Latin America

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It is possible to argue that Latin America is no more than a geographical expression, and that, rather than trying to generalize across a range of different countries, we need to focus on the history of the individual republics. Certainly there are significant differences within the region, and path dependency is a factor in determining particular political outcomes. However, there are important similarities within the region as well. All Latin American political systems are presidential. No Latin American country has achieved a genuine 'first world' standard of living. Social inequality within the region is very high. Despite widespread poverty, most Latin Americans live in cities, and enjoy near-'first world' life expectancies. There are also similarities in religious tradition, legal system and language. The Latin American republics are also significantly influenced by the policies and outlook of the United States – almost completely so in the case of the small Central American republics, and significantly so in the countries of South America.

This discussion adopts a 'broad picture' approach to discuss efforts to conceptualize democracy and democratization in the region as a whole. Some common trends throughout the region as a whole make it plausible to do this. Toward the end of the 1970s, the vast majority of Latin American republics were under authoritarian rule. Now the vast majority have democratized. Some countries democratized much earlier than others, but Latin America can be included in the 'third wave' of democratic transition that also occurred in eastern Europe and some parts of Africa and Asia (Huntington 1991). In the 1980s, therefore, there was a significant literature on transitions to democracy, with a

good deal of discussion of pacts and the general tactics of democratization.

The region as a whole also suffered from a severe economic setback, following the foreign debt crisis of 1982. Even today it has not fully recovered from the resulting problems, with the result that the region's record of strongly positive growth during 1945–82 was followed by a much more disappointing performance during 1982–2002. Discussions of political economy were inevitably dominated during the 1980s by issues concerning debt and economic stabilization. Later, when most countries in the region adopted market reforms, these became the main focus of discussion. Today this kind of approach has evolved into a literature on the relationship to be expected between market-oriented reform (or globalization) and democracy. The tone of the literature has become notably more pessimistic over the past few years.

If we abstract from economic issues (which is hard to do), then a positive case can be made for the consequences of democratization. The Latin American state now is responsible for far fewer abuses of human rights than it was in the authoritarian past. Violence against the person has probably diminished by less, owing to what most observers agree has been an increase in organized crime since the early 1980s. Some civil conflicts, notably those in Central America, have come to an end under the impact of democratization. However, other civil conflicts, most notably in Colombia, have continued and perhaps intensified under democracy. Even so, it is possible to argue that democracy has made Latin America more peaceful than it once was. Politics has also become much more inclusionary. The emergence into active politics of indigenous organizations, especially in Bolivia, Ecuador and – most dramatically of all – southern Mexico is one of many possible examples.

In the end, though, there is no getting away from the fact that economic progress under democracy has been disappointing, thus far at least. Furthermore, democracy itself has not operated particularly smoothly. There have been many constitutional crises, more in some countries than others. Ecuador saw the removal of one president by congress for 'mental instability' in 1997 and the enforced resignation

of another president in 2000 owing to military intervention. The current president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, was largely unknown to the general public when as Colonel Chávez he led a coup attempt against a democratically-elected government in February 1992. This did not stop him being elected to the presidency in 1998. Peru's Alberto Fujimori, though democratically elected in 1990 and 1995, looked to be on the point of imposing a kind of full-scale authoritarianism when he finally lost power in 2000. Argentina saw a sequence of economic disasters, riots and dramatic presidential resignations late in 2001.

It is true that some countries of the region have endured much less political turbulence than others. However, it is not easy to devise general hypotheses to explain why some countries should have had more problems than others, except for the fact of greater United States influence in Central America and the Caribbean than further south. Levels of development within the region do not seem to relate to anything much. Argentina has one of the highest levels of per capita income in the region, but suffered severe political problems during 2001–2. The durability of electoral democracy is also not easy to generalize. Venezuela and Colombia have been free of overt authoritarian government since the 1950s, but the first elected a former coup leader to the presidency and the second is suffering from what seems like an interminable civil war. The experience of democratic rupture has been varied too. Chile has had fewer political upheavals and more policy successes than most democratic countries in the region; but the Chilean transition was for a long time the most constrained, owing to the continuing role of its previous president, General Pinochet. Only Pinochet's arrest in London in October 1998 completely punctured the threat of a military veto. Whatever may have explained Chile's relatively successful transition in the 1990s, it was not any kind of dramatic rupture with the past. Yet Peru, where there has also been substantial continuity between military and democratic government, is one of the most politically troubled cases in the whole region. There probably is a relationship between marked cyclical economic decline and political crisis; but that observation is not particularly remarkable.

