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Potential Mistakes, Plausible Options: Establishing the Legacy of Hypothesized Critical Junctures

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When I was studying at Berkeley with David and Ruth Collier in the first decade of the 2000s, a recurring question on our minds was whether the shift to neoliberalism constituted a “new critical juncture” for Latin American politics. In graduate seminars, we frequently debated the political consequences of neoliberal reforms and how to make sense of the ensuing transformations of party systems and political representation. Meanwhile, others outside of Berkeley were pursuing similar themes. Most prominently, Kenneth Roberts began developing the “new critical juncture” argument in detail, both in a 2002 article and also in the draft book manuscript—circulating *samizdat*-style among Berkeley graduate students at the time—that eventually became *Changing Course in Latin America*.¹

In exploring critical junctures, we sought to ask big questions about substantively important outcomes in Latin American politics, but also to answer these questions through a careful application of the comparative method. And while I enjoyed debating the *new* critical juncture question in seminars and hallway conversations, I had significant doubts at the time as to whether it could be answered in a similarly definitive fashion as Collier and