

Democracy's Third Wave: Lessons and Legacies



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THE DIVERSITY OF LATIN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

BY MARK P. JONES



The recent collapse of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring provides a backdrop to reflect on Latin America's democratic transitions from authoritarian rule during the "Third Wave of Democratization" as well as to review the current health of the region's democracies. Compared to the paucity of democracies in Latin America at the start of the Third Wave in the mid-1970s, the near-universal presence of democratic regimes today highlights the tremendous democratic progress made in the region over the past three-dozen years. Nevertheless, within this broader regional success exists considerable country-by-country variation in democratic experience and quality.

This article will first review the stark differences in the foundations upon which the region's Third Wave democracies were constructed, with particular focus on the nature of the democratic transition and prior experience with democratic elections and governance. It will then discuss the evolution of democracy in the region over the past three and a half decades. Next it will examine the considerable variance in the degree of democratic consolidation and democratic quality in the region as of 2012. A final section will draw some general conclusions about some of the most significant factors that drove the democratization of Latin America.

The article will concentrate on the 19 former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the region -- Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela -- while excluding a discussion of democratic transitions and democracy in the region's former British, Dutch and French colonies. This latter group is dominated by the dozen ex-British colonies, which with the exception of Guyana have avoided any serious democratic breakdowns since achieving independence between 1962 and 1983, and at present all possess robust democratic systems.

DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIP IN LATIN AMERICA AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD WAVE

In January 1977, only two of the 19 former Spanish and Portuguese colonies could truly be classified as democracies. Costa Rica and Venezuela were islands of consolidated democracy within a sea of dictatorship, with the former continuously democratic since 1953 and the latter since 1958. A third country, Colombia, was in the midst of a democratic transition following the end in 1974 of its experience with a quasi-democratic power-sharing pact between the Liberal and Conservative parties, which had been established in 1958 as a means to help end a decade-long civil conflict.

The remaining 16 countries were governed by military or civilian dictatorships of diverse stripes. In many cases the dictatorship was relatively institutionalized, with the presidency and other key posts regularly changing hands, while in others the lion's share of power lay in the hands of a single personalist dictator who had governed -- or would continue to govern -- for decades.

Examples of the former set of countries include Brazil and Mexico. In Brazil, different generals occupied the presidency for a fixed term during most of the dictatorship. In Mexico, a new president from the country's omnipotent Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) assumed office every six years. Nicaragua and Paraguay are examples of the latter type of country. Nicaragua was governed in 1977 by Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who had assumed control in 1967 following the death of his brother, who had in turn taken the place in 1956 of their assassinated father, Anastasio Somoza García, whose tenure had begun in 1936. In Paraguay, Alfredo Stroessner had held the reins of power continuously since 1954 and would continue to do so until his removal by a military coup in 1989.

THE THIRD WAVE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Between 1977 and 1994, 15 of these 16 nondemocratic Latin American countries would embrace democracy, with the exception being totalitarian Cuba. The nature of the initial transitions from authoritarian to democratic governance, however, varied tremendously among the 15 countries that became democracies during the post-1977 period.

Several countries experienced gradual, managed transitions, with Brazil and Mexico two examples of this model. In Brazil, where restricted elections had been held to select national legislators and local officials throughout most of the 1964-1985 military dictatorship, these elections became increasingly free and fair over time. This gradual democratic transition in Brazil, often referred to as the process of "political decompression," culminated with a fully democratic election in 1986 of national legislators who would go on to draft the country's 1988 constitution.

Under the iron control of the PRI, Mexico had held regular restricted and fraudulent elections since the 1930s, with never any doubt that the outcome would be a PRI victory. During the 1980s, Mexico's elections became increasingly transparent and competitive, with 1994 often identified as the date of the country's first truly free and fair presidential election. Mexico would pass the final democratic litmus test in 2000 when, after over 70 years in power, the PRI lost the presidential election and transferred the presidency to the victorious Vicente Fox of the opposition National Action Party.

Other democratic transitions were much more abrupt. Argentina was governed between 1976 and 1983 by a military dictatorship responsible for the murder of between 10,000 and 20,000 citizens and the torture, imprisonment and exile of tens of thousands more. In April 1982, the military government invaded the British-held Falkland Islands, known in Argentina as the Malvinas. The invasion was a dual attempt to resolve tensions within the armed forces by unifying its members around a common goal, while simultaneously rallying popular support behind a national cause to deflect attention from the military's disastrous management of the economy, egregious human rights abuses and general lack of legitimacy. The military's quick defeat at the hands of the British and the public backlash against it as a result of this failure, along with the other deficiencies cited above, resulted in rapid negotiations between the military and key civilians. Elections were scheduled for October 1983, with power handed over to a democratically elected civilian president in December of that year.