The issue of democratic consolidation in Latin America

What has, therefore, to be explained is a rather ambiguous outcome. Democracy has indeed survived in the region, despite policy problems and political crises. However, the policy problems and political crises that might eventually threaten democracy and are already reducing its benefits have not gone away. The concept of democratic consolidation, or more precisely non-consolidation, seems helpful in this regard. There is a considerable literature on democratic consolidation in Latin America, but (like the subject-matter itself) it is ambiguous. According to some definitions, Latin America is mostly made up of consolidated democracies. According to other definitions, including the one preferred by this author, this is not the case. Either way, we have to try to explain how democracy has survived without being consolidated or alternatively how it has remained consolidated (by virtue of its survival) despite many problems with its operation.

At least four different ideas or approaches can be detected in the literature on democratic consolidation in Latin America. They are, first, the game-theoretical idea; second, longevity; third, legitimacy; fourth, the 'checklist' approach. Take each in turn. The game-theoretical idea considers a democracy to be a set of rules and adopts rational choice techniques to discuss both rule-making and participatory strategies. Przeworski's (1991: 26) famous claim that 'democracy becomes consolidated when under particular political and economic conditions a particular set of institutions becomes the only game in town' precisely uses the word 'game'. Przeworski's point is that consolidated democracy can be analysed as a system because political actors can be relied upon to follow the established rules. This happens when it becomes in the interest of all parties to accept the constraints of the democratic process. Failure to do this in a consolidated democracy is less a threat to democracy than evidence of irrationality and self-destructiveness. This need not mean that every political actor obeys all the rules all the time, but it does mean that successful rule-breaking requires concealment. It is bad news for a politician in a consolidated democracy to be found with his hand in the till.

Few Latin American democracies are fully consolidated according to Przeworski's criterion. There are many cases in which politicians who are openly corrupt and barely trouble to deny it have won important elections. More important still, open defiance of the national constitution by figures such as Chávez, Fujimori and the Peronist majority in the Argentine congress (which in December 2001 effectively forced President de la Rúa's resignation though it had no official power to do this) has often worked. It is not at all obvious in Latin America that political actors improve their chances of success by obeying the rules of the game. It happens much more often that cynics prosper, while those who observe the rules finish last.

On Przeworski's definition few Latin American democracies are consolidated. Instead of the institutionalization of uncertainty, there is 'law of the jungle' politics. A pure Hobbesian logic (after Thomas Hobbes, 1588–1679) indicates that a failure to institutionalize democracy would lead to the breakdown of democracy and the imposition of government by force. However, although this did indeed happen many times in the region prior to 1980, it has not really happened since. Empirically, non-consolidated democracies in Latin America do not tend to break down, but instead stagger on from crisis to crisis. Latin American democracies, therefore, are non-consolidated in Przeworski's sense, but they are stable in a much broader and possibly more eclectic sense. The question is why?

A second approach to consolidation, following O'Donnell (1996) and Schedler (1998), is to regard consolidation as longevity. A consolidated democracy is a democracy that does not break down. However, the notion is otherwise tautologous unless it implies that longevity is itself a factor that sustains democracy. The problem with the longevity argument is that it has not worked well in the region. We have already noted that Colombia and Venezuela, countries that have held contested elections for many years, have very problematic democracies. Moreover, during the 1970s authoritarian governments took power in some countries, most notably Uruguay and Chile, in which democracy had in earlier times appeared fully established. In both of those countries the appearance of stability gave way to crisis and democratic breakdown. The problem of democratic stability

has not gone away since 1980, but democratic instability has not thus far led to democratic breakdown. That is a significant difference, and one that needs more explanation.

