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978-0-521-19001-5 - Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall

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## I

## Introduction

We began this book because we wanted to understand the evolution of political regimes in Latin America since 1900 and the reasons for the patterns of those political regimes. What explains why democracies have endured or broken down? What explains why dictatorships have survived or fallen? What explains waves of regime change? Even though the literature had many rich case studies, it was not entirely clear how to cumulate knowledge from these existing studies. Nobody had previously undertaken a project to explain the emergence, survival, and fall of democracies and dictatorships for the region as a whole over an extended period of time.

These empirical issues raised theoretical questions. What theories or theoretical approaches gave us the most leverage in understanding the emergence, survival, and fall of democracies and dictatorships in Latin America? From the outset, we were skeptical that some prominent existing theories would give us much leverage for explaining these issues for Latin America. Modernization theory, which posits that more economically developed countries are more likely to be democratic, did not seem promising as a way of understanding the vicissitudes of democracies and dictatorships in Latin America. A decade ago, we published an article that showed a weak and nonlinear relationship between the level of development and democracy in Latin America (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003). Our work added to earlier evidence that modernization theory did not go far toward explaining political regimes in Latin America (Landman 1999; O'Donnell 1973).

As we worked on some related articles that paved the way to this book, class theories of democratization enjoyed renewed visibility with the publication of the works by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) and Boix (2003). These works see democratization as a struggle between the poor, who always favor democracy when it is a viable outcome, and the rich, who prefer dictatorship when stable dictatorship is feasible. For Latin America (and beyond), these theories are problematic. In many cases, the poor and the working class strongly supported leftist

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and populist authoritarians even when liberal democracy was an alternative outcome (R. Collier 1999; Germani 1974; Levitsky and Mainwaring 2006; Lipset 1959: 87–126). In other cases, elite actors helped spearhead transitions to democracy (Cardoso 1986; L. Payne 1994). Moreover, contra the assumption of the class-based theories, for Latin America from the 1980s until 2003, many democracies distributed income from the poor to the wealthy, and none did the opposite.

Nor did Inglehart's theories of democracy based on mass political culture (Inglehart 1990, 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005) hold much promise as a way of understanding the rise and fall of democracies and dictatorships in Latin America. Inglehart's theories have modernization underpinnings, and modernization theory, as already noted, does not explain regime survival and fall in Latin America. Moreover, in many Latin American democracies, large numbers of citizens express indifference about democracy in public opinion surveys. If large numbers of citizens are not committed to democracy, how can a democratic public opinion explain the durability of democracy?

Finally, all of the established major theoretical paradigms in comparative politics focused on within-country variables. Such a focus cannot easily explain *waves* of regime change, in which international influences and actors hold sway.

We found theoretical inspiration in the seminal works by Linz (1978b) on democratic breakdowns and by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) on transitions to democracy, as well as in many case studies about political regimes. We build on these works, but they did not attempt to develop a theory in the strict sense (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 3). Linz and O'Donnell and Schmitter focused on quite proximate questions of regime change and survival and on regime coalitions, without specifying why different actors join the pro- or anti-democracy coalitions. Ultimately, our dissatisfaction with existing theories of regimes and regime change and our desire to provide greater theoretical integration than Linz (1978b) and O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) led us to set forth a new theory of regimes in this book.

We have two primary ambitions. First, we hope to contribute to broader theoretical and comparative debates about the survival or fall of authoritarian and competitive (democratic and semi-democratic) regimes. Second, we aspire to explain regime change and survival<sup>1</sup> of dictatorships and competitive regimes in Latin America from 1945 to 2010, with some glances back at the 1900–44 period.

Because of the inadequacy of existing theories and the advantages that a theory offers, we concluded that it would be useful to elaborate an alternative theory based on more realistic microfoundations about what motivates political actors. Our theory looks at systems of actors, posits assumptions about their preferences and about why regimes fall or survive, and deduces hypotheses from these assumptions. In a theory, it is not only the individual hypotheses that can

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the book, we use the terms “regime survival,” “regime continuity,” “regime durability,” and “regime stability” interchangeably. As used here, a stable regime is simply one that survives even if it faces other forms of upheaval.

