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I Democratization in Latin America: The Current Cycle

The 1980s has been a decade of rapidly accelerating democratization in Latin America. Throughout the region there have emerged formal, constitutional democracies, replete with comparatively honest and open elections, active party competition, and a relatively uncensored press. By mid-decade, only Chile and Paraguay seemed largely impervious to the trend. The change from the preceding two decades has been dramatic; almost all nations of the region were ruled by military men for some, if not all, of that period. Of those Latin American and Caribbean countries that have been independent since at least 1960, only Costa Rica and Venezuela have enjoyed continuous constitutional rule, competitive party politics, and civilian supremacy.¹ Throughout much of the rest of the region, unconstitutional regimes, repressive and brutal even by Latin American standards, were the norm.

While there are those, especially in diplomatic circles, who point with great pride to the widespread emergence of democracy in Latin America, most scholars expert in the region remain skeptical regarding the long-term significance of this change. They quickly point to previous periods in Latin American history, such as the years immediately following World War II, the 1920s, and earlier periods, going all the way back to the 1820s, when democratic forms of government seemed to be taking hold. In each period, however, democracy proved ephemeral. Democratic governments were readily replaced by authoritarian regimes which often were more repressive than those that had preceded them. Indeed, the prevailing view among scholars is that democracy and authoritarian rule have oscillated throughout an extended series of cycles of roughly twenty

years' duration and that this pattern of oscillation, sometimes called a "pendular pattern," is likely to continue. The predominance of authoritarian rule in the 1960s and 1970s merely followed the earlier period of democratic rule in the 1940s and 1950s, and is currently being replaced by a cycle of democracy. If this pattern continues, the current cycle has only another fifteen or so years to run before it, too, will be repeated.

A complicating factor in the current cycle is that authoritarian regimes have left the scene at a time that, at first inspection, seems to be unusually inauspicious for the long-term stability of democracy. This is so because most Latin American nations are facing unprecedented economic challenges, and democratic governments have come to power saddled with international debt burdens that offer them little room for maneuver. On the international side, few private banks are willing to get in any deeper and therefore resist making new loans in the region. There is little chance, however, that the debts will be repaid without further infusions of new foreign capital. These loans are badly needed in order to help modernize and stimulate sagging economies. On the domestic side, the International Monetary Fund presses these debtor nations to improve their ability to meet their foreign obligations largely by restricting consumption. Such consumption-restricting measures, however, have their greatest impact on the urban working class and middle sectors, the very groups from whom continued political support is required if these elected regimes are to stay in power. In sum, there are strong grounds for predicting that the present cycle of democracy in Latin America will be ephemeral.

While it appears that the cyclical oscillation between democracy and authoritarian rule seems to be an unalterable pattern, each new cycle is not necessarily a carbon copy of the one that preceded it. Cyclical patterns can occur with evolutionary movement. Clearly, the last authoritarian cycle was fundamentally different from preceding ones in at least two ways. First, the new military regimes that dominated in the 1960s and 1970s were not merely caretaker governments ruling to bring order to societies ensnared in chaotic, inefficient, and immobilized civilian rule. Rather, during that cycle Latin American militaries came to power articulating explicit developmental goals. Second, these military regimes saw themselves as more or less permanent features of the political landscape. These new regimes were a far cry from the personalist dictatorships, à la Trujillo, Batista,

Somoza, and so on, that had typified the region for so many years. These were a new breed of professional, technocratic military men.

Guided by development programs and led by professional norms, these new "bureaucratic-authoritarian" military regimes were seen by many scholars as typical of the emerging pattern in the region.² Nevertheless, they too succumbed to the cyclical swings and were swept away by the current drive toward democratization. But there is no escaping the conclusion that the last cycle of military rule was different from those that had preceded it.

The democratic regimes now in power throughout Latin America may turn out to be no more than carbon copies of those of earlier periods, but this would be unlikely. Just as the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the last cycle proved to be a new breed, so too the new democracies promise to differ substantially from those previously existing in Latin America. Two factors in particular, one arising directly out of the performance of the last military cycle and the other from broad socioeconomic trends, suggest that the democratic regimes of the current cycle will be different.

