

CHAPTER 3

Dictatorship, Democracy, and Revolution in the Modern Era

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain the challenges to democracy that emerged after independence.
- Evaluate how the United States affected the development of democracy in the region.
- Identify the relationships between economic development and democracy.

Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico from 1876 to 1911, was from the southern state of Oaxaca. As president, of course he ruled the entire country but always focused attention on his home state. His minister in Washington actively promoted it for international audiences. In return, local leaders mostly accepted demands Díaz made about who would be the main political leaders in the state. He developed personal relationships with Oaxacan politicians even at the local level to maintain their support. When in 1911 he was overthrown and forced to leave the country, the Oaxaca state congress was the only one to send him a telegram of congratulations for his accomplishments.¹ As in so many Latin American countries, in both democracies and dictatorships, national and more local power bases were bound together in many ways and further spiced with international pressures.

The nineteenth century was not an auspicious one for Latin American democracy. Caudillos had often dominated the political landscape, and weak political institutions had contributed to the rise of militaries that either ruled directly or were hovering over civilian governments. Thus, in the first decade of the twentieth century, there were still dictators such as Porfirio Díaz, Juan Vicente Gómez of Venezuela, and José Santos Zelaya of Nicaragua. They viewed themselves as modernizers, bringing a needed iron fist to nations that could not

advance otherwise. But an era was passing. The age-old liberal–conservative divide was mutating and becoming more complicated. New forces and ideologies emerged that challenged the old order and sparked new divisions, with dissent bubbling up from the local level. This chapter will introduce background and concepts about the struggle for democracy that we will keep coming back to in the case studies.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, Robert Dahl’s concept of *polyarchy* is a useful place to start for analyzing democracy. The procedures behind free and fair voting, political competition, and representations are the essential building blocks of democracy. They do not guarantee broader rights and liberties, but **liberal democracy** cannot exist without that foundation. As political scientist Gerardo Munck notes, however, it is easy for a focus on **procedural democracy** to exclude participation.² For example, people must have the right to vote (which can be easily measured by examining the constitution and relevant laws, as well as the ways in which they are enforced) but they must also be free from informal means (e.g., intimidation or elite-based decision making) of keeping them out of the political system.

Political scientist Peter Smith emphasizes the need to include accountability in any analysis of democracy.³ Thus, rulers must not simply be elected. There must also be a way to judge their actions while in power, and they must consistently justify their policies in a formal manner. Voters put politicians into office, but there may or may not be ways to judge that ruler once he or she is in office. Examples include regular elections, freedom of speech and media scrutiny, and the ability for citizens to organize and protest, which reverberates all the way to the local level. Horizontal accountability refers to what in the United States is commonly known as *checks and balances*. Do state institutions have the authority to hold each other accountable? In the context of Latin American presidentialism, to what extent can presidents make decisions that cannot be checked by the legislature, the courts, or other institutions?

In Parts II to IV, we will see why this is so important, particularly with regard to contemporary politics. Countries with long records of democratic elections convulsed with discontent because the elections masked underlying problems of minimal participation. In addition, presidents might be elected but then rule in a manner that circumvented accountability, either vertical or horizontal. The first step, however, remains the free and fair election. In the early twentieth century, they were few and far between.

The wide variation that we see, both now and a century ago, creates analytical challenges. Very often, a particular regime does not conform perfectly to the characteristics of polyarchy, or even if it holds competitive elections, it lacks in terms of participation or accountability. This variation has given rise to what has been called *democracy with adjectives*, whereby “democracy” is qualified.⁴ Thus, governments may be “protected democracy,” “oligarchic democracy,” “illiberal democracy,” “restrictive democracy,” “electoral authoritarianism,” and so on. Scholars have used hundreds of such subtypes to describe how particular governments deviate from polyarchy. Although it may increase precision, it makes comparison more difficult. Is a “tutelary democracy” more or less democratic than a “guarded democracy”? There isn’t much agreement.

National and International Influence in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

We have already examined the development of presidential systems in the nineteenth century, characterized by a very strong president and weak national legislatures. But in the twentieth century, the gradual growth of an independent **civil society**, referring to groups organizing at the local level to push for change of some sort, also prompted the development of a wide variety of political parties, in some cases very radical. These parties emerged from below, as voluntary associations (e.g., unions) came together to make specific political demands. The ability of these emerging movements to create functional governing organizations also helped translate into parties that were unified enough to engage existing political structures and even challenge the executive. We need to remember that these movements were sometimes threatening to the status quo and therefore sometimes found themselves under attack. In particular, local demands could translate into national action. Despite some resistance, the parties these movements helped create would alter the presidential–legislative relationship in ways that had different effects in different countries. As a result, the presidential domination of the nineteenth century gradually gave way to a more complicated interaction.

Early Weakness of Democracy: National Challenges

As Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Soberg Shugart point out, presidential power in Latin America is mediated by a country's constitution and by its party structure.⁵ In some countries, such as Mexico, a single party would extend its reach throughout the country, down to the lowest possible level, even a neighborhood. With its power, for most of the twentieth century the Mexican president wielded tremendous influence that was almost totally uncontested by Congress. But elsewhere, political parties began defining new issues and contesting the status quo.

