from complete, but they serve to reiterate another fundamental point: congresses in general were not pawns of the presidents. Once we realise this, studying their basic role acquires significance.

Congresses and policy-making

Since the New Granada congress was not dominated by the executive, it then played an important role in defining the agenda of the government. The constitution granted

²⁹ M.P. Costeloe, ‘General versus Politicians: Santa Anna and the 1842 Congressional Election in Mexico’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 8, (1989), p. 257. See also, Arroyo, ‘Miradas contemporáneas’, pp. 117, 124, 130, 133.

³⁰ J. Basadre, *Elecciones y centralismo en el Perú. Apuntes para un esquema histórico* (Lima, 1980), p. 22.

³¹ For the notion of ‘limited control’ of the Chilean executive over the electoral system, see J. Samuel Valenzuela, ‘Building Aspects of Democracy before Democracy: Electoral Practices in Nineteenth Century Chile’, in E. Posada-Carbó (ed.), *Elections Before Democracy. The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America* (London and Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 223-57. There were important parliamentary elements in the Chilean system; the 1833 constitution, for example, allowed members of Congress to be part of the cabinet. From the 1860s onwards, parties seem to have gained the upperhand in the political process, the power of the executive being gradually undermined. The system broke down in 1891, when the outcome of a civil war that pitted the executive against the legislative led to a parliamentary regime that lasted until 1925. See P. S. Reinsch, ‘Parliamentary Government in Chile’, *American Political Science Review* 3, (1909), pp. 507-38.

congress 'exclusive' legislative faculties on practically all subjects of public interest: spending and taxation, the organisation of the army, public credit, education, international treaties, provincial boundaries. In these and other matters, the legislative initiative was in the hands of senators and representatives until 1843 or the Consejo de Estado (a body formed by 7 members, elected by congress). A reform in 1843 gave members of the presidential cabinet the faculty of proposing bills to congress.³²

Further studies of the history of the New Granadian congress ought to look deeper into the voluminous legislation approved by its members year by year, as in 1840 when, in the middle of a civil conflict, congress passed fifty-five pieces of legislation on a wide range of subjects: elections, the national guard, conscription and the general accountancy office.³³ In fact, practically every substantial policy decision during the period was in the end taken by congress, such as the dismantling of convents that triggered the civil war in 1839, the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1850 or the abolition of slavery in 1852. As in the Peruvian case, examined here by Natalia Sobrevilla, congress also took on the task of reforming and issuing new constitutions, but this was done as part of their ordinary faculties during their ordinary sessions. In 1840, congress started to discuss the need to reform the constitution, only approved in 1843. Similarly, the approval of a new constitution by congress in 1853 was the outcome of discussions during two consecutive legislatures, under two successive governments. All these decisions, regarding both ordinary legislation and constitutional reforms, were often the result of complex processes of negotiation among members of congress and the governments where partisan, regional and of course personal interests were at stake. Debates were frequently intense, as in 1840,

³² *Constitución del Estado* (1832), pp. 18-21; y *Constitución política* (1843), p. 12.

³³ Restrepo, *Historia de la Nueva Granada*, vol 1, p. 171.

when Vicente Azuero, a liberal radical, attacked the government with ‘virulence’, while advocating a wide amnesty for the rebels.³⁴

Congress, political parties and national leadership

Although clearly differentiated political parties, with their programmes and manifestos, officially dated back to 1849-50,³⁵ the development of factions and ‘parties’ in congress was notable from the origins of the republic. There are no studies of the political composition of congresses, like the one offered by Ossa and Estefan in this issue, but no faction or party exerted hegemonic control of the legislature during the period. The available information also indicates a relatively high turnover, though some were re-elected while others moved from the house to the senate. Congress therefore provided the apprenticeship for the political class that was formed during these early decades of the republic, as well as being the natural setting of party developments.