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advance social science; it is also the overarching set of integrated and interrelated propositions (Achen and Snidal 1989). Our theory, which we sketch in this chapter and present more fully in Chapter 2, integrates the study of transitions to competitive regimes and of breakdowns of competitive regimes, and by implication, the study of the durability of dictatorships and of competitive regimes.

A BREAK WITH THE PAST

Figure 1.1 illustrates the fundamental transformation of regimes in Latin America, showing the annual percentage of democracies in the region between 1900 and 2010. The first panel depicts the percentage of countries counted as democracies (as opposed to dictatorships) in the dichotomous classification developed by Adam Przeworski and his collaborators (Przeworski et al. 2000; Cheibub and Gandhi 2004). The second panel reflects the percentage of countries with scores greater than 5 in the Polity scale (Gurr, Jagers, and Moore

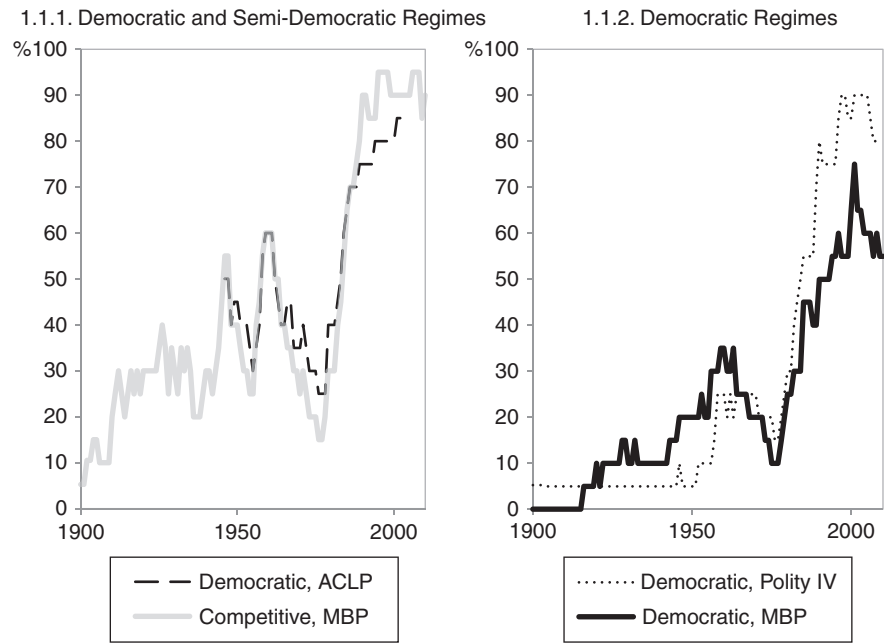


FIGURE 1.1 Percentage of Democratic Regimes in Latin America, 1900–2010  
Key: ACLP: Classification developed by Alvarez, Cheibub, Gandhi, Limongi, and Przeworski.  
Polity: Countries with scores greater than 5 in the Polity IV scale.  
MPB: Mainwaring, Brinks, and Pérez-Liñán trichotomous classification.  
Sources: Authors' elaboration based on Cheibub and Ghandi (2004), Przeworski et al. (2000), Polity IV 2012 (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>), and Table 1.1.

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1990; Jagers and Gurr 1995; Polity IV Project 2012).<sup>2</sup> We also present the classification of political regimes developed for this project, introduced later.

Figure 1.1 suggests that the Przeworski et al. measure is more lenient than a classification based on a score of greater than 5 on the Polity IV scale. Yet all three measures confirm the occurrence of an unprecedented wave of change between 1978 and 1995. They depict a similar trend for the last part of the twentieth century, suggesting reliability in the overall picture.<sup>3</sup> Democracy expanded somewhat in the late 1950s, and then hit a nadir in 1976–77, followed by an unprecedented surge during the 1980s.