The gelling together of national parties is important for the process of democratization, both then and now. Parties are vehicles for stable political negotiation and provide guidance for voters with specific issue interests. But there is a delicate balance to keep. Where there were relatively few parties that had clear platforms, that had coherent leadership, and avoided being dominated by single personalities, democracy was more likely to take root. Party disintegration would become a challenge later in the century, when a variety of populist leaders (which we will discuss shortly) ran without an established party. Too many parties can also be problematic because debate becomes more like a cacophony, which makes negotiation and compromise much trickier.

It took a very long time for parties and presidents to work together in a democratic way. In 1900, there were no democracies at all in Latin America. In most countries, there were elections of some sort, but they can be characterized as “oligarchic domination through electoral means.”⁶ In other words, the elections were rigged or at least elites tightly controlled the choices of candidates. Even the more democratic countries, such as Chile, greatly restricted participation and vertical accountability was minimal. Other Southern

Cone countries, especially Argentina and Uruguay, also started moving in the direction of procedural democracy. Elite competition came before broader political participation.

We can also see the lack of democracy by how many times the rules of the political game changed. There has also been a multitude of constitutions, which demonstrates the high degree of instability. From 1800 to 2006, there were a total of 251 constitutions in Latin America, for an average of 12.6 per country.⁷ Most of those, however, were ratified in the nineteenth century (the Dominican Republic had an astounding twenty-four constitutions between 1827 and 1929). After 1977, only two countries (Guatemala and Nicaragua) had as many as two. Nonetheless, periodic rewriting of all those rules of the game undermined predictability and the formation of strong democratic institutions, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And in some cases, the absence of democracy helped prompt revolution.

National Threats to Democracy

Presidential power would also be leavened with **revolution**, or armed overthrows of the entire political system, which became more common in the twentieth century as new groups pushed their way into the political system and demanded rights. These are the most radical political transformations. The first major revolution of the century occurred in Mexico, where the dictator Porfirio Díaz was forced out in 1910. Emiliano Zapata emerged as the revolutionary leader most attuned to the Mexican peasantry. He excoriated the country's political leadership, especially Francisco Madero.

The main tenets of Zapata's 1911 "Plan de Ayala" would be echoed throughout the century in different countries and contexts. The main argument was that a single dictator should not run a country, and that a combination of corruption and repression had made revolution necessary (and perhaps even inevitable). In its place, the country needed to have more representative institutions that would allow the voice of "the people" (whoever they might be) to be heard at the local level. Similar sentiments were later heard in Cuba, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

In general, however, revolutions were sporadic during the first part of the century, because local discontent had not yet come together at the national level. There were a few, however. Fueled by discontent in the countryside, the 1925 July Revolution in Ecuador ended three decades of liberal rule and increased the state's role over the economy. In Paraguay, after winning the Chaco War against Bolivia in 1935, soldiers expressed their disgust with the liberal government in February 1936. That "Febrerista Revolution" created a short-lived, fascist-leaning government that redistributed land but was overthrown. After years of instability, in 1952 Bolivia experienced upheaval with the Bolivian National Revolution, which nationalized tin mines and incorporated the rural population into the political system with universal suffrage and land reform.

The Cuban revolution, which we will discuss in Chapter 7, was the model for many Marxist revolutionary movements after 1959. **Che Guevara**, the Argentine who fought alongside Fidel and Raúl Castro in the Sierra Maestra

mountains of Cuba, penned a famous work on guerrilla warfare that was intended to be a manual for future revolutionaries. He argued that a small “foco,” or group of guerrillas, could establish themselves in the countryside, the very heart of the local level, where they are harder to find than in the cities. He summarized the strategy as “Hit and run, wait, lie in ambush, again hit and run, and thus repeatedly, without giving any rest to the enemy.”⁸ Guerrilla fighters could win the support of the peasants and destabilize the government regardless of conditions in urban areas. As in Cuba, revolution would radiate out from the rural area, destroy capitalism, and bring a Marxist government to power. Although that strategy failed in most cases (and Guevara was executed in Bolivia in 1967, unable to attract the support of a skeptical and fearful peasantry), it had a massive impact on the Latin American left and on the United States, which considered the Cuban revolution to be a hemispheric threat. In general, revolutions have had a very shaky relationship with democracy. Radical change does not mesh well with the normal push and pull of polyarchies.

