

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part One

POLITICS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

**DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA
SINCE 1930***

INTRODUCTION

Latin America has often been viewed as a continent where in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the formal architecture of democracy has been a thinly veiled facade for civilian and military tyrants who have imposed their will on conservative and backward peoples. Such a view of the origins and development of democracy is partial and misleading. The struggle to consolidate representative regimes, accept the legitimacy of opposition, expand citizenship, and affirm the rule of law has been a continuous and uneven process – on both sides of the Atlantic – for two centuries. The central, but often elusive, guiding principle has been the concept of popular sovereignty, the notion that legitimate government is generated by a free citizenry and is accountable to it for its policies and actions. In Latin America, as in Europe and North America, the quest for these liberal ideals has been a permanent aspiration, if often challenged by political disorder, civil war, human rights abuses, dictatorship and, in the twentieth century, alternative visions for organizing the political community, including fascism and Marxism.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, most of the major countries of Latin America had managed to establish at least ‘oligarchical democracies’, that is to say, regimes, in which presidents and national assemblies derived from open, if not fully fair, political competition for the support of limited electorates, according to prescribed constitutional rules and which were largely comparable to the restricted representative

*We gratefully acknowledge comments by Manuel Alcántara, Michael Coppedge, Bolívar Lamounier, Fabrice Lehoucq, Cynthia McClintock, Carina Perelli, and members of the University of North Carolina comparative politics discussion group, especially Evelyne Huber, Gary Marks and Lars Schoultz. Eduardo Feldman helped compile the bibliographical essay. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Leslie Bethell for his patience and indispensable editorial advice.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

regimes in Europe of the same period. Argentina (from 1916) and Uruguay (from 1918) were democracies with universal male suffrage. However, in Latin America, as in Europe, the advent of world depression in the 1930s unleashed forces that undermined the progress of representative government. At the end of the Second World War there was a brief period of democratization. But democracies were swept away in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Another, more profound turn to democratic rule occurred in the late 1950s. But during the 1960s and 1970s numerous countries returned to military rule, often for long periods. Only in the late 1970s and 1980s was there a significant retreat from direct military control of government throughout the region. Most Latin American countries entered the 1990s under democratic government. During the half century from the 1930s to the 1980s there was no uniform pattern. While the majority of the small nations of Central America and regional giants such as Argentina, Brazil and Mexico fell far short of the ideal of democratic construction, other countries such as Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Colombia and Venezuela experienced long periods of democratic government.

We define 'democracy' or 'political democracy' as incorporating three critical dimensions. The first, to use Robert Dahl's term, is contestation.¹ In a democracy the government is constituted by leaders who successfully compete for the vote of the citizenry in regularly scheduled elections. The essence of contestation is the acceptance of the legitimacy of political opposition; the right to challenge incumbents and replace them in the principal positions of political authority. Contestation requires state protection for the freedom of expression and association and the existence of regular, free and fair elections capable of translating the will of the citizenry into leadership options. Particularly significant for political contestation is the development of consolidated party systems, in which the interaction among parties follows a predictable pattern and their electoral strengths remain within stable parameters. Parties promote distinct programs or ideologies, sponsor individuals for elected office, and serve as critical links between civil society and the state.

The second dimension is constitutionalism, or respect for the constitu-

¹ We are indebted to Robert Dahl's influential work for the first and third points in this characterization of democracy. See Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn., 1971). The definition of democracy that emphasizes the importance of competition for political leadership as a critical element stems from Joseph A. Schumpeter's pioneering work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York, 1942).

tional order, embodied in constitutional documents and/or practices, often in contravention with the strict application of the principle of majority rule. It is in this sense that contemporary democracies must be understood as 'constitutional democracies'. A constitutional democracy, while guaranteeing the right of opposition to challenge incumbents by appealing for the support of a majority of the citizenry, defines and restricts the powers of governmental authorities. It also places limits on the hegemony of electoral majorities or their representatives, with a view to protecting the rights and preferences of individuals and minorities, the options of future majorities, and the very institutions of democracy itself. These institutions and rules vary and include such provisions as restrictions on presidential reelection and the partial insulation of judicial, electoral and security organs from elected leadership. They also include the use of qualified legislative majorities and complex ratification mechanisms when fundamental changes in the nation's constitution and basic laws are at stake. Finally, they make provisions for power sharing and minority representation, an essential element for the protection of opposition and encouragement of the concept of a 'loyal opposition'. In practice, constitutional democracies diverge on the degree to which contingent majorities or their representatives are constrained by constitutional and legal restrictions.

