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Running the numbers behind Pope Francis' election

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Pope Francis

Rome — On CNN's "Connect the World" program Monday, the day before the 2013 conclave opened, host Becky Anderson asked me a question about geographic blocs in the College of Cardinals.

Here's what I said: "If there were a lone strong Latin American candidate, I think that guy would already have this race sewn up ... The problem is, there isn't just one plausible Latin American, there are several."

As it turns out, I was half-right.

Although there were other compelling Latin American candidates heading into the voting, such as Brazilians Odilo Pedro Scherer and João Bráz de Aviz and Mexican Francisco Robles Ortega, a lone strong candidate from the region nevertheless emerged within five ballots, well under the 7.4 rounds of voting that form the statistical average for the previous nine conclaves.

A strong Latin American did, in fact, sew things up fast.

After the new pope's bravura debut last night -- asking for the people's blessing before bestowing his own, referring to himself modestly as "bishop," displaying a charming and gentle smile, and most revolutionary of all, taking the name of Francis -- the choice of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio runs the risk of seeming obvious. Faithful Catholics may also be inclined to say the politics of the outcome are irrelevant now, because however it happened, the church has a pope.

In fact, however, it probably took the intersection of several currents in the College of Cardinals to carry Bergoglio to the papacy, and it's easy to imagine how the stars might have aligned a different way.

We'll doubtless learn more in the days to come, but for now it's possible to identify at least three blocs that might have found their man in the 76-year-old Jesuit from Buenos Aires.

First, cardinals who spoke in pre-conclave interviews about the desirability of electing a pope from outside the West probably saw him as their best bet, especially given the strong support he attracted eight years ago, when he was effectively the runner-up to Pope Benedict XVI.

It's reasonable to surmise that once Bergoglio's candidacy seemed real, he attracted most of the votes of the 19 Latin American cardinals, as well as substantial numbers of the 11 Africans and 10 Asians.

To that total have to be added cardinals from Europe and the United States who wanted to elect a non-Western pope in order to put a face on Catholicism's dynamism across the southern hemisphere.

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In a pre-conclave interview, Italian Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio said out loud what many of his brother cardinals were obviously thinking: "It's time to look outside Italy and Europe, in particular considering Latin America."

Second, although Bergoglio is unquestionably orthodox, he may have once again attracted support from European moderates who turned to him eight years ago as the main alternative to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. For that constituency, the fact that Bergoglio is a Jesuit with a reputation for holding diverse currents within the order together probably made him seem attractive.

Those European moderates didn't have the numerical weight in 2013 that they wielded in conclaves past, but they probably represented 15-20 votes.

Third, Bergoglio would have appealed to a current within the 38 Vatican cardinals who took part in the conclave, especially those who come out of the Vatican diplomatic tradition and prize the Holy See's traditional role as a voice of conscience on the global stage.

For that current, a pope devoted to the peace and justice teaching of the church, especially solidarity with the poor, could position Catholicism once again to be a relevant political and social force in the early 21st century.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals, seemed to hint at that vision in his homily for the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontefice* on Tuesday morning.

"The last popes have been builders of so many good initiatives for people and for the international community, tirelessly promoting justice and peace," Sodano said.

"Let us pray that the future pope may continue this unceasing work on the world level."

Those cardinal-diplomats represented 10-15 votes in the conclave.

Adding up 40 cardinals from the developing world, 20 European moderates and 15 diplomats comes to 75 votes, just two short of the magic threshold of 77 required to elect someone pope.

As a cardinal who never worked in the Roman Curia and who has a track record of criticizing careerism

and ambition, Bergoglio would also have appealed to those cardinals seeking a reform of the Vatican bureaucracy -- reform in the sense of a return to the Gospel as personified in Francis of Assisi, not necessarily the "Ten Minute Manager."

What tends to happen in a conclave is that once someone's election begins to seem inevitable, others join the bandwagon to offer the new pope a unified show of support.

At least at first blush, that way of running the numbers seems to compute.

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