International Influence: The United States and Democracy

Until fairly recently, the U.S. government has only sporadically supported democracy in Latin America. By the end of the nineteenth century, U.S. troops were being deployed as a way to keep European influence out of the region and protect U.S. businesses. That, in turn, led to support for nondemocratic governments that were more likely to maintain order and by extension protect U.S. interests. As the Nicaraguan foreign minister put it delicately in 1912, “my Government desires that the Government of the United States guarantee with its forces security for the property of American citizens in Nicaragua and that it extend its protection to all the inhabitants of the Republic.”⁹

In practice, this would mean the beginning of an extended period of U.S. intervention in Latin American politics, focused on Central America and the Caribbean, which of course were the closest. These interventions were antidemocratic in nature and sparked considerable local resistance. In 1898, the United States sent troops to Cuba to finally push the already teetering Spanish Empire out forever. General Leonard Wood was sent to govern the island, and he noted, “It is next to impossible to make them believe we have only their own interests at heart.”¹⁰ That would remain a very common lament, as many Latin Americans resented the dictatorships supported by the United States.

Woodrow Wilson (president from 1913 until 1921) was committed to spreading what he believed to be the benefits of U.S. democracy. As the diplomatic historian Samuel Flagg Bemis put it admiringly back in 1943, there was “a sincere Wilsonian zeal for saving the people from bad government, tyranny, and economic exploitation in order that they might be made fit and stable for self-government, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness under protection of the United States.”¹¹ Therefore, in the name of all things good, Wilson had Marines almost constantly on the move around the Caribbean.

Of course, not everyone viewed occupation as synonymous with “protection.” The presence of these troops was unpopular to most of the population

(though political elites often enjoyed the enforced stability), and resistance found a strong voice in Nicaragua, where a rebel named Augusto Sandino took to the hills to fight against not only the United States but the political elites—“shameless hired assassins”—who accepted and even encouraged their presence. Sandino’s message was that Nicaragua should belong to Nicaraguans, including the long-awaited (and never completed) canal. Foreigners—he gave specific and scathing attention to the United States—and elites subverted Nicaraguan development: “The world would be an unbalanced place if it allowed the United States of America to rule alone over our canal.”

ANALYZING DOCUMENTS

Augusto Sandino was an ardent nationalist, which in turn stemmed in large part from the international presence of the United States. He celebrated the local population, “the lap of the oppressed,” from the national oligarchies and the U.S. government.

Augusto Sandino, Manifiesto, July 1, 1927

To the Nicaraguans, to the Central Americans, to the Indo-Hispanic Race:

The man who doesn’t ask his country for even a handful of earth for his grave deserves to be heard, and not only to be heard, but also to be believed.

I am a Nicaraguan and I am proud because in my veins flows above all the blood of the Indian race, which by some atavism encompasses the mystery of being patriotic, loyal, and sincere.

The bond of nationality give me the right to assume responsibility for my acts, without being concerned that pessimists and cowards may brand me with a name that, in their own condition as eunuchs, would be more appropriately applied to them.

I am a mechanic, but my idealism is based upon a broad horizon of internationalism, which represents the right to be free and to establish justice, even though to achieve this it may be necessary to establish it upon a foundation of blood. The oligarchs, or rather, the swamp geese, will say that I am a plebeian, but it doesn’t matter. My greatest honor is that I come from the lap of the oppressed, the soul and spirit of our race, those who have lived ignored and forgotten, at the mercy of the shameless hired assassins who have committed the crime of high treason, forgetful of the pain and misery of the Liberal cause that they pitilessly persecuted, as if we did not belong to the same nation.

...

The world would be an unbalanced place if it allowed the United States of America to rule alone over our canal, because this would mean placing us at the mercy of the Colossus of the North, forcing us into a dependent and tributary role to persons of bad faith who would be our masters without justifying such pretensions in any way.

Civilization requires that a Nicaraguan canal be built, but that it be done with capital from the whole world, and not exclusively from the United States. At least half of the cost of the construction should be financed with capital from Latin America, and the other half from other countries of the world that may want to hold stock in this enterprise, but the share of the United States should be limited to the three million dollars that they paid to the traitors Chamorro, Díaz, and Cuadra Pasos. And Nicaragua, my Fatherland, will then receive the taxes that by right and be law belong to it, and we will then have income

enough to crisscross our whole territory with railroads and to educate our people in a true environment of effective democracy. Thus we will be respected and not looked upon with the bloody scorn we suffer today.

Fellow citizens:

Having expressed my ardent desire to defend my country, I welcome you to my ranks without regard to your political tendencies, with the one condition that you come with good intentions to defend our nation's honor. Because keep in mind that you can fool all of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time.

Discussion Questions

- What does Sandino think about the international influence on Nicaragua and how it affects nationalism?
- Why is Sandino so angry about the “Colossus of the North”?

Source: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/sandino/sandino7-1-27.htm>

The United States helped seal decades of dictatorship by maneuvering to make Anastasio Somoza García head of the National Guard in 1933 just as the U.S. Marines were leaving the country. Somoza lured Sandino to a meeting, where he had him murdered the following year. Somoza, and then his sons after his death, ruled Nicaragua until the Sandinistas—a guerrilla group named after their hero—overthrew the dictatorship in 1979. Support for dictatorships was the norm in Central America and the Caribbean. By that time the United States had established a hegemonic position in Latin America, meaning that it had far more economic and military power than any other country in the hemisphere. Hegemony does not mean the ability to determine events, but it does entail considerable political leverage, especially over the governments of smaller, weaker countries. Over the years, the United States would commonly use force or economic sanctions, or at least the threat of one or the other, to ensure that a friendly government came to power. Whether or not that government ruled (or even came to power) democratically was not necessarily a primary consideration. Before the Cold War, hegemony was less relevant for South America, which by virtue of distance was less of a concern for policy makers in the United States.