Some national leaders who reached the presidency originally made their names in the battlefield during the wars of independence – Santander, Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera, José María Obando. However, most presidents after 1837 were civilians and those who had been in the army were elected in their civilian condition; and most had previous congressional experience. Indeed a significant number of nineteenth-century presidents had occupied, prior to their presidency, a seat in congress at some point between 1836 and 1859: Mosquera, José Hilario López, Manuel María Mallarino, Mariano Ospina, Francisco Javier Zaldúa, Manuel Murillo Toro, José de Obaldía, Eustorgio Salgar, Rafael Núñez, Carlos Holguín. Some former

³⁴ Restrepo, *Historia de la Nueva Granada*, vol 1, p. 166. Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 3, p. 203.

³⁵ ‘Programa conservador de 1849’, in Directorio Nacional Conservador (ed.), *Los programas conservadores de 1849 a 1949* (Bogotá, 1952), pp. 47-8; the first liberal programme is reprinted in G. Molina, *Las ideas liberales en Colombia*.

presidents continued their careers in congress, a tradition of sorts inaugurated by Santander who was elected to the house in 1838, a year after he left the presidency. José Ignacio Márquez, Mosquera and Pedro A. Herrán, to name a few, followed in Santander's footsteps. Being in congress seems to have carried weight.³⁶

Of course not all those who distinguished themselves in congress reached the presidency, but most serious contenders, like Vicente Azuero, Florentino González and Joaquín Gori, had long parliamentary careers. Congress also provided the arena, together with the press, for the development of the opposition, a notion that started to gain some legitimacy from the 1830s. Santander took up his seat in the house as leader of the opposition, a development that contemporaries, foreigners and nationals alike, found startling as it was considered undignified that a former head of state launched an open opposition to his successor. His successor, however, followed again on Santander's footsteps, thus establishing the 'practice that each leaving president attack his predecessor'.³⁷

Colombian historiography has for long insisted that the country's political traditions and partisan loyalties were forged almost exclusively through civil wars. But during most of the three decades covered in this article, the years of peace far exceeded those of war. And, as shown above, even during the years of war (1839-41, and 1854), congress continued to have an active existence. The account offered here suggests that national political leaders were predominantly established through their experiences in congress. A successful career in congress required special negotiating

³⁶ In 1835, future president Herrán considered that the House of Representatives had lost prestige, thus his preference for the senate. See Herrán to Mosquera, Bogotá, septiembre 2 de 1835, in L. Helguera and R. H. Davis (eds), *Archivo epistolar del General Mosquera*, 2 vols (Bogotá, 1966-72), vol. 1 (1966), p.206. For a humorous critique of congressional activities, see (Anonymous), *Cartas a piquillo i de piquillo o breve resumen de los trabajos del Congreso de 1856 por un diputado de la barra* (Bogotá, 1856).

³⁷ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol. 3, p. 92.

and public speaking skills. Mariano Ospina, co-founder of the Conservative Party and elected president in 1856, gained early reputation in congress for his parliamentary performances.³⁸ The inauguration of congressmen was marked as an occasion for congressmen to prove their capacities as orators, often developed in the earlier stages of their careers as deputies in their provincial assemblies.³⁹

Congress and the socialisation of politics

Since its sessions were open to the public, congress also provided a unique setting for the socialisation of political life. Its activities reached a wider public through at least three channels: directly, by the presence of people during the sessions in the galleries; indirectly, through the press and the petitions sent by citizens requesting the legislature's attention to their concerns.

In New Granada, as in other Spanish American countries like Chile, the public that sat in the galleries were called *barras*. Galleries were often packed, 'full of people', remembered Lino de Pombo when he attended the sessions of the Senate in 1838.⁴⁰ Those joining the *barras* did so for several motives. University students in Bogotá were notable among the regular attendees. Some were perhaps driven by genuine curiosity, in their aspirations to follow a political career, but others were already politically involved and their presence in the *barras* was therefore partisan. Florentino González, leader of the senate in the 1850s, noted in his memoirs that, as a student in the 1820s, he did not miss any congressional session, particularly those

³⁸ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol. 3, p. 5.