There is more to say about the notion of consolidation as longevity; but we now turn to the third approach, exemplified by Diamond (1999) and Lagos (1997) among others. These authors draw on public opinion surveys, which have become increasingly sophisticated during the past decade. Their core concept of consolidation is based on Lipset's earlier (1983) claim that legitimacy and efficiency are keys to the stability of democracies. Public opinion surveys routinely measure popular preference for democracy and popular satisfaction with the performance of democratic systems. Until recently, most Latin American samples expressed fairly strong preferences for democracy, but much less satisfaction with the performances of their political systems and institutions generally. According to the notion of consolidation as legitimacy, one could regard a country as democratically consolidated if the vast majority of its citizens preferred democracy as their system of government. This is obviously an important political fact in itself, and it is also a fact with explanatory potential. If most people want democracy, then it is likely that they will vote for democrats and against anti-democrats. This might not be enough to stop a hypothetical group of committed authoritarians from seeking or retaining power, but it should certainly reduce their chances.

There are, though, two reservations worth making. First, as noted, the surveys showing popular support for democracy as a concept do not show anything like the same kind of support for democracy as a set of institutions. On the contrary, there is often a deep-rooted cynicism about the workings of congress, the judiciary, the police, the presidency and the political parties. This outlook can easily translate into a situation where, although democracy may be the only political concept in town, the legal rules are not the only rules. When Fujimori closed the Peruvian congress by force, his popularity went up. The resulting situation is a complex one. Plebiscitary democracy is not stable democracy. Mass support can produce precisely those increasing returns to power that are most dangerous for democratic stability. What is to stop this from happening in Latin America?

Earlier in the 1990s some political scientists expressed the fear that what O'Donnell (1994) referred to as 'delegative democracy' (that is, elective dictatorship) might become common in the region. This has not really happened. In part the reason may be that Latin American publics are capable of recognizing some political leaders as excessively authoritarian, and reacting against them. This is clearly what happened to Fujimori in 2000. However, not every rule-breaker or aspiring dictator is necessarily going to be inhibited by fear of unpopularity. There seem to be complex institutional reasons preventing ambitious political leaders from using a temporary burst of popularity as a means of overthrowing democratic institutions altogether. A positive popular orientation toward democracy, unless expressed in terms of specific support for a particular set of institutions, may not be sufficient guarantee of the stability of a democratic system. There is therefore something further to explain that cannot be explained by popular orientations toward democracy alone.

The other reservation is that public opinion is capable of changing over time. The most recent surveys (for example, in *The Economist* 26 July 2001) have shown a marked decline in popular support for democracy across much of Latin America. When asked whether authoritarian government could under certain circumstances be preferable to democracy, a majority of respondents in 2001 still said 'no', except in the single case of Paraguay. However, the very wide margins of approval given to democracy in 1996 and 1997 are starting to reduce. Almost certainly this can be attributed to worsening economic circumstances.

Again, there is more that can be said about the notion of consolidation as legitimacy; but this is a good place to introduce the fourth approach to democratic consolidation, which is associated with Linz and Stepan (1996). Their argument is complex, but best known for attempting to develop a 'checklist' approach to democratic consolidation. In other words, a democracy is consolidated if it is organized in accordance with some general principles (laid down by political scientists) of what democracy should be. Linz and Stepan refer to five arenas of contestation: the political, administrative, legal, social, and economic. There must be free and fair elections, a Weberian civil service governed by

a concept of state impartiality, an effective and impartial rule of law, interest group participation in the context of an active civil society, and respect for property rights.