Until the wave of democratization that began in 1978, authoritarian regimes were pervasive in most of the region. Many democracies were short-lived, and several countries had had no experience whatsoever of competitive political regimes. The situation changed profoundly between 1978 and 1995. A region that had previously always been predominantly authoritarian witnessed the virtual demise of openly authoritarian regimes. Moreover, since 1978, competitive regimes have been far more durable than ever before. Compared to what occurred in earlier waves of democratization in Latin America, this wave has lasted much longer and has been broader in scope. This transformation is one of the most profound changes in the history of Latin American politics.

The increase in the number of democracies and semi-democracies in Latin America between 1978 and 1995 was dramatic. At the beginning of this period, Latin America had only three democracies, and the other seventeen countries had openly authoritarian regimes. By 1990, the only openly authoritarian governments were those of Cuba and Haiti. By 1995, Cuba was the sole holdout (although Haiti eroded back into authoritarian rule between 1999 and 2006). The shift away from authoritarianism was dramatic in speed and breadth. The trend is even more striking if we consider the total proportion of Latin Americans living under competitive regimes. In 1900, only 5 percent of the regional population enjoyed democratic or semi-democratic politics. In 1950, it was 58 percent. The percentage plummeted to 12 percent of the regional population by 1977, but it had reached 98 percent by 2006.

Figure 1.1 also displays the evolution of political regimes according to our own classification. We classify regimes in Latin America using a simple trichotomous scale developed with Daniel Brinks (Mainwaring et al. 2001, 2007): democratic, semi-democratic, and authoritarian. We lump together the democratic and semi-democratic regimes into a broader category of “competitive

<sup>2</sup> The Polity scale ranges between –10 (authoritarian) and 10 (democratic). The threshold of 5 is conventionally employed to distinguish full democracies from other types of regimes.

<sup>3</sup> The Polity score (the only available for the 1900–45 period beside our own classification) does not consider the extension of voting rights, so it overestimates levels of democracy in the early twentieth century. These four measures of democracy are strongly correlated. The series for the proportion of democracies and semi-democracies according to the Mainwaring et al. three-point scale correlates at .98 with the Przeworski series, at .93 with the Polity index, and at .97 with Freedom House scores.

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regimes” displayed in panel 1.1.1. We explain our coding of political regimes in Chapter 3.

## THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

**1) Political actors should be at the center of theories of regime survival and change.** Political actors, not structures or cultures, determine outcomes, even though structures and cultures affect the formation and preferences of actors. We view presidents and organizations such as parties, unions, business associations, the military, and organized movements as the most important actors. These organizations and presidents control political resources and therefore exercise influence in the competition for power.

We locate our theory between structural or long-term cultural approaches, on the one hand, and agency and contingent action approaches, on the other. In many theoretical perspectives, purposeful action is the final step in a long causal chain that is largely determined by deep structural (e.g., Boix 2003; Skocpol 1979) or cultural (Foucault 1972; Inglehart and Welzel 2005) forces that transcend individual actors. In these structural and cultural accounts, actors’ decisions are largely determined by macro forces. On the other hand, we emphasize the constraining and structuring of powerful organizations more than approaches that focus on individual leaders’ decision making.

**2) We emphasize the role of political factors that help political regimes survive or lead them to fail.** By “political factors” we refer specifically to the impact of actors’ normative preferences about democracy and dictatorship, their moderation or radicalization in policy preferences, and international political influences exercised through external actors. We counterpose an emphasis on these political factors to analyses that argue that the survival or displacement of regimes depends largely on structural factors such as the level of development, the class structure, or income inequalities, or on mass political culture.

These political factors have primacy in determining whether regimes fail or remain stable. The empirical evidence for Latin America in the twentieth century supports a primary focus on political factors such as the level of radicalization, actors’ normative commitment to democracy, and a favorable international political environment. With a normative democratic commitment on the part of powerful political players and a favorable international environment, democracy can survive in the face of daunting challenges: poverty, significant ethnic cleavages, deep social inequalities, high inflation, and low growth (Linz 1988; Remmer 1996). Indeed, democratic and semi-democratic regimes have survived in post-1977 Latin America in the face of all these unfavorable conditions. This capacity of democracy to survive despite seemingly highly adverse conditions flies in the face of many theoretical expectations before the latest wave of democracy began.