When the military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s left the scene in the 1980s, they left behind them a dual legacy that is shaping the democracies that have now come to power. First, their leaders demonstrated more profoundly than ever before their ultimate incompetence to rule. The old-time military regimes and personalist dictators of Latin America had made no special developmental claims. Their sole source of legitimization had been brute force and the power to coerce restive populations into quiescence. Hence, their frequent failures in economic matters had not undermined their claims to legitimacy. The new militaries promised much more and based their claims to legitimacy on those promises. They would have done away with politics and made decisions based upon rational, bureaucratic criteria. They convinced themselves, and exhorted the masses to believe, that only in this way could the obstacles to rapid economic growth be overcome.

Alas, by the time the Latin American militaries had left the scene, not even their staunchest supporters could believe in their claim to a superior calling to rule. While some of the regimes could point to areas of progress, none was able to transform the economy, and nearly all jeopardized long-term economic growth by debt crises for which they are ultimately responsible. In the 1970s Latin American governments became addicted to foreign borrowing at levels not pre-

viously experienced. Early in the decade foreign loans were justified by the hope that they would stimulate long-term economic development. Later, largely as a result of the failure of many of these investments to yield the expected dividends, and also as a result of spiraling interest rates on world credit markets, it became necessary for these governments to incur even larger debts in order to repay existing obligations. But these new loans were largely short-term, and carried extremely high interest rates. By the time the militaries had withdrawn, most of Latin America was drowning in a sea of unpaid international debts. Not that the civilian governments were doing any better (for example, Venezuela, Mexico, and Costa Rica), but the military's sanctimonious claims as to their superior ability to rule could not be sustained.

Another component of the legacy left by the last cycle of military rule is a deep distrust among the very groups which in the past have been most willing to see the military take over. Prior to the last cycle of military rule, civilian governments had often relied upon the military to bail them out of difficulties. When economic failures produced uncontrollable labor unrest, populist civilian governments would often privately call for the military to take over to calm the waters; the outcome has become known as the "middle-class military coup."³ They would do so with the understanding that military rule would be brief and would not intrude into established political structures, especially political parties. But the militaries of the 1960s and 1970s had a very different agenda in mind. They came to power with the intention of ruling on a permanent basis, and while they ruled they made it their business to try to destroy the old-time party structures and political alliances. In so doing, the modern military regimes often used totalitarian terror tactics, including mass arrests, arbitrary imprisonment, "disappearances," and torture. This was certainly more than the traditional civilian political elite had bargained for and ultimately left them much less willing to resort to using the military as an escape hatch for their own political and economic failures. In short, the democracies of the present cycle are likely to be more tenacious in their grip on the reins of government and much more reluctant to step aside the next time there are rumblings in the streets or in the barracks.

The second factor favoring a transformed and possibly longer-lived set of democratic regimes in Latin America relates to the pattern of socioeconomic development that the region has experienced. Accord-

ing to a large body of comparative research on democracy, until relatively recently the minimum levels of socioeconomic development that are necessary to sustain democratic rule simply were not present in most of Latin America.⁴ Several studies have led to the near-universal conclusion that underdevelopment and stable democracy do not mix. There appears to be a lower threshold of economic and sociocultural development beneath which stable democratic rule is unlikely to emerge. The income threshold appears to be around \$250 per capita in 1957 dollars, and the sociocultural threshold, usually defined by educational achievement, seems to be the reduction of illiteracy to below 50 percent.

As late as the end of World War II, just when a new cycle of democratization was beginning, of the eleven nations covered in this volume, only Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica had achieved both the levels of income and literacy that have been found elsewhere to be the minimum economic and sociocultural conditions necessary for promoting and sustaining democratic rule. All three of these nations had, by that time, known extended periods of democracy. All of the other nations covered in this volume, however, had far less experience with democratic rule, a fact that emphasizes the importance of the economic and socioeconomic thresholds just mentioned. Conversely, all three of the nations that had achieved the necessary conditions by 1945 saw their democracies break down in the years that followed. In both Chile and Argentina the breakdowns were protracted, with authoritarian rule still predominating in Chile as of this writing, whereas in Costa Rica it was much shorter-lived (1948–1949). These breakdowns emphasize that economic and sociocultural development seem to be merely necessary but not sufficient conditions for sustaining democratic regimes.