Linz and Stepan, like Diamond, seek empirical indicators of democratic consolidation; but those of Linz and Stepan are empirically far more demanding. Diamond and others look largely at the state of public opinion – information that can in principle be acquired in a self-contained way. In contrast, Linz and Stepan pay more attention to a whole series of empirical conditions that, they believe, are likely to underlie the state of public opinion and its orientations toward a particular status quo. As we move from the first (game-theoretic) to the fourth of the approaches to consolidation, we move from an analytically neat but empirically problematic approach to more and more demanding empirical specifications. But can we be sure that they are the right empirical specifications?

Questioning the approaches

All four approaches can be subjected to the key question ‘how can we know whether a democracy is consolidated or not?’ The Przeworski test – is open violation of the democratic process unthinkable? – cannot be verified absolutely. We cannot be sure that public opinion plus the state authorities will rally to the support of the democratic order under any conceivable set of circumstances. Since we cannot know this, we cannot confirm that any system is necessarily consolidated for all time. However, Przeworski’s condition of consolidation can in principle be falsified. In fact it has been falsified in a number of Latin American countries. If a president closes congress and finds that his popularity has increased, or if congress exceeds its authority and overthrows an incumbent president on a pretext, then the rules of the democratic system can no longer be regarded as the ‘only game in town’. The problem for Latin Americanists is that we still need some explanation of why non-consolidated democracy does not break down altogether when these things occur. Przeworski does not really tell us why it hasn’t, though he does suggest that the reasons for the non-breakdown of

non-consolidated democracy are likely to be different from the non-breakdown of consolidated democracy.

The definition of consolidation as stability over time is also open to a rather similar objection. It is serviceable descriptively and has the merit of being simple, but there is no explanation. An explanation sometimes given is that the electoral arena is privileged in Latin America, in the sense that the electoral process is sealed off from the abuses of the system that occur at the level of the bureaucracy, the judiciary or civil society. However, this explanation is empirically unconvincing. There have been many examples of elections that have been contested, but nevertheless influenced by rule-breaking. For example in Mexico in 2000, the presidential candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the PRI) received significant election funding from the state oil monopoly Pemex. In Peru in 2000 a close ally of President Fujimori was caught on video bribing a legislator to change sides. In Paraguay in 1999 the president was impeached by congress on charges that included the murder of the vice-president. These are clearly interferences with the electoral process. Overall, to say that consolidated democracy is long-lived democracy risks tautology.

The idea of consolidation as legitimation has the merit of being testable. The fact that popular orientations toward democracy in Latin America have become more negative in recent years may make further testing necessary. We have discovered what is in principle a new fact, namely growing popular disillusionment with democracy. But we have not yet learned its significance. We have yet to establish if this will eventually threaten democracy. However, the idea that democratic consolidation can be judged by whether or not the polls convey a positive message about popular attitudes to the system still seems rather limiting. As social scientists we presumably believe that there is some kind of relationship between underlying structural realities and people's systems of belief.

The Linz and Stepan approach therefore has a great deal going for it, but there are problems as well. For their criteria for consolidation are very demanding. Taking them strictly then, Spain (because of the violent opposition of Basque nationalists), Northern Ireland (because of violence from republican sympathizers) and the Old South of the United

States (because of racism) would have to be considered non-consolidated. The non-consolidated democracies of Latin America would find themselves in rather distinguished company.

The Linz and Stepan approach also involves problems of verification. In this case, the problem has to do with the significance of democratic non-consolidation. Even if we could somehow abstract from problems of measurement and devise a single scale, all we could know is how country X stood in respect of the criteria for democratic consolidation. We could not be absolutely sure whether this fact was significant or not. It would not be self-evident that local public opinion would endorse the view suggested by the criteria. Even if it did, we cannot be sure that a negative public opinion would fatally wound democracy (though we could be pretty sure that it wouldn't do it much good). For example, Linz and Stepan themselves discover that there is significantly less popular support for democracy in Chile than might have been expected in view of that country's very successful post-1990 policy performance. The question is: why? Possibly there is more latent popular support for the Pinochet regime than people want to tell opinion pollsters. Certainly the arrest of Pinochet in London was soon followed by a considerable boost in the fortunes of the right-wing candidate for the 1999 presidential elections. The right has remained strong in Chilean opinion polls. Idiosyncrasies of perception may not be the whole story, but they are probably a part of it.