Other analysts have also focused on political factors in understanding regime survival and fall. We add to and modify most previous work by presenting these

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ideas in an integrated framework and by testing the theory and specific hypotheses in new ways.

**2a) Actors' normative attitudes about democracy and dictatorship are important influences in regime survival or fall.** If the most powerful actors have a normative preference for democracy – if they believe that democracy is intrinsically the best political regime even if it does not satisfy their other policy preferences – democracy is more likely to survive.

Our focus on the impact of actors' normative attitudes on regime outcomes builds on literatures in political science and sociology that have emphasized the importance of actors' beliefs in understanding political outcomes. Actors' beliefs influence what they view as desirable and how they pursue their interests (Berman 1998; Blyth 2002; Finnemore 1998; Goldstein 1993; Hall 1989; Sikkink 1991, 1993). If powerful actors view liberal democracy as an inefficient, corruption-plagued obstacle to rapid economic growth, as the Argentine military and big business did in the 1960s, when a competitive regime in a poor or medium income country falters in economic performance, it is vulnerable to breakdown. If powerful leftist actors believe that liberal democracy is a facade for bourgeois domination, as most of the Marxist tradition did, they are likely to mobilize for workers' gains even if this mobilization endangers the regime. Conversely, if actors intrinsically value democracy as a "universal value" (Coutinho 1980), they accept policy sacrifices to preserve democracy, and they are more likely to view democracy as an intertemporal bargain (Przeworski 1991, 2006) in which they can compensate for today's sacrifices by gaining tomorrow. We contribute to the literature on the political impact of actors' beliefs or preferences by testing this argument in new ways.

**2b) Actors' policy radicalism hinders the probability that a competitive political regime will survive. Policy moderation facilitates the survival of competitive regimes.** Several studies have claimed that the content of the policy preferences embraced by powerful political actors (for instance, a preference for or against income redistribution) have important consequences for political regimes. The *intensity* of actors' policy preferences, and not just their substance, is critical for regime survival and fall. Radical policy preferences make actors on the left and on the right of the policy spectrum intransigent and thus unlikely to tolerate the give-and-take of democratic politics.

**3) A favorable regional political environment, characterized by the existence of many democracies in Latin America, increases the likelihood of transitions from authoritarian rule to competitive regimes and diminishes the likelihood of breakdowns of existing competitive regimes.** Our theory emphasizes the embeddedness of countries' political actors and political regimes in a regional and international context.

Recent work on democratization has emphasized two factors that are at odds with an exclusive focus on domestic factors. First, democratization occurs in wave-like processes; what happens in neighboring countries has a significant impact on a region. Consistent with the arguments of Brinks and Coppedge

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(2006), Huntington (1991), and Markoff (1996) at a global level, change in political regimes in Latin America has occurred in waves. It would be difficult to explain wave-like change only on the basis of within-country conditions if there were no transnational effects. The likelihood that political transformations regional in scope could be explained solely by the simultaneous change of domestic conditions in multiple countries is very low. Theories of democratization that are based exclusively on country-level conditions are therefore ill equipped to explain waves of democratization.

Second, these wave-like processes often bring about profound changes in political regimes in a region in a short time. In Latin America, the change from a region that was overwhelmingly authoritarian in 1977 to one that is overwhelmingly democratic or semi-democratic occurred rapidly. Most comparative politics approaches that explain democratization involve long, slow processes. Political culture at the mass level, the level of development, the size and strength of the working class, and income inequality, all of which have been offered as explanations of democratization, usually changes only over the long run. Because the domestic factors that have traditionally been used to explain regime change move relatively slowly, the likelihood that they could account for profound change in a region in a short time is extremely low.

Synchronicity and rapidity of change do not definitively prove that democratization had powerful international causes, but they greatly increase the likelihood that international factors were at work. Many recent works have emphasized the impact of international actors,<sup>4</sup> regional influences,<sup>5</sup> and international organizations<sup>6</sup> on democratization. Consistent with this burgeoning literature, we underscore that battles over political regimes involve not only domestic actors, but also international and transnational actors.