³⁹ In his memoirs, José María Samper noted his apprenticeship in 'parliamentary oratory' as a deputy in the provincial legislature of Ibagué, where he 'acquired his skills to speak in public, always improving his speeches'. See J.M. Samper, *Historia de una alma, 1834 a 1881* (Bogotá, 1948), 2 vols, vol. 2, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Letter from Pombo to Cenón de Pombo, Bogotá, 15 May 1838, in S. Díaz and L. Guillermo Valencia (eds), *Confidencias de un estadista. Epistolario de Lino de Pombo con su hermano Cenón, 1834-1877* (Bucaramanga, 2010), p. 125.

of the House, motivated by his wishes to learn about ‘the practices of representative government’.⁴¹ His visits to the *barras* allowed him to become acquainted with ‘all the men that had been part of the government in my country’. González read Jefferson’s *Manual del derecho parlamentario*, met deputies in person, and even got himself a job in the secretary office of the house.⁴²

While students seem to have had an active protagonism in the *barras*, these attracted a diverse public, often including followers of the various parties, either in support or in opposition to the order of the day. Governments might have packed the *barras* with its employees, as José Victorino Lastarria noted in his parliamentary memoirs when faced a hostile *barra* as a member of the opposition in the Chilean congress.⁴³ But *barras* in New Granadian seem to have been politically mixed. Hecklers from the opposition were often notable: in 1853, for example, when congress discussed a motion against the vice-president, ‘the *barras* expressed their enthusiasm each time the motion received a favourable vote’.⁴⁴ Whether those expressions of enthusiasm were genuine or orchestrated is difficult to tell. To some contemporaries, like González, the behaviour of the *barras* was in any case deplorable: ‘unfortunately [...] people in the *barras* believed that they were allowed

⁴¹ F. González, *Memorias. Controversias bolivarianas* (Buenos Aires, 1933), p. 75.

⁴² González, *Memorias*, p. 82.

⁴³ J.V. Lastarria, *Diario político, 1849-1852* (Santiago, 1968), pp. 27, 31, 36, 37. There are repeated references to the *barras* in the Chilean Congress in I. Errázuriz, *Historia de la administración Errázuriz* (Santiago, 1935), pp. 268, 365, 401, 435, 436. In 1850, *El Mercurio*, a leading newspaper in Santiago, warned those of the opposition who mobilized their partisans from their clubs to the *barra* since, in *El Mercurio*’s views, they were instigating a social conflict that they would not be able to control in the long term. See ‘Los clubs y la barra’, *El Mercurio* (Santiago), 6 July 1850. Contemporary satirical pamphlets about congressmen also included references to the *barra*; see (Anonymous), *Los demóstenes de la mayoría. Bosquejos parlamentarios* (Santiago, 1868), pp. 11, 31, 34, 41.

⁴⁴ Arboleda, *Historia contemporánea*, vol 3, p. 239, vol 6 p. 169.

to vituperate or applaud the deputies: a right that is exclusive only to the deputies in the countries where the parliamentary-representative government is well known'.⁴⁵

Among the congressional activities that attracted the *barras*, the election of presidents stands out. Some of these events became massive demonstrations, and the *barras* arguably had real agency. The election of Joaquín Mosquera in 1830 was partly attributed to the pressures of an 'unruly youth', who 'shouted so much [...] and was so threatening' that deputies felt intimidated.⁴⁶ Few meetings, however, paralleled those of March 1848, when congress was surrounded by thousands of people, including organized groups of artisans who successfully pressed for the election of President José H. López. In addition to presidential elections, some congressional debates also attracted large crowds: during the discussions of the reform of the constitution in 1851, when so many key issues were at stake, the massive attendance of the *barras* 'put to test' the physical 'solidity of the galleries'.⁴⁷

In this section, I have focused on the *barras* as a way to show that congressional activities were not isolated from the public. Of course only residents or visitors in Bogotá could attend the *barras*, but what happened in the capital city tended to have important national repercussions, and *barras* in congress were often replicated, on smaller scales, in the provincial legislatures. Furthermore, as suggested above, congressional activities reached a wider public through reports in the press, including parliamentary debates.⁴⁸ And the public also exercised pressure in congress through petitions, expressing citizens demands on a wide range of subjects which I

⁴⁵ González, *Memorias*, p. 80.