In the end, we have a continuing puzzle. Why have Latin American democracies neither truly stabilized nor broken down altogether? When trying to understand this we should look at a range of factors. These include the opinion polls, the historical record (which tells us that politically motivated law-breaking is nothing new in the region), and the gap between what an idealized form of democracy should look like and what Latin American politics actually does look like. Then we may still want to remain agnostic about ultimate causes, but we should at least have a reasonable 'common sense' understanding of the main political problems facing the region. This understanding should also help us keep track of growing popular disillusionment that might translate into something more sinister but has not as yet done so.

Institutional aspects of non-consolidation

At an institutional level, the criteria supplied by Linz and Stepan are extremely useful. They do help to explain non-consolidation. Most Latin American countries (Uruguay being the only really significant exception) fill the top positions of their state bureaucracies via patronage. It is somewhat true that patronage criteria play a part in filling the United States' public bureaucracy as well, but not to anything like the same extent. If we exclude those state bureaucrats with tenured positions who do not show up to work at all, the ratio of patronage to permanent appointments in Latin American bureaucracies can be as high as 1 to 12. That is vastly higher than in the United States.

In addition, judicial power is relatively weak in Latin America. Elected presidents sometimes simply refuse to implement the findings of the courts. Fujimori was notorious for not doing this in Peru, while Argentina's president Eduardo Duhalde in January 2002 responded to an adverse Supreme Court decision on his government's economic policies by decreeing non-implementation for 180 days. Meanwhile, the Argentine congress set about impeaching the Supreme Court, with whose verdict it disagreed. Other criteria, notably those of civil society activism and a secure institutionalization of the economic decision-making process, also tend to show up weaknesses.

Interestingly, Linz and Stepan's work on democratic consolidation has little to say about core executives, although Linz earlier made a scathing critique of presidentialism (Linz 1994). In fact, the nature of Latin American presidentialism may be of central importance, and although Linz's scepticism about presidentialism has been criticized in the literature there is much to be said in its support. Critics point out, quite rightly, that presidentialism has its advantages as well as disadvantages. Quite apart from anything else, most Latin Americans evidently prefer presidential government, and there is therefore no chance of introducing a fully alternative system. Furthermore, there are many different types of presidentialism, and quite detailed provisions relating to (say) budgetary policy can make a difference between a system that works and one that on the whole does not.

Finally, if there is a climate of political good will, then any specific problems with any particular variant of presidentialism can be dealt with by introducing reform.

However these objections do not really deal with the main problem of presidentialism: while Latin American presidentialism may operate within a set of formal institutions that are similar to their US counterpart, these have generally been informed by quite different concepts. US presidentialism was invented in the eighteenth century as a means of limiting the power of the state. In contrast, Latin American presidentialism developed a few decades later as a means of asserting state authority. Madisonian presidentialism (after James Madison, 1751–1836) was not and is not the same thing as Bolivarian presidentialism (after Simon Bolívar, ‘the Liberator’). One might roughly identify the first with checks and balances and the second with a leadership principle that is its antithesis.

As a result, the formal institutional system of checks-and-balances does not really describe how Latin American presidentialism works. There is much more of a crude battle for power in Latin America. Even under normal political circumstances, Latin American presidents have rights (to decree legislation, to interpret legislation, to refuse to spend the national budget) that do not easily fit Madisonian notions of checks-and-balances. When presidents are powerful enough, they may try to close congress outright (Peru in 1992). They may develop new constitutions that reduce congressional power to a minimum (Venezuela in 1999, and Peru in 1993). Alternatively, they may try to change the rules to permit their own re-election. In the past, the power of Latin American presidents was generally restricted by term limits. However since 1990 constitutions have been changed to permit presidential re-election in Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Venezuela. On the other hand, anti-government majorities in congress have also shown an increased willingness to go over on to the attack. Before 1990 presidential impeachment was virtually unheard-of in Latin America. However, in 1992 Brazil’s Collor de Mello was impeached and removed on corruption charges and Venezuela’s Carlos Pérez was impeached and briefly imprisoned in 1993. In these cases (and also with the impeachment of Raúl Cubas in Paraguay in 1999) there can be no doubt that congress was concerned

with criminal acts. However, in 1997 Ecuador's Abdala Bucaram was removed from office by congress on the ground of mental instability, and in 2001 Argentina's de la Rúa was forced by congress to resign even though there was no suggestion of corruption or mental instability.