Our work contributes in five ways to the existing literature on international effects on political regimes. First, we include international effects and actors as part of a theory of regime change and stability. Little previous work has integrated domestic and international actors in a theoretical understanding of regime dynamics. Second, an important question has remained unanswered by the existing literature. Because the wave of democratization was more or less contemporaneous with an increasing emphasis by U.S. foreign policy on “democracy promotion,” it is hard to disentangle the effects of regional diffusion per se from the role of U.S. foreign policy. We separate these effects in Chapter 4. Third, although the literature on international diffusion of political regimes has burgeoned in recent years, the analysis of the mechanisms behind diffusion is less developed. We analyze this issue in Chapter 7. Fourth, we show that international influences have reinforcing dynamics that help explain the

<sup>4</sup> Brinks and Coppedge (2006); Gleditsch (2002); Gleditsch and Ward (2006); Markoff (1996); Pridham (1991, 1997); Starr (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Brown (2000); Levitsky and Way (2010); Whitehead (1986b, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Pevehouse (2002a, 2002b, 2005).



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magnitude and pace of waves of democratization and authoritarianism (Chapters 4 and 7). Finally, in Chapter 8 we show that while international actors facilitate transitions to democracy and prevent the breakdown of competitive regimes, they are not effective at promoting the advancement of competitive regimes once a transition has taken place.

#### EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS: UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL REGIMES IN LATIN AMERICA

Empirically, the book examines democratization and regime change in Latin America over a long sweep of time.<sup>7</sup> We hope to make three empirical contributions. First, we aspire to contribute to understanding the history of political regimes in Latin America from 1900 to 2010. Along with Daniel Brinks, and with the help of sixteen research assistants over the course of a decade, we coded political regimes as democratic, semi-democratic, and authoritarian. We discuss our coding rules and procedures in Chapter 3. Our classification of political regimes lays the groundwork for understanding the evolution of democratization and authoritarianism in the region and provides a research tool that other scholars can use.<sup>8</sup>

Second, this is the first book that tries to *explain* the emergence, survival, and fall of political regimes for Latin America as a whole over a long period of time. There is a huge literature on political regimes in Latin America. However, much of it focuses on single countries or a few countries. Drake (2009), Hartlyn and Valenzuela (1994), and P. Smith (2005) offer valuable descriptive histories of democracy in Latin America, but with little effort to explain regime emergence, survival, and demise.

Third, this is the first book that has attempted to extend an actor-based approach to political regimes to the empirical study of a large number of countries over an extended period of time. Many scholarly approaches agree that political actors (rather than structures or political culture) offer the most fruitful perspective to study political regimes. Such approaches claim that actors' choices determine regime outcomes, and that structures and cultures, even though they influence the actors that emerge and their behavior, do not determine their choices. Actor-based approaches to studying political regimes are common in case studies (Berman 1998; Capoccia 2005; Figueiredo 1993; Levine 1973, 1978; Linz 1978a; O'Donnell 1982; Stepan 1971, 1978; A. Valenzuela

<sup>7</sup> By Latin America we refer to the twenty countries in the western hemisphere that were colonized by Spain, France, or Portugal: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. We do not include countries colonized by Great Britain or the Netherlands.

<sup>8</sup> Drake (2009) and Smith (2005) also describe the evolution of democracy in twentieth-century Latin America.



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1978; J. S. Valenzuela 1985; Viola 1982). Theoretical frameworks such as those of Linz (1978b) and O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) also posit that actors (or blocs of actors) are the most useful unit of analysis. Yet given the time-intensive demands of studying a large number of actors across a long period of time in a substantial number of countries, there hitherto has been no extensive (i.e., involving a large number of cases) empirical testing of theoretical propositions about the effects of actors' preferences on regime outcomes.