The National Effects of Economic Policy

Particularly, once the Great Depression of the 1930s settled in, old oligarchies were challenged politically in newly insistent ways, mostly undemocratic. The military was deeply involved in resolving socioeconomic conflict by taking over the political system. Between 1900 and 1935, coups hit fifteen Latin American countries.¹² In Ecuador, there were nineteen governments between 1931 and 1948, with none of them finishing their term.

As the region recovered from the economic ravages of the Depression, however, democracy did emerge in many countries. The growth of the middle class was an important factor, but only when the middle class allied itself with the

similarly growing working class.¹³ This is where politics at the local level became increasingly relevant, as the working class organized. Combined, the middle and working classes pushed for greater political inclusion and participation. When the middle class chose to ally itself with the military, broad political participation was restricted. In those cases, the middle class felt more threatened by what they considered radical working-class demands and looked to the military to maintain order. Or, as political scientists Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier argue, when the working class was incorporated into the political system by political parties, this was deemed to be a threat and a backlash—such as a military coup—ensued.¹⁴ Most governments were pursuing some version of import substitution, but only later in the century would government spending be viewed as more leftist.

Presidentialism became even more pronounced in this context, as the executive guided state-led development strategies at the national level. Constitutions already concentrated power in the executive branch, and it became even more common to rule by decree through the use of emergency powers. As Colombian President Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958–1962) put it, the president had to be “a magician, prophet, redeemer, savior, and pacifier who can transform a ruined republic into a prosperous one, can make the prices of the things we export rise and the value of the things we consume drop.”¹⁵ Political elites considered a strong president as the most effective tool to overcome economic difficulties and push through reforms.

As Table 3.1 demonstrates, polyarchies were not uncommon in Latin America in the middle of the twentieth century. In some cases, such as Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela, they were long lasting if at times imperfect. But as time would show, many of them were quite fragile.

TABLE 3.1 Latin American Polyarchies in Mid-Century

| |
|---|
| Argentina 1946–1951; 1958–1962; 1963–1966 |
| Bolivia 1952–1964 |
| Brazil 1945–1964 |
| Chile 1932–1970 |
| Colombia 1936–1949; 1958 to present |
| Costa Rica 1919–present |
| Ecuador 1948–1961 |
| Guatemala 1944–1954 |
| Peru 1939–1948; 1956–1962; 1963–1968 |
| Uruguay 1942–1973 |
| Venezuela 1958 to present |

Source: Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 162.

The Cold War (1947–1991)

Structural change, particularly with regard to international politics, meant that period of democratic rule was short-lived. Militaries across Latin America were already deeply involved in politics since independence and most commonly retained close ties to ruling elites. That combination already posed a major obstacle to democratization. The advent of the Cold War, however, made the process even more difficult and, in many cases, more violent. In most countries, military leaders viewed Marxism—and any leftist group by extension—as a threat to the existence of the nation. In military journals, Communism was routinely portrayed as a “cancer” that needed to be removed from the political body. Continuing the medical metaphor, the armed forces were the doctors, and because cancer is insidious and ever spreading, it needed to be cut out by whatever means necessary. Eventually that would mean simply taking over the entire country, cancelling elections, and ruling by force.

This phenomenon has aptly been called the “politics of antipolitics.”¹⁶ Military leaders professed disgust at the ways in which civilians would create unstable conditions, and thus how “politics” had become too important at the expense of the national interest. Antipolitics therefore entails restoration of order, both political and economic, and a subordination of individual rights to the needs of the fatherland. The level of repression might vary, but the rhetoric across different countries was strikingly similar. As the manifesto of the more leftist Peruvian military government put it in 1968, “Overwhelming personal ambition in the exercise of the responsibilities of the executive and legislative branches in the discharging of public and administrative duties, as well as in other fields of the nation’s activities, has produced immoral acts which the public has repudiated.”¹⁷ If politics is producing immorality, then the armed forces are not only justified to act but indeed required to do so decisively. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, that militarized aspect of Latin American politics has now diminished greatly, particularly since 1990, though still has not entirely disappeared in some countries.

The Military and International Influence

Latin America was not developing in a vacuum. The United States and the Soviet Union were allied in the effort to defeat the Axis (the most important components of which were Nazi Germany and Japan), but the alliance was one only because of necessity. The ideological divide between the two immediately became apparent once the war was over and the two sides began the process of consolidating new borders and spheres of influence in Europe and Asia. What became known as the Cold War is commonly considered to have begun in 1947, as the Soviet Union consolidated control over parts of Eastern Europe and President Harry S. Truman announced the Truman Doctrine, asserting that the great power rivalry pitted freedom against tyranny. It emphasized containment, referring to a strategy of preventing the spread of Communist, or Communist-inspired, governments. This would have a tremendous, and mostly negative, impact on Latin American democracy.