Democratization and international involvements

Almost all the literature on democratic consolidation treats the main issues as endogenous. But perhaps the main factors that have prevented renewed democratic breakdown are exogenous. This is not to deny that most Latin Americans still want democracy; but it could still be the case that institutional weaknesses could be exploited by manipulative authoritarian leaders. The Ecuadorian coup attempt of January 2000 ultimately failed, though not before deposing the president. But in acknowledging failure, the coup leaders stated that Ecuador could not afford the international isolation that a coup would create. Ironically, survey evidence shows that a successful coup might have been popular in Ecuador, at least in the short run.

In diplomatic terms, there is little doubt that the US government and other international bodies prefer democracy in Latin America. In economic terms, it has generally been believed that Latin American countries gain material advantages from being democratic. The point is not whether or not democracy works better in principle, but rather that non-democracies would incur bad will in Washington, and this would hurt their reputation in financial markets. They would come to be regarded as political risky. It is not entirely clear that this logic is unbreakable. The Argentine crisis that began in 2001 has already severely damaged the market credibility of many Latin American economies. There is now much less hope in the region than there was even a few years ago that market reform will bring about sustained economic progress.

What South America does not have, and Central America plus Mexico essentially does, is an opportunity to tie in its future to a larger international community. There can be little doubt that the prospect of joining the European Union

has made a significant difference to the development of democracy in both southern and eastern Europe. Even Turkey, which is unlikely to join the European Union soon, has gained considerable material benefit from its international position. The United States could not regard the financial bankruptcy of a strategic ally like Turkey with the same equanimity with which it has regarded the Argentine default and economic crisis that came to a head in 2002. It is true that international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund play a (controversial) part in economic policy-making in the region. However, such involvement is no substitute for the prospect of joining a powerful collective. Even the North American Free Trade Agreement, which is a far looser kind of organization than the European Union, has demonstrably influenced the process of institutional change in Mexico.

Conclusions

Latin American countries returned to democracy sooner than other 'third wave' countries in the developing world. Latin America raises issues concerning democratic consolidation and might be expected to teach us more about that aspect than can countries in, say, Africa, where the contemporary agenda more closely resembles the trials and tribulations of political and democratic transition. The discussion of consolidation in this chapter has moved from a discussion considering concepts to one based more on analysing the workings of institutions. This is a necessary progression. It is not possible easily to understand consolidation in purely conceptual terms without understanding more of the real world to which the concept relates. However, there can be no certainty either about whether any particular set of institutional conditions will prove to be little more than transient obstacles to the strengthening of democracy, or instead will ultimately make stable democracy unviable. We can, though, hope to tease out some of the ambiguities involved both in the concept of democratic consolidation and in the empirical realities of Latin American politics through the study of these countries.

Finally, Latin America – more so than some other regions – raises in quite a sharp way the tensions created when the international diplomatic and ‘human rights’ community seeks to exert influence in one direction and a business and financial community tries to influence in a different direction. Although they both refer to such concepts as ‘good governance’, they tend to mean different things by them. Markets will often welcome a decisive show of political leadership, while human rights activists may worry about democracy being put in danger. The controversy surrounding the US-supported anti-drugs and anti-insurgency ‘Plan Colombia’, in 2002, illustrates the point. Only in Mexico and Central America is there a coherent project of institutional transformation, and this (broadly speaking) means integration with the North American economic zone and political system. The international community as a whole clearly matters to Latin America, but tends to send out different messages. That, too, is a factor working against any secure form of institutional consolidation.