The third dimension is inclusiveness or participation. By definition democracies are based on the concept of popular sovereignty. As democracies evolve, the constitutional provisions for citizenship broaden to include larger proportions of the adult population, through the elimination of restrictions on suffrage based on property, literacy, gender, race or ethnicity. Changes in formal rules, including residency and registration requirements and the effective involvement of the population in politics through the expansion of parties and movements lead, over time, to full inclusiveness.

A constitutional democracy may be viewed as consolidated when contestation and respect for the constitutional order are widely accepted by both elites and mass publics and citizenship and effective electoral participation have been extended to all adults with minimum qualifications. This is a procedural definition of democracy. It is often supplemented by a conception of citizenship that incorporates formal equality (universal suffrage) and legal protection from abusive state power, but also includes notions of sufficient levels of material satisfaction and levels of education that participation can be deemed meaningful rather than largely manipulated.

The theoretical literature in the social sciences provides few adequate

guide-posts for understanding the early development and consolidation of democracy in Latin America. The dominant perspectives have tended to view the success or failure of democracy as being directly related to broader cultural and economic forces. Cultural explanations drew on the legacy of Roman Catholicism and the Iberian colonial experiences to argue that liberal democracy would find infertile soil in conservative societies characterized by hierarchical social relations and deference to absolute authority. In such societies, even as they entered the modern world and achieved significant levels of industrialization, strong-man rule and corporatist political structures were more likely to flourish than representative institutions based on individualistic notions such as 'one person, one vote'.

From an economic perspective, the modernization school of the 1950s and 1960s held that economic development and industrialization would encourage social differentiation and higher levels of education, contributing to political pluralism and the gradual but inevitable success of democratic practices. By contrast, the dependency school of the 1960s and 1970s, implied that liberal democracy would be thwarted by a pattern of economic exchange which placed economic and political power in the hands of a small oligarchy, while discouraging the development of bourgeois and middle-class groups and strong states necessary for the growth of democratic institutions and practices. Industrialization and economic development, rather than encouraging the development of pro-democracy middle sectors, contributed to authoritarian responses by those very sectors who, in alliance with elites, the military and international capital, sought to thwart the rising power of working class and popular groups who threatened their privileges.

Broad cultural and economic factors, such as effective national integration, a vigorous civil society with a dense network of groups and associations, steady socio-economic development and reductions in inequalities may facilitate the development of democratic institutions and practices. Our review of the pattern of democratic development in Latin America suggests, however, that cultural and socio-economic factors are at best contributory conditions, not necessary ones. Taken alone they cannot account for the significant variations in the experience with democratic development in the hemisphere and are particularly incapable of accounting for notable deviant cases. Thus, they fail to explain why Chile, one of the most traditional and 'dependent' societies in the region was able to structure relatively competitive and predictable patterns of political contestation before the advent of similar patterns in many European coun-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tries. Nor can they fully account for the failure of Argentina to develop stable democratic institutions, by contrast with Uruguay, a country of similar social extraction and comparable economic patterns, that established one of the most enduring democracies in the region. Nor do they help us to understand the consolidation of democracy in Costa Rica after the Civil War of 1948, nor the transformation of Venezuela, from the least democratic country in the region before 1958, to one of the most successful democracies after 1958. Finally, economic and cultural explanations also fall short in accounting for the significant reversals in political patterns in countries as different as Bolivia and El Salvador, particularly at a time of catastrophic economic recession, in the 1980s.

We are far more persuaded by a perspective which places more emphasis on political variables, both domestic and international, as intervening or independent variables in their own right, rather than simply as expressions of underlying cultural and socio-economic determinants. While these dimensions are often viewed as epiphenomena, with little bearing on the reality of political life, the Latin American experience with democracy suggests that political and institutional factors often play critical roles in defining rules and procedures and framing political opportunities, with a powerful impact on a country's democratic experience. These include political leadership and choice, and the actual role of political institutions and formal constitutional rules and procedures designed to regulate the 'playing field', encouraging, or undermining, over time the construction of democratic forms. They also include political parties and the political expression of social groups that link civil society with the state. Constitutionalism, the extension of the suffrage, executive-legislative relations, capacity for governance, the rule of law (*estado de derecho*), and political parties, party systems and elections, are essential features of democracy.