Latin America soon became part of the battleground. Enhanced freedoms of the press and of opposition in many countries motivated locally inspired reform efforts, which ran up against deeply entrenched and suspicious oligarchies. Their views coincided with, but were not created by, the United States. In 1948, the **Organization of American States (OAS)** came into being, the culmination of over fifty years of periodic hemispheric meetings intended to cultivate some sort of common vision. For the United States, the essential purpose of the OAS was to add another layer of protection against what policy makers considered Communist infiltration in the region. Many Latin American leaders agreed, but they also believed the OAS could act as a block against U.S. hegemony by providing a space for defending against intervention.

Nowhere was the new era more evident than in Guatemala, where the dictator Jorge Ubico was forced out in the midst of a general strike in 1944. Elections held soon thereafter brought Juan José Arévalo to the presidency. He proclaimed his project was “spiritual socialism,” which in practice meant a focus on labor reform, empowerment of unions, and expansion of civil liberties. Although he was careful to couch his ideology in anti-Communist terms, and not to antagonize United Fruit in the countryside, U.S. officials became convinced that Guatemala was traveling on the road toward Communism. He was succeeded in 1951 by his defense minister, Jacobo Arbenz, who took the reformist project into the countryside, brought members of the Communist party into his cabinet, and prompted the United States to launch Operation PBSUCCESS, which successfully overthrew Arbenz in 1954 (see Box 3.1).

From that point on, support for authoritarian governments became common if they were anti-Communist. Truman’s idea of “containment” was also not always enough. Rather than simply contain leftist governments, the United States worked to oust them and install a more friendly replacement. Obviously, this new war was not “cold” in Latin America. The influential former State Department official George Kennan neatly summed up the Cold War view of Latin America: “It seems to me unlikely that there could be any region on earth in which nature and human behavior could have combined to produce a more unhappy and hopeless background for the conduct of human life than in Latin America.”¹⁸ Latin America was not only vulnerable, but it was really incapable of democracy. Therefore, Kennan concluded that only “harsh governmental measures of repression” would protect them from Communist advances. In this view, dictatorship might be the only answer for many governments. That assessment would be echoed by countless policy makers over the next several decades.

The struggle for democracy in Latin America in the early Cold War developed a certain circular quality. Nascent efforts at reform were turned back, which led to resistance, violence, military coups, and dictatorships. In turn, those dictatorships spurred on even greater resistance and guerrilla warfare, which alarmed the United States and led to increased repression. Very few countries escaped some aspect of this vicious cycle, which accelerated after the Cuban revolution of 1959. But even the most stable democracies, such as Chile

BOX 3.1

International Pressures: The Overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz

International: The United States watched the election of Jacobo Arbenz with considerable alarm. President Dwight D. Eisenhower cut off all economic and military aid. Covert action began in 1952, and the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) used every means at its disposal to create a sense of crisis and obtain support from the Guatemalan military. An analyst in the Department of State wrote an influential memo titled, “Our Guatemala Policy,” positing that Guatemala could be used “as a base from which to operate against the political and social structures of other Latin American states, and from which to organize sabotage of physical installations that contribute to the defense of the Hemisphere.”¹⁹

The plan was enacted in 1954 after a shipment of weapons Guatemala purchased from Czechoslovakia was intercepted. The operation was quick and effective, as Arbenz’s internal support crumbled under the CIA’s radio broadcast of a massive invasion (which in reality was only 250 soldiers). Arbenz fled the country and a military junta took control. Guatemala’s fledgling democracy ended, and the resulting civil war would not officially end until peace accords were signed in 1996.

National: Under Arbenz, both political exiles and foreigners came into the

country, bringing with them ideas that had been banned during the previous dictatorship. They introduced Marxism into the country, especially to the country’s largest union, the Central Labor Federation. Arbenz allied himself with the Community Party and enacted land reform that included nationalization and expropriation of land owned by the large U.S. company United Fruit. That set into motion a series of events that culminated in the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Arbenz and the installation of a military government.

Local: Elected president of Guatemala in 1944, Juan José Arévalo advocated for what he called *spiritual socialism*, the core of which was emphasis on the dignity of the individual. Long oppressed, the large local indigenous populations had little connection to the national government and received almost no benefits from it. Arbenz sought to deepen the connection between the national government and the local level even more. That challenged local elites, who then supported his overthrow.

Discussion Questions

- How legitimate is it for international actors such as the United States to intervene in the national (or even local) affairs of other countries?
- Why was the United States so concerned about national policy making in a very small country?

and Uruguay, eventually succumbed to military coups in the face of intense ideological polarization. Research has also shown that increased spending on military institutions has a negative effect on economic development. As a result, dictatorships have been detrimental not only to democracy but also to basic socioeconomic indicators.