Slow but noticeable economic growth and improvements in sociocultural development did take place in the years following World War II. By 1957, however, the base year used in several key studies regarding the preconditions of democratic rule, only Brazil could have been added to the other three nations that had already achieved the necessary conditions.⁵ By the mid-1950s Brazil's GNP per capita was moving above the \$300 level, and illiteracy had dropped to slightly below 50 percent. In Ecuador and Peru, illiteracy levels declined below the 50 percent level by the 1950s, but their economic development still lagged below the income threshold. (See figures 1.1 and 1.2.)

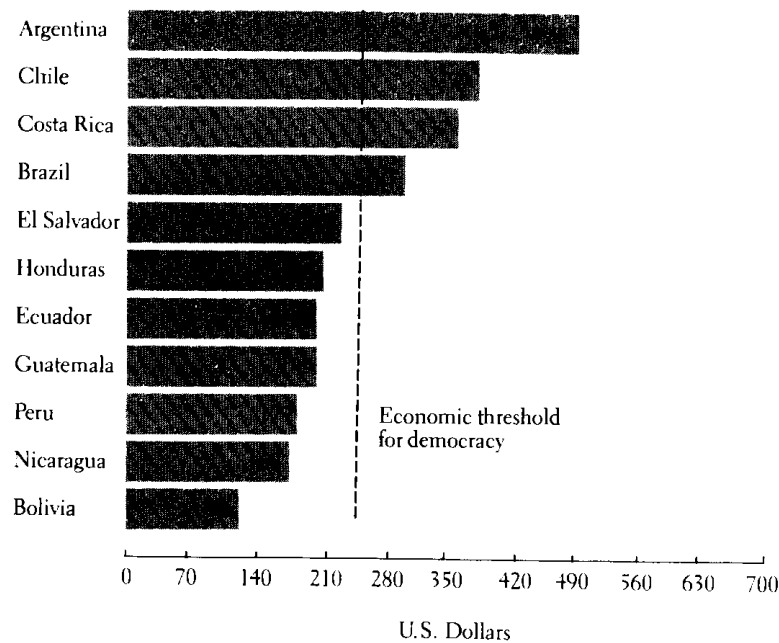


Figure 1.1 GNP Per Capita in Latin America, 1957 (in U.S. dollars)

Source: Bruce M. Russett, Hayward R. Alker, Jr., Karl W. Deutsch, and Harold D. Lasswell, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 156.

By the 1980s, however, considerable economic and social development had occurred in all of these countries. Even Bolivia and Honduras, the least developed countries treated in this volume, by 1982 were sending 86 percent and 95 percent, respectively, of their school-aged children to primary school, and had managed to reduce illiteracy to only about one-third of their population.⁶ Nevertheless, Bolivia's economic development still lagged behind that of the others in the region, and probably fell below the established threshold, and Honduras was a borderline case.⁷ By the beginning of the 1980s, then, nine or ten of the eleven nations covered in this book had achieved levels of both economic and social development that are considered to be minimal prerequisites for the emergence of stable democratic rule.

Meshing the empirical democratic theory with the data presented above leads one to the conclusion that with the exception of Bolivia, and possibly Honduras, the socioeconomic foundations for stable