⁴⁶ J. María Samper, *Derecho público interno*, 2 vols (Bogotá, 1951), vol 1, p. 173.

⁴⁷ *El Neogranadino*, 28 March 1851. The paper estimated a crowd of 1,500 – this seems an exaggerated figure, but it does indicate the presence of an extraordinary number of people.

⁴⁸ 'Congreso', *El Neogranadino*, 11 March 1853.

can only registered here as part of a research agenda that requires systematic implementation.⁴⁹

Conclusion

‘The history of Congress’ in Colombia, wrote Guillermo Fonnegra in 1953, is ‘mixed up with the [...] history of the nation. And that is so because all the national activities have been regulated from parliament’. In spite of this apparent significance, its history however continues to be by and large ignored. Other Spanish American congresses have also suffered from similar historical oblivion, though in some countries, like in Mexico, we can now count on an important body of literature on the subject. Our ignorance of the history of congress not only represents a serious gap within the discipline but impinges upon the interpretations about the region that tend to dominate the social sciences on themes as central as the composition of elites, the systems of government and the developments of democracy in Spanish America.

By focusing on the experience of New Granada between 1830 and 1860, this article has aimed to show that congress was a central political actor in the history of the republic, following its emergence as an independent state. During that period, it played significant roles in forming governments, in limiting the power of the executive, in deciding about the policy agenda, in serving as a main setting for the development of party politics, and in socialising political life. As a representative body, congress was the centre of dispute among various interests, social, economic, regional, partisan, and religious – all meriting further scholarly attention.

⁴⁹ For example, the adoption of Jeremy Bentham’s texts during the Santander administration was opposed by the church and lay Catholics, who led a campaign of petitions in the 1830s to ban Bentham from the educational system. One of these petitions, signed in 1839 by hundreds of people, including the Archbishop of Bogotá, noted that congress had already received ‘similar petitions from provincial assemblies and thousands of peoples’ throughout the republic. See *HH. Senadores y Representantes* (leaflet, Bogotá, 14 April 1839). Over one hundred people send a petition to congress in 1848, requesting the end of the tobacco state monopoly: *A la M.H. Cámara de Representantes* (photocopy of leaflet, Cartagena, 4 April 1848), I thank Gustavo Bell for providing me with a copy of this document.

In 1861, the republic of New Granada experienced its first constitutional breakdown after the victory of a rebellion led by Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera against Mariano Ospina, who had been popularly elected president in 1856. Mosquera was perhaps the closest figure in the country to the *caudillo* that still dominates the political history of Spanish America. Yet even Mosquera was unable to establish the *caudillaje* system described by Wolf and Hansen at the beginning of this article. In the aftermath of his victory, a constitutional assembly, convened in the provincial town of Rionegro, away from Mosquera's regional power base, and issued a new constitution, explicitly designed to set strict limits to the power of the national executive. In 1864, the civilians were back in control of the presidency with the election of the radical liberal Manuel Murillo Toro. Mosquera, however, was re-elected president in 1866, when he decided to form a cabinet without involving the majorities in Congress. Government deadlock soon followed. The house opposed Mosquera's legislative initiatives and accused him of being a traitor. After months of conflict, Mosquera decided to close congress on 29 April 1867. It did not last long. Three weeks later, on 20 May, the president was arrested and, by unanimity, congress decided to prosecute him. Waiting for trial, a picture taken at the time captured him playing chess in his prison at the Observatory of Bogotá.⁵⁰ Mosquera might have been the main protagonist of that historical photograph, but the subsequent condemnation of his actions by the senate proved that the main protagonist of Colombian politics was still congress.

Notes on Contributor

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⁵⁰ Fundación Mapfre, (ed.), *Colombia a través de la fotografía* (Bogotá, 2011).

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