National Factors in Democratic Breakdown

Latin American military ideology and international influences are not the only explanations for democracy's fragility. One prominent hypothesis about political outcomes relates to political institutions, particularly presidential versus parliamentary forms of government. A very common argument is that presidentialism—the norm in Latin America—has been detrimental to democracy. This can help explain democracy's periodic breakdown in the region, but it can also provide insight into how democracies struggle on a constant basis without necessarily succumbing to dictatorship. The hypothesis is focused largely on the national level, though it does acknowledge the destabilizing effects of local discontent.

In presidential systems, the executive and legislative branches are elected separately, sometimes by voters with very different priorities. If the president and a majority of legislators are at odds, then a “zero-sum game” ensues, meaning that a win for one side necessarily entails a loss for the other. Presidential systems do not offer any means for resolving disputes, because each side is elected separately from the other, and only in extreme circumstances (e.g., criminal behavior) can a legislature impeach and convict a president. The president, meanwhile, has no power to dissolve the legislature as in a parliamentary system or otherwise force it to compromise. As the well-known political scientist Juan Linz has argued, “The zero-sum game raises the stakes in a presidential election for winners and losers, and inevitably increases the tension and polarization.”²⁰

In countries with weak political institutions that are experiencing a high degree of conflict, this tension may lead to democratic breakdown. Traditionally, this has taken the form of military intervention but, in recent years, has also manifested itself in what is known as a **self-coup** (from the Spanish “autogolpe”) where the president illegally forces the dissolution of the legislature, thus overthrowing part of the government. The essential hypothesis is that presidentialism makes political conflicts worse and thereby represents a threat to democracy. By contrast, a parliamentary system in which the executive is chosen by a majority in the legislature, and then must maintain the confidence of a majority of legislators or be forced out of office, is viewed as a preferable alternative that would alleviate—if not necessarily eliminate—the sometimes disastrous effects of polarization.

This line of argument, while influential, has been challenged. The rules governing presidential systems may not be to blame; instead, other external (or “exogenous”) factors may be more responsible. Presidential systems in Latin America “tend to exist in countries that are also more likely to suffer from dictatorships led by the military.”²¹ Therefore, presidentialism may not be the most important variable, as other aspects of Latin American countries have led to military intervention, such as historically powerful and politicized militaries. Furthermore, there are many different variations of presidentialism that also account for breakdown. Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Soberg Shugart note the importance of the number of political parties, how disciplined they are, and also of electoral law (i.e., the rules governing how presidents and legislators are elected).²² Some combinations might therefore keep presidential governments more stable.

Even if there is no consensus about the most relevant variables, there is widespread agreement that presidentialism plays an important role in determining how politics plays out in Latin American countries. Since independence, presidential power has been substantial, which in turn has led to political conflict of varying intensity. Between 1964, when the Brazilian military overthrew the elected government (subsequently ruling for twenty-one years), and 1990, when the Chilean dictatorship finally left power, Latin American democracy was at a low point. The ideology of the Cold War had literally overwhelmed the region. A few polyarchies remained, most notably Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela, but political violence had replaced democratic governance in many countries (see Table 3.2). In 1979, Ecuador was the first dictatorship to launch a transition to democracy, and gradually others followed suit. It is no coincidence that many of these transitions occurred just as the Cold War was winding down, as the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. Once the ideological battle was no longer so relevant, even the brutal Central American civil wars slowly concluded. The United States gradually ended its support for these wars and showed less patience with dictatorships than in the past.

The transitions from authoritarian rule took a number of different forms. In a widely cited work, political scientist Terry Lynn Karl identified four broad “modes” of transition.²³ In a pacted transition, the dictatorship and the opposition negotiate an end to authoritarian rule. Transition by imposition means the governing regime is forced out. Transitions by reform entail using existing laws to democratize the political system and end authoritarian practices. Finally, as its name suggests, revolution involves overturning the entire political system and installing something radically different in its place. Each of these different

TABLE 3.2 Women’s Suffrage in Latin America

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Argentina 1947 | Guatemala 1945 |
| Bolivia 1952 | Honduras 1955 |
| Brazil 1932 | Mexico 1953 |
| Chile 1949 | Nicaragua 1955 |
| Colombia 1957 | Panama 1945 |
| Costa Rica 1949 | Paraguay 1961 |
| Cuba 1934 | Peru 1955 |
| Dominican Republic 1942 | Uruguay 1932 |
| Ecuador 1929 | Venezuela 1947 |
| El Salvador 1939 | |

Source: Peter H. Smith, *Political Change in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186.

modes of transition suggests different political outcomes and, therefore, represents a “path-dependent” argument. This generated considerable scholarly debate, as analysts struggled to explain what happened once authoritarian governments fell. As we go through the country case studies, we will examine some of these transitions in more detail.

