Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America

This book documents the emergence of a new pattern of political instability in Latin America. Traditional military coups have receded in the region, but elected presidents are still ousted from power as a result of recurrent crises. Aníbal Pérez-Liñán shows that presidential impeachment has become the main instrument employed by civilian elites to depose unpopular rulers. Based on detailed comparative research in five countries and extensive historical information, the book explains why crises without breakdown have become the dominant form of instability in recent years and why some presidents are removed from office while others survive in power. The analysis emphasizes the erosion of presidential approval resulting from corruption and unpopular policies, the formation of hostile coalitions in Congress, and the role of investigative journalism. This book challenges classic assumptions in studies of presidentialism and provides important insights for the fields of political communication, democratization, political behavior, and institutional analysis.

Aníbal Pérez-Liñán is an assistant professor of political science and a member of the core faculty at the Center for Latin American Studies, University of Pittsburgh. Born in Argentina, Pérez-Liñán has conducted extensive research in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Venezuela. He has published articles in academic journals in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Great Britain, Spain, the United States, and Uruguay. His most recent articles have been published in the Journal of Politics, Electoral Studies, and Comparative Political Studies.
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Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America

ANÍBAL PÉREZ-LIÑÁN

University of Pittsburgh
To my mother, for her strength and generosity
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Preface and Acknowledgments

The 1990s were an era of great hopes for Latin America. After the demise of authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and the early 1990s, major economic reforms were undertaken in most Latin American countries in order to reduce chronic inflation and promote sustained growth. For many contemporaneous observers, the confluence of democracy and free markets signaled a break with the past, the dawn of a new era of civil liberties, prosperity, and political stability.

More than a decade later, it is hard to look back at this period without a mixture of nostalgia and sarcasm. The legacies of the 1990s varied from country to country, but they can be generally described as notable achievements overshadowed by missed opportunities. In the economic realm, hyperinflation was eventually defeated, but economic growth remained elusive and poverty resilient. In the political arena, the military eventually withdrew from politics (not a minor feat), but elected governments, surprisingly, continued to collapse. Starting in the early 1990s, presidents were removed from office in Brazil, Venezuela, Guatemala, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Argentina, and Bolivia – in some countries recurrently. This outcome frequently represented the triumph of an indignant society over a corrupt or abusive executive, but it seldom prevented the occurrence of new abuses in later administrations. By the early years of the twenty-first century, it was clear that the particular circumstances of each crisis represented only parts of a broader puzzle – a new pattern of political instability emerging in the region.

This book explores the origins and the consequences of this novel pattern of instability, emphasizing the critical events that defined the new trend between 1992 and 2004. During this period, civilian elites realized that traditional military coups had become for the most part unfeasible and
Preface and Acknowledgments

experimented with the use of constitutional instruments to remove unpopular presidents from office. Presidential impeachment thus became a distinctive mark of the new political landscape in Latin America.

The recurrence of presidential crises without democratic breakdown challenged many dominant views among political scientists. Latin American democracies proved to be simultaneously enduring and unstable, willing to punish presidential corruption but unable to prevent it, and responsive to popular demands only in the context of massive protests and widespread frustration. My attempts to understand these facts initially relied on well-delimited theoretical perspectives that proved rather disappointing, and I was forced to embark on a long exploration across the disciplinary boundaries of political sociology, communication, political behavior, institutional analysis, democratization, and the study of social movements. Others who have studied these topics more thoroughly than I may be reluctant to recognize their subject in the chapters that follow, but I hope that they will forgive my intrusion. In the course of this exploration I have wandered through the academic fields of many colleagues and collected a large number of intellectual debts along the way.

Intellectual debts, Theodore Lowi once wrote, are never paid in full. Over the course of the years many people and institutions have endowed my work with ideas, guidance, support, and helpful criticism. This book grew in the fertile ground provided by the Department of Government and International Studies (now Political Science) at the University of Notre Dame and was finished in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh. Scott Mainwaring coached this project from beginning to end; Michael Coppedge, Robert Fishman, and Guillermo O’Donnell imparted enthusiasm and sound advice. The lively intellectual environments of the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at Notre Dame and the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh nurtured the ideas presented here.

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