The 15 countries that transitioned to democracy during the Third Wave also differed dramatically in terms of their ability to construct their new democracies on the foundations of substantial past democratic experiences. At one end of the continuum were countries such as Chile, Uruguay and, to a slightly lesser extent, Argentina and Brazil. During the transitional period, these countries were guided by their rich democratic pasts and, with the exception of Brazil, their robust political party systems, which had remained vibrant during the dictatorial interludes. When Argentina (1983), Chile (1989) and Uruguay (1984) transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, they did so with well-institutionalized political parties that possessed deep roots in society and party elites with considerable democratic experience, and all four countries did so with a historical legacy of functioning democratic institutions.

The results of the 1971 Uruguayan presidential election, the country's last prior to the 1973 coup, and those of the 1984 presidential election provide a poignant example of the country's high degree of partisan continuity in spite of a dozen years of dictatorship. In 1971, the Colorado Party won the presidency with 41 percent of the vote, followed by the Blanco Party with 40 percent and the Broad Front with 18 percent. Thirteen years later, the results were strikingly similar: The Colorado Party garnered 41 percent of the vote, the Blanco Party 35 percent and the Broad Front 21 percent.

The other end of the continuum was occupied by countries with limited to almost nonexistent prior experience with democratic electoral processes and governance. Included in this group are Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay. The gradual democratic evolution which took place in Mexico along with the rather unique role played by the PRI make the country something of a sui generis case in the region in regard to historic experience with democracy.

The cases of the Dominican Republic and El Salvador make clear that the lack of a democratic legacy does not pose an insurmountable barrier to future democratic success. However, it is readily apparent that the absence of a shared national history of successful democratic institutions and of political elites with experience operating within a democratic environment has represented a hindrance to democratic consolidation in a majority of these eight countries. This is especially the case in Guatemala and Nicaragua, but also in Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay.

One institutional feature shared among all 15 transitioning countries, along with Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela, was their use of the presidential form of democratic government. While there have been isolated experiences with nonpresidential government in the region -- the Uruguayan experiment with a Swiss-type collegial executive between 1952 and 1967 being the most notable -- Latin Americans have almost exclusively been governed by pure presidential regimes. In the current democratic era, these systems feature the separate election of presidents and legislatures for fixed terms and a constitution with a checks-and-balances framework.

During the early days of the Third Wave, many scholars and policymakers expressed concerns that presidentialism would result in problems of severe executive-legislative gridlock, winner-take-all elections, crises of democratic legitimacy and the election of anti-democratic outsiders. These critics generally proposed the adoption of parliamentary or semi-presidential constitutions to help avoid these potential problems. However, these reform proposals have met with virtually no success in the region.

In general, the initial fear that many of the Third Wave Latin American democracies would fail due to their use of presidentialism appears today to have been unfounded. However, while Latin America's democratic regimes did not break down during the past 30 years -- with the exception of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's 1992 coup against his own administration -- more than a dozen democratically elected presidents were forced from office during this period of regime stability. Often presidents were removed from office either through impeachment or a credible threat of impeachment that resulted in an anticipated resignation by the president. Aníbal Pérez-Liñán has referred to this general dynamic as "stable presidentialism with unstable presidents."

DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA TODAY

As of 2012, all 18 of the countries that either were democratic in 1977 or underwent a democratic transition since that time are classified as electoral democracies. However, within this broad democratic rubric exists a considerable level of variance in the quality and performance of democracy across the region.

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2012" report underscores the widely varying conditions present in Latin America's democracies. Freedom House places every country on two scales, ranging from 1 to 7, measuring their level of political rights and civil liberties, which are then

combined and divided by two to provide a Freedom Score, where 1 is most free and democratic and 7 is least free and democratic.

Three of the 18 Latin American democracies under consideration receive the highest Freedom Score possible: Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay. The quality and performance of democracy in these countries places them among the world's premier democracies.

A second set of countries has not achieved the same level of democratic success as these three, but at the same time they have created thriving democratic systems in which elections and the rule of law play a dominant role within the political system. This category includes Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Panama in particular, but also, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico and Peru.

At the other end of the spectrum are Nicaragua (4.5) and Venezuela (5.0), which currently straddle the border separating a democratic system from an authoritarian one. Democratic conditions in both countries have become progressively worse during the tenure of democratically elected Presidents Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, both of whom are well on the road to transforming themselves into personalist dictators and their countries into quasi-democratic authoritarian regimes. Cuba has a Freedom Score of 6.5, far and away the lowest in the hemisphere.

The 2010 Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey of political attitudes in Latin America reveals a strong commitment among Latin American citizens to the abstract concept of democracy. Large majorities in all 18 electoral democracies believe democracy is preferable to any other form of government, with more than four-fifths of the population holding this opinion in eight countries, and all countries registering a majority greater than two-thirds.