While constitutions have sometimes appeared ephemeral in Latin America, there has been a complex interactive relationship between broader societal changes and the rules, norms and practices established at certain moments by new constitutional edicts. Rules established in constitutions and laws help structure political competition and shape political practices, providing an essential referent as a legitimate template during authoritarian intervals, even in countries where the democratic ideal has fallen short of reality. In a very uneven process over time, the importance of the rules embodied in constitutions, such as their role in fostering or blocking political accommodation, became far more central, as political actors and social groups sought to minimize violence as an option in resolving conflicts and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

determining political power. These rules and procedures – especially those related to electoral competition, executive-legislative relations, the distribution of patronage and governmental spoils – have affected political conflict in different ways, either helping to polarize or defuse tensions.

Democratic practices become instituted when incumbents and challengers perceive that their fundamental interests are best served by agreeing to formal institutions and mechanisms for resolving their disputes peacefully within the framework of democratic practices. In Dahl's terms, democracy is most likely to be implemented when incumbents and challengers perceive that the costs of repression, insurrection or external pressures, exceed the costs of toleration and mutual accommodation. For the most part, this process takes place slowly over time. The more successful democracies in the region are those that experienced long decades of 'oligarchical democracy' – within restricted contestation – before gradually becoming more inclusive, permitting development of learning over time. Democratic success in Chile and Uruguay is often viewed as responding at least in part to having followed this sequence; although intertwined with periods of intense civil strife, this pattern is also relevant to Costa Rica and Colombia. Argentina, on the other hand, failed to develop its political democracy from the 1930s until the 1980s, and Venezuela, despite the lack of historical experience with democracy, became one of Latin America's most enduring democracies after 1958.

Ultimately, what seems to permit the consolidation of democracy over time (as opposed to the establishment of democratic practices) is the very practice of democracy itself, a complex learning process that is reinforced by the continuous perception by relevant political actors that their fundamental interests will be best served by a system which resolves political conflict through agreement and accommodation while minimizing violence. There are two distinct obstacles to be overcome in this process. The first is to secure acceptance on the part of elites of the fairness of the process of contestation and the legitimacy of a 'loyal' opposition, that is, an opposition not fully excluded from a meaningful say in the political process; the second is to secure the acceptance of an enlarged political community, consisting of ordinary citizens and not simply members of the elite. Initially the central issue was finding mechanisms to stop competing elites from killing each other and their mobilized followers over the 'winner take-all' nature of presidential contests. Subsequently, the issue was the acceptance by elites of mass actors, and the latter's acceptance of the constraints of constitutional democracy.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Democracy in Latin America since 1930*

9

For some Latin American republics these two processes were clear and distinct: stable practices permitting political contestation were established in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, prior to the advent of pressures for mass participation. This permitted a more gradual and ordered, if not controlled, process of enlargement of the political community in the aftermath of the 1929 Depression, helping to guarantee a greater degree of political continuity. For others, the challenge of contestation and inclusiveness came simultaneously, increasing the level of uncertainty and the risks for established actors in acceding to 'popular sovereignty' as the defining element of political power.

Although central to the consolidation of democracy, it would be misleading to imply that the ongoing challenges of forging democracy revolve exclusively around contestation and inclusiveness. Societies may face severe economic and social challenges or international shocks that can tax the survival of any political regime. The inability of democratic institutions to address fundamental problems resulting from civil conflict or severe economic crisis can undermine the legitimacy of representative institutions leading the way for authoritarian outcomes. Governance – how regime leaders analyse problems and the policy choices they make, especially in the economic field – can have profound effects on legitimacy, effectiveness and performance and thus on democracy. The challenges to democracy can also derive from the very functioning of political institutions. Governmental deadlock and paralysis stemming from minority governments and executive legislative conflict, or from the politics of outbidding by contending foes unwilling to compromise or stand up to anti-democratic forces can have independent effects, initiating or aggravating economic and social problems, thus contributing to 'unsolvable' problems (in Juan Linz's terms) that often accelerate regime breakdown. Weak or corrupt parties can aggravate a political crisis by providing no real authority or decisional capacity. Covert or overt support for conspiratorial alliances between political leaders and military elements, in contravention of the dictates of the electorate, severely undermines the democratic rules of the game, particularly in times of crisis.