We should keep in mind, however, that despite authoritarian setbacks, even short-term experiences with electoral democracy had some long-lasting and positive consequences. Structural transformations brought new political actors to the fore. Women in Latin America were pushed to the periphery of the political system until the nineteenth century, when (as in the United States) they won the right to vote. Middle- and upper-class women spearheaded the suffrage movements from the grassroots, spurred on by the example of the United States, which amended the constitution to allow women to vote, effective in 1920. From the perspective of modernization theory, this would be a cultural step on the path toward copying the model of the developed world, because many activists explicitly pointed to the advances that women were making in the United States. As Table 3.3 shows, South American countries took the lead in the 1920 and 1930s, though in some countries (e.g., Colombia and Paraguay) that change did not take place until at least well into the 1950s.

Women’s societies around Latin America linked together in a 1922 meeting in Baltimore and formed the Pan American Association for the Advancement of Women. By virtue of their social status, participating women had the opportunity to make their views known to relevant policy makers. In 1922, for example, Brazilian activists were able to attend a luncheon with the U.S. ambassador to Brazil, the Brazilian vice president, the minister of foreign relations, the director of public education, and congressmen.²⁴ Change came slowly, but within a decade Brazilian women could vote.

A second surge of women participating in politics came as a result of authoritarian governments. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, women took on

TABLE 3.3 Latin American Military Dictatorships After 1959

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Argentina 1966–1973; 1976–1983 | Guatemala |
| Bolivia | Honduras |
| Brazil 1964–1985 | Nicaragua |
| Chile 1973–1990 | Panama |
| Cuba 1959 to present | Paraguay |
| Dominican Republic | Peru 1968–1980 |
| Ecuador | Uruguay 1973–1985 |
| El Salvador | |

active political roles to protest the mistreatment of their relatives and joined together to overcome the repression and economic deprivation they suffered. They were partially protected because of their cultural status as wives and mothers and carved out political space that did not exist before (the Argentine mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is probably the most famous example, along with Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala, which will be discussed in more detail in later chapters). Once the dictatorship, and hence the common enemy, was gone, women found it challenging to maintain the same level of unity and commonality of purpose. This is a dilemma that continues today.

Political participation of indigenous groups proved even thornier. There have been periodic moments when the virtues of indigenous cultures have been promoted (e.g., the Mexican revolution), but the benefits tended to be either mostly symbolic or short-lived. The 1991 Colombian constitution, for example, lays out indigenous rights in detail but periodic protests demonstrate the depth of concern about how political violence there has negatively impacted those rights. Even in the latter part of the twentieth century, there was a severe imbalance between the percentages of indigenous people in the legislature versus the population as a whole. Indigenous populations in some countries constitute a majority or at least close to a majority of the entire population, yet have barely any political representation. It has proven very difficult to get their demands heard at the national level.

By 2012, for example, the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples remained only in draft form. As with many other issues, there remains considerable distance between the rhetoric of rights and the implementation of specific policies intended to ensure their protection. In Chapter 8, we will examine the dynamics of indigenous rights in Andean countries, but the outcomes of these struggles remain very much in doubt, particularly because they are hotly contested.

Contemporary Democracy in the Post–Cold War Era (1991 to Present)

By the time the Cold War officially came to a close, Cuba was the only remaining dictatorship in Latin America. Despite periodic reversals, such as a self-coup in Peru (2000), along with coups in Ecuador (2000), Venezuela (2002), and Honduras (2009), polyarchies persist in the region. Plus, even the coups that have occurred have not led to military dictatorships as in the past. Parts II to IV that follow will analyze the political effects of the widespread election of self-proclaimed leftists to the presidency. Their platforms and policies are far more diverse than conventional wisdom suggests, but they do raise important questions about the dynamics of accountability and participation in polyarchies. In general, left-leaning governments have arisen because of simmering discontent with market-driven reforms that began in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s. Processes of privatization, spending and subsidy cuts, and deregulation were unpopular in many countries. New political leaders emerged who harnessed that resentment and ran successful campaigns focusing on bringing the state back in.

Much ink has been spilt trying to categorize the rise of leftist governments. Some argue about “good” versus “bad” lefts, with the former more social democratic and the latter more authoritarian.²⁵ *Social democratic* refers to the idea that the state should play an important role in the economy to alleviate the problems generated by market forces, but at the same time the rules of democratic governance are strictly followed. The authoritarian argument is that more radical leftist governments seek to force state-led development and increase the power of the executive, thus endangering both vertical and horizontal accountability. Our case studies will show that it is difficult to make such sweeping generalizations. Indeed, research has shown that despite the election of so many governments of the left, the median voter is still slightly to the right of world opinion.²⁶ In other words, in general Latin Americans lean a bit to the conservative side.

The National Impact of Populism

This debate also centers on **populism**, which has a complex relationship with democracy. Populism involves the rejection of established political parties, an emphasis on the individual leader’s direct and personal connection to the populace, and the establishment of direct ties to different segments of the population. Kurt Weyland sums it up as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.”²⁷ It also involves a discourse that focuses on duality, of good and evil, with of course the charismatic leader embodying the good.²⁸ Latin America has experienced populism of both the left and the right, and its essential danger is that the president bypasses formal political channels and makes policy according to his or her whim. Hugo Chávez is the current figure most associated with the concept, but past leaders as ideologically varied as Alberto Fujimori (Peru) and Juan Perón (Argentina) also fit the populist label.