However, while Latin Americans overwhelmingly prefer democracy to other forms of government, a substantial proportion are not especially satisfied with how their own democracy is functioning today. For example, in a third of the countries, a majority of the population is either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country, with Peru (61 percent), Venezuela (59 percent) and Mexico (56 percent) possessing the most unsatisfied citizens. On the other side of the democratic satisfaction spectrum, Uruguayans (89 percent), Panamanians (79 percent) and Costa Ricans (71 percent) are either very satisfied or satisfied with the workings of their country's democracy.

The above-mentioned dissatisfaction with the functioning democracy in many countries throughout the region has its roots in a host of factors, including populist presidents with limited respect for democratic institutions, the weakness of the rule of law and the overall inability of the democratic system to meet many of the society's most basic needs in key areas such as education, security and social welfare. Perhaps the single most corrosive element eroding public support for democracy in Latin America, however, is the excessive level of corruption present in a majority of the region's countries. For instance, in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), of the 18 Latin American democracies, only three -- Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay -- ranked in the upper third of the 183 countries studied. In contrast, seven of the 18 were found in the lower third of countries, with scores below 2.8 on a scale where 10 is considered to be "very clean" and 0 "highly corrupt." Perhaps unsurprisingly given the country's penultimate score in democratic satisfaction noted above, the CPI located Venezuela as one of the dozen most corrupt countries in the world.

FACTORS BEHIND THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

The transitions to democracy that took place in Latin America between the late-1970s and early 1990s were as diverse in their origins as they were in their outcomes. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some trends present across subgroups of the countries that were integral to the initial transition.

In one set of cases, countries that had enjoyed robust democracies at varying points in time during the post-World War II era experienced military coups in the 1960s and 1970s designed not just to remove democratically elected leaders, but also to impose a new type of technocratic rule by the military as an institution, a regime type commonly referred to as bureaucratic authoritarianism. These regimes were found in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, all countries with a large and politically influential middle class as well as a working class that became increasingly opposed to military rule and dissatisfied with government performance -- with Chile representing a partial exception -- during these dictatorships. The growing pressure by the middle class and working class became too much for the military governments to bear, with the result eventually being a peaceful transition to democracy in all four countries.

Another set of cases is found in Central America north of Costa Rica, where there was limited to nonexistent prior experience with democracy. Here the successful 1979 revolution led by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua sent shock waves through the economic oligarchies and militaries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The Nicaraguan revolution's impact was also felt in Washington, where the administration of President Ronald Reagan viewed Central America primarily through a Cold War lens. For Reagan, Nicaragua was a Soviet beachhead on the continent that in turn threatened its three northern neighbors, all of which had communist guerrilla insurgencies operating at varying levels of intensity. In a 1986 speech, Reagan had noted that Sandinista-controlled Nicaragua was "just two days' driving time from Harlingen, Texas."

The Reagan administration considered democracy to be a vital weapon in its fight against Soviet and Cuban destabilization efforts in Central America, and pressured the military and economic elite in each country to democratize. These twin forces of elite fear of revolution and U.S. fear of Soviet intervention helped pave the way for the region's democratic transitions. Reagan played a particularly prominent role in managing the Salvadoran transition to democracy as well as in placing pressure on the authoritarian government of then-Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, who eventually felt compelled to hold free and fair elections in 1990, which he lost.

CONCLUSION

Latin America has come a long way from the dark days of the mid-1970s, when dictatorships reigned and democracies were an endangered species. Today, the threat of military coups has been greatly diminished compared to the past, as support for authoritarian rule among both ordinary citizens and elites is minimal. Furthermore, a majority of the region's countries have adopted something approximating a zero-tolerance policy for unconstitutional transfers of power within Latin America, a policy that has discouraged many potential coup participants from even beginning to plot.

Nevertheless, while the region's electoral democracies appear relatively immune to threats from the traditional coups of the past, many are experiencing a progressive decay of political rights and civil liberties under presidents whose behavior in office is increasingly much more akin to that of a personalist dictator than that of a democratically elected president. In 2012, the greatest threat to democracy in Latin America no longer lies in the barracks, but rather in the presidential palace. In a not insignificant number of countries, elected presidents have over time increasingly concentrated in their hands an excessive and dangerous level of political and economic power.

Latin America's experience with democracy has historically been pendular, with periods of democracy followed by democratic reversals and periods of dictatorship. To date, the region has for the most part avoided the reverse swing of the pendulum in its latest period of democratization. All of the countries that transitioned to electoral democracy over the past three-dozen years remain democracies today. That said, there exists a growing level of variance in the degree of democratic performance, quality and satisfaction within the region. Several democracies rival the best in the world, with others increasingly close behind and all enjoying a seemingly positive future trajectory. However, other countries find themselves barely above the threshold required to

be considered even a minimalist democracy, with trajectories that are taking them every day closer and closer to authoritarianism. It is likely that these trends will continue in Latin America, with the result being an increasingly diverse set of democracies and democratic experiences coexisting within the region. □

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