Working with a different team of nineteen research assistants, we identified the main actors operating under every presidential administration in the twenty Latin American countries from 1944 to 2010 and also coded their attitudes toward democracy and dictatorship and their policy moderation/radicalism.<sup>9</sup> If actors (as opposed to structures or cultures) determine political outcomes, actually examining their preferences and behavior is essential. Some excellent studies have followed this precept for one or a small number of countries, but no previous work has coded actors for so many countries over a long period of time.

## WHY DEVELOP A THEORY?

Scholars working on political regimes confront several choices. In terms of the overall analytical strategy, the main question has been whether to develop a theory with an integrated set of hypotheses that is deduced from explicitly articulated initial assumptions (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003); a theoretical framework that provides a general orientation toward studying political regimes (Linz 1978b; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986); or a set of narrower empirical hypotheses (Cutright 1963; Morlino 2008: 47–51; Przeworski et al. 2000).<sup>10</sup>

Each of these options has advantages and disadvantages. Theories provide integrative ways of understanding the world – an advantage, given our objectives. A theory makes explicit who the actors are and how they are constituted, what motivates their behavior in regime games, and how they form winning coalitions. Empirical propositions that are not integrated by theories or by theoretical frameworks such as Linz (1978b) and O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) do not explicitly embed their analyses into an understanding of these issues. In contrast, the empirical propositions that a theory deductively generates are part of an integrated whole (Bunge 1998: 433–43). Some scholars (Coppedge 2012: 49–113; Munck 2001) have commented on the lack of theoretical integration in most work on political regimes and argued that this

<sup>9</sup> To be precise, we coded all presidential administrations that lasted long enough to be in power as of December 31 in at least one year. If a president began his term in a given year and did not serve until the end of that year, we did not include that administration in our dataset.

<sup>10</sup> These distinctions could be seen as a continuum rather than as three discrete categorical possibilities.

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constitutes a weakness in this literature. We agree with their judgment; our effort at building a theory responds to their observations.

Notwithstanding the sophistication of some of the work that has inspired us, there have been no previous efforts along the lines presented here to develop a theory of regime survival and fall.<sup>11</sup> The insights of the rich literatures on which we draw do not fully substitute for a theory of regime survival and fall. These insights are not generally connected to each other in a system of cohesive and logical relationships. As a result, work on political regimes has accumulated considerable knowledge, but with less theoretical integration than is desirable. As Coppedge (2012: 49–113) comments, with loose integration, a research finding about the importance of certain independent variables could be compatible with a wide range of theories.

Social scientists want to know not only whether some specific independent variables affect political outcomes, but also what theories hold up (Bunge 1998: 433–43). Because it consists of a system of integrated hypotheses deduced from explicitly articulated assumptions, a theory helps order and organize hypotheses.

Our book integrates previous streams of research into a cohesive theory. The core contribution of our work is not the five discrete hypotheses about regime survival and fall that we present later. Rather, it is the theory, which links these hypotheses in deductively logical ways, and the testing of it. A theory is a way of making sense of the world, of providing an integrated framework. Discrete hypotheses can also advance understanding in the social sciences, but theories help stimulate advances in how social scientists think about politics. The development and testing of theories is a critical part of social science (Achen and Snidal 1989; Bunge 1998: 433–43; Coppedge 2012: chapters 3–4; Ferejohn and Satz 1995; Munck 2001).

Our understanding of “theory” is not restricted to formal models. Our endeavor is a theory because it starts with some explicitly articulated assumptions about the relevant set of actors and the factors that determine their choice of regime coalition, and then we deduce an integrated set of hypotheses from these assumptions.<sup>12</sup>

#### ACTORS AND REGIME COALITIONS

The notion of political actors forms the first building block of our theory. We focus on a parsimonious set of the most important political actors: presidents,

<sup>11</sup> Linz (1978b) and O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) developed theoretical frameworks that have some of the characteristics of a theory, but without a set of integrated hypotheses.

<sup>12</sup> The formal-theory approaches such as Boix (2003) offer tight integrated theories that provide logical microfoundations for specific macro-hypotheses. Some frameworks (Linz 1978b; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986) offer heuristics to guide the inquiry of researchers into cases or topics. In this regard, our theoretical discussion follows the second tradition more than the first one.