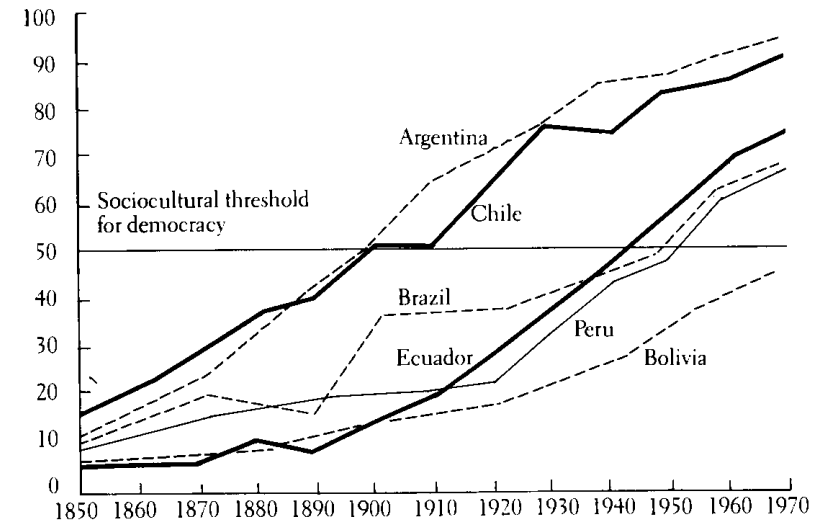


Figure 1.2 Literacy in Six South American Nations, 1850-1970

Source: Tatu Vanhanen, *Political and Social Structures, Part 1: American Countries 1850-1973* (Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere Institute of Political Science Research Reports, 1975), pp. 238-59.

democracy had finally been established among the nations treated in this volume. It does not, however, lead to the conclusion that democratic rule is somehow inevitable among these nations. Indeed, the long-term breakdown of democracy in Chile and Argentina emphasizes the fact that socioeconomic development is only a necessary, not both a necessary *and* sufficient condition for the development and maintenance of stable democracy.

Taken together, the factors just enumerated suggest that the present cycle of democracy is likely to be different in nature, potentially more robust in character, and probably more durable, than the ones that preceded it for three reasons. First, the recent record of the military has made civilian governments much less willing to consider the "military option" as a convenient way out of mounting economic and/or political problems. These governments have good reasons to suspect that, once invited to return to power, the generals will hold on to it for a protracted period. They also suspect that the military will on the one hand do considerable damage to the extant political power structure, and on the other hand engage in large-scale violations of human rights. Secondly, professionalized and bureaucratized

though it now may be, the military establishment has shown itself to be as inept at running the economy as the civilians. Third, civilian governments have taken power in Latin America at a time when almost everywhere in the region the minimum necessary levels of socioeconomic development appear to have been attained.

There is yet another factor tending to favor a more permanent institutionalization of democratic rule. For many years the conventional wisdom among experts in Latin American studies has been that the political culture of the region is fundamentally authoritarian and therefore the "natural" state of affairs is authoritarian government. In an effort to understand why democracies were being replaced with authoritarian regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, Peter Smith has argued that it is authoritarianism and not democracy that is to be expected in Latin America: "The prevalence of nondemocratic, authoritarian ideals in Spanish America strongly suggests that dictatorship is not an aberration. It would seem to be a logical expression of the political culture."⁸ According to this widely held point of view, authoritarian rule is legitimate in Latin America because "there is congruence between claims of the leaders and the values of the people."⁹

Recent research has challenged the notion that there is a political culture of authoritarianism in Latin America responsible for the prevalence of dictatorial regimes. In two recent studies, one on Mexico and another covering Argentina and Chile, extensive survey research data fails to offer evidence of a political culture of authoritarianism. The study of Mexico "uncovered a largely democratic political culture within an essentially authoritarian regime,"¹⁰ while the study of Argentina and Chile found that the respondents "are much more likely to hold prodemocratic values than one might expect on the basis of their political circumstances."¹¹ In light of these studies, it is necessary to reconsider the view that contemporary political culture and regime type are closely linked in Latin America; the roots of authoritarian politics probably lie elsewhere.

There is a limit as to how far these generalizations can be stretched to cover the great variety of cases in the region. Not all military governments of the last cycle blatantly violated human rights, not all sought to eliminate politics, and not all were equally incompetent in running their economies. Each democracy that has emerged in the present cycle has its own particular origins and historical evolution. Each has emerged from a somewhat different political, social, and

economic mix of conditions, and each has its own political culture. To do justice to this diversity, one would need to examine the cases one by one. That is what we propose to do in this volume.