Populism past and present involves leaders making personal connections to people at the local level. They see parties as national elites that are uninterested in the common person. In practice, this often generates a lot of excitement and intense loyalty. Individuals feel that, for the first time, a president is really paying attention to them and even promising to solve local problems that have been totally ignored in the past.

Newfound Strength of Democracy

The strength of party systems must also be considered in the context of populism. Well-functioning parties provide connections between the local and national levels, place obstacles in the way of individuals who want to concentrate power in their personal hands, and allow for clear avenues of policy discussion and debate. In Venezuela, the strong traditional parties literally disintegrated, leaving a gaping power vacuum. Yet in Uruguay, where the left has won

two consecutive presidential elections (including former guerrilla José Mujica, elected in 2009), the parties are very strong and the shift from the right to the left has been smooth and peaceful. Other countries fall in between. Brazil, with leftist president Dilma Rousseff, has a chaotic party system but the Worker's Party is disciplined and well organized, which has also ensured a tranquil transition and no move toward populist rule.

The mere fact that so many leftist presidents have been elected and remained in office (with Honduras a glaring exception) represents a step forward for a region that has experienced so many conservative military coups in its history. Also positive is the alternation of power from left to right, as occurred in Chile after a runoff presidential election in 2010. Whether or not populist governments continue to rule in a democratic fashion, and accept elections that force them to step down, remains an open question that we will explore. The wide variety of these new analytical terms that have come into vogue refer to a government that is freely elected but attacks other institutions—the legislative and judicial branches, the media, even organizations within civil society—once it is in power. There are worrisome signs in this regard in Venezuela, for example, but once again, generalizing too much is problematic.

Conclusion

The process of democratization in Latin America has been very gradual and, many times, has suffered setbacks in the form of coups and other types of authoritarian intrusions. Porfirio Díaz's rule in Mexico exemplifies how difficult it was even for authoritarian leaders to reconcile local, national, and international demands. The middle of the century saw an increase in polyarchies, although they did not necessarily offer expansive political participation and either vertical or horizontal accountability. In practice, this means that many local-level concerns have gone largely unnoticed from national politicians, and that has created discontent. In addition, for decades international influence was very high. The Cold War was characterized by a literal explosion of coups and military governments, demonstrating the importance of international factors. Between 1979 and 1990, Latin American dictatorships began transitions to democracy (with the exception of Cuba).

Currently, Latin America is more moderate and democratic than at any other time in its history. That may be hard to believe given the sometimes alarmist headlines, but—with some exceptions—elections take place in a much more fair and much less contentious atmosphere, the armed forces are more likely to stay in the barracks, and the state persecutes fewer of its citizens. There are glaring exceptions to be sure, but the chapters that follow will show the gains made by many countries that have suffered tremendous instability in recent decades. We can't make predictions about the future, but we can take a close look at the political development of specific countries and get a sense of where they seem to be headed.

Key Terms

- Liberal democracy
- Procedural democracy
- Civil society
- Revolution
- Che Guevara
- Organization of American States (OAS)
- Self-coup
- Populism

Discussion Questions

- What consequences did U.S. intervention tend to have on democracy in Latin America? Why?
- What historical and doctrinal characteristics of the armed forces have made them an obstacle to democracy in the region?
- Which political parties in the region have been the most stable? Can you think of ways parties connect to people at the local level?
- Are there discernable time periods where democratic rule has been more common in Latin America?
- In what ways might populism connect national-level politics to the local level?

Further Sources

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Web Sites

Fitzgibbon Survey of Scholarly Images of Democracy in Latin America (<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/PSci/Fac/klesner/fitzgibbon/default.htm>). Named after Professor Russell Fitzgibbon, who began the project in 1945, this is the Web site of a survey taken every five years. It asks scholars of Latin America their perceptions of various aspects of Latin American democracy, using a specific set of criteria.

Latinobarómetro (<http://www.latinobarometro.org/>). This is data generated by a private company in Santiago, Chile. Every year, it conducts public opinion polling across Latin America and releases a lengthy summary. The Web site does not allow access to the data, but it does include past reports back to 1995. The site is in both English and Spanish.

The National Security Archive (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>). This independent, nongovernmental organization has unearthed countless U.S. government documents through Freedom of Information Act requests. Its archival projects includes details on Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico (in addition to many other countries outside Latin America).

Center for Latin American Studies (Research) (<http://pdba.georgetown.edu/>). The Center for Latin American Studies at Georgetown University offers a database focusing on political institutions. This includes constitutions, information on branches of government, political parties, indigenous peoples, and civil society.

Vanderbilt University Latin American Public Opinion Project (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>). Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) conducts extensive public opinion polling, culminating in the Americas Barometer. The Web site includes an extensive list of publications on the topic, access to the data, and the option to sign up for email releases of new polling analyses.

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