In most countries democracy has always had to confront a 'violence option', exercised by forces resisting change (usually conservative landed interests or business groups allied with the military), from forces advocating a disruption of the status quo (insurrectionary socialism) and occasionally from an often ideologically muddled populism. The first group, though sometimes acting in the name of democracy, has usually justified the use of violence in terms of preventing anarchy, the rise of Communism

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

or economic collapse. Very few coups in Latin America since 1930 have occurred without the active conspiracy of key political actors, including parties, seeking to advance their fortunes and defend their privileges through violence on failing to secure adequate electoral support. No Latin American country, with the exception of Costa Rica where the armed forces were abolished in 1949, has successfully institutionalized a model of democratic control of the military or enshrined adequate constitutional measures to prevent civilian manipulation of the armed forces. The second and third groups have often presented competing images of democracy to the procedural, political definition discussed above, focussed more on social and economic conditions and rights and stressing the 'majoritarian' imperatives of democracy over and above the constitutional limitations on the majority. On the right, order and economic growth compete with democracy; in populism and on the left, popular aspirations for inclusion and social justice clash with it. The willingness of the right to distort democratic procedures and violate its rules has often led to its denigration, feeding the doubts of populists and of the left about the possibilities for reform if they abide by the democratic 'rules of the game'.

Thus, even in democratic periods many countries in the region may be more accurately characterized as semi-democratic, rather than fully democratic, because of constraints on constitutionalism, contestation or inclusiveness, including occasional outright electoral fraud and manipulation. And some Latin American countries – for example Argentina, Brazil and Peru – can be characterized for part of the period since 1930 as possessing hybrid democratic-authoritarian regimes, noteworthy for the persistent interference in politics of the military and powerful economic interests, and by frequent direct, if brief, military intervention. In these three countries there was also the proscription for long periods of a particular leader or movement (Perón and the Peronists in Argentina, the Communist Party in Brazil and Haya de la Torre and APRA [Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana] in Peru).

It follows also that the process of democratic construction is reversible. Not only Argentina, Brazil and Peru, but in the early 1970s countries with long traditions of constitutional rule and respect for the electoral process such as Chile and Uruguay experienced profound regime breakdowns. For sure, these processes can be affected by international shocks or the demonstration effect of a series of regime breakdowns that encourage and even legitimize the actions of anti-democratic forces. This explains, in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59582-7 - Latin America Politics and Society since 1930

Edited by Leslie Bethell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Democracy in Latin America since 1930*

11

part, the cyclical nature of some of the patterns of regime change in the region. But, their precise impact necessarily differed in accordance with the internal dynamics within each country.

The chapter will next focus on broad themes of constitutional development in Latin America and especially what we have called the dilemma of presidentialism. This will be followed by discussions of political parties and party systems and of citizenship and electoral participation. The second part of the chapter consists of an account of the democratic experience of Latin America in the period from 1930 to 1990. Here we will focus specifically on the five countries which, although none was immune from civil war or military coup, together account for around half of the continent's years of democracy in this period: Chile, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Venezuela and Colombia, as well as the three countries that come next in terms of their experience of democracy: Argentina, Brazil and Peru. These eight countries are quite diverse and have distinctly different political histories and democratic experiences. All the larger and economically more developed countries of the region, except for Mexico, are included. Taken together they represented in 1985 approximately 65 per cent of the population of Latin America, 70 per cent of its GDP and 75 per cent of its value added in manufacturing.

The omission of Mexico is justified by the particular nature of Mexico's political system and political history in the period since the revolution of 1910. Mexico has had the longest experience of constitutional stability of any Latin American country in the period under review. The progressive constitution of 1917 had an important impact on the rest of Latin America and on the development of socio-political thought in the region. Here is a civilian regime (after 1940), essentially inclusionary, with a long established record of elections and some important constitutional restrictions on power, notably a strict prohibition on presidential re-election. For many decades its hegemonic party of the revolution has been capable of winning elections without recourse to fraud (though it still often acceded to it) as it successfully forged a multi-class, integrative coalition. Other parties have been countenanced, or even carefully buttressed, in order to give the appearance of opposition and to enhance democratic legitimacy, as appeals to revolutionary myths have become increasingly difficult to sustain over time. However, implicit in the notion of democracy is the possibility of the alternation of power. It is widely agreed that what Mexico has developed is a successful one-party authoritarian regime which