We have organized the case studies geographically. The Southern Cone is represented by Aldo C. Vacs's contribution on Argentina, by John Markoff's and Silvio Duncan Baretta's study of Brazil, and by Silvia Borzutzky's chapter on Chile. The Andean republics are treated in the chapter by James M. Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra on Bolivia, in Luis Abugattas's analysis of Peru, and in Catherine M. Conaghan's chapter on Ecuador. The five Central American cases are treated by two chapters, one by Mark B. Rosenberg and another by Mitchell A. Seligson. The role of the United States in the process of political change in Latin America can never be far from one's consideration, and the chapter by Cole Blasier looks at that aspect of the problem. The book concludes with James M. Malloy's attempt to abstract from the wide range of countries covered the elements common to each. He finds in those elements a set of patterns that may help us understand the nature of democratic development in Latin America, and that might help predict its future.

Notes

1. Colombia held elections throughout this period, but frequent states of siege were declared whereby the military came to exercise extensive power, especially in the judicial system. Mexico also had regular elections, but opposition parties stood no chance of unseating the hand-picked successor of the incumbent president.
2. See Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of International Studies, 1973).
3. See José Nun, "The Middle-Class Military Coup," in *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America*, ed. Claudio Veliz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).
4. For a summary of this literature, see Myron Weiner, "Empirical Democratic Theory," in *Competitive Election in Developing Countries*, ed. Myron Weiner and Ergun Özbudun (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming). The major works are Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971); Seymour Martin Lipset, "Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69-105; and Phillips Cutright, "National Political Development: Measurement and Analysis," *American Sociological Review* 28 (April 1963): 253-64.
5. GNP data for this early period are difficult to obtain and not particularly reliable. The data reported here are from Wendell C. Gordon, *The Economies of*

Latin America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 335. Gordon presents GNP per capita data for the 1943–1946 period. He assigns, for example, a GNP of \$61 to Nicaragua, \$48 to Peru, and \$34 to both Bolivia and Ecuador. Some literacy data for 1940 is contained in the United Nations *Statistical Yearbook, 1949–50* (New York: United Nations), p. 490. Additional and probably more reliable literacy data are found in James W. Wilkie and Maj-Brit Nilsson, "Projecting the HEC (Health, Education and Communications) Index for Latin America Back to 1940," in *Quantitative Latin American Studies: Methods and Findings*, ed. James W. Wilkie and Kenneth Ruddle (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications), p. 81. This source gives the following figures: Argentina, 89 percent; Chile, 71 percent; Costa Rica, 70 percent; El Salvador, 49 percent; Peru, 42 percent; Brazil, 40 percent; Nicaragua, 34 percent; Ecuador, 30 percent; Guatemala, 29 percent; Bolivia, 24 percent; Honduras, 22 percent. Harry Stark, *Social and Economic Frontiers in Latin America*, 2d ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1963) gives estimates for each of the countries which show that only Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica exceeded the 50 percent level in 1948.

6. The World Bank, *World Bank Atlas, 1985* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1985), pp. 6–9, and World Bank, *World Development Report, 1982* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 150–51.

7. According to the figures from the World Bank, the GNP per capita of Bolivia in 1983 was \$510; that of Honduras was \$670. Reliable deflators of Bolivia's GNP to convert it to 1957 dollars are not available, but, as shown in chapter 8, Honduras was just below the threshold in 1982.

8. Peter H. Smith, "Political Legitimacy in Spanish America," in *New Approaches to Latin American History*, ed. Richard Graham and Peter H. Smith (Austin: University of Texas, 1974), p. 241.

9. *Ibid.*

10. John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, "The Political Culture of Authoritarianism in Mexico: A Reexamination," *Latin American Research Review* 19, no. 1 (1984): 118.

11. Susan Tiano, "Authoritarianism and Political Culture in Argentina and Chile in the Mid-1960s," *Latin American Research Review* 21, no. 1 (1986): 86.

I The Southern Cone
