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Title: **104-10192-10110_p18.png**

Provenance:

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Current Balance Sheet

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CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

The Christian Democratic movement is generally agreed to be of current political significance only in four Latin American countries--Chile, Peru, Venezuela, and El Salvador.

The decisive victory of Eduardo Frei in the September 1964 Chilean presidential election led many to hope that Christian Democracy would develop significantly throughout Latin America, competing with Communism on ideological grounds and offering an alternative democratic route to social and economic progress.

In only one of these--Chile--is the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) the governing party. Frei's solid victory in the 1964 presidential election was followed by an even more impressive showing in the March 1965 congressional election. However, the party's reform program has run into difficulty in the upper house of Congress, which is still controlled by the opposition; no progress has been made in weakening Marxist domination of the urban labor force; and Frei's moderation has been increasingly challenged by the left wing of his own party, which may capture control in the next two or three years.

No such trend has yet developed. The Christian Democratic movement's appeal is to students and middle class, a relatively small percentage of the population in most Latin American countries. Its concepts of basic social reform and the dignity of the human person may appeal to the workers, but they still cast their vote on a pragmatic basis for the least objectionable of the established parties that have an immediate chance of governing.

The only other Christian Democratic party with a claim to a role in government is the one in Peru. It was brought into a pre-election coalition by the dominant Popular Action Party in 1963 and, although it gained only four percent of the vote, it holds two cabinet posts. Its voting strength has been weakened recently by the defection of a dissident faction which formed a separate Popular Christian Party.

The movement's progress is likely to be hampered by its lack of strong leaders and effective labor organizations to compete against the entrenched positions of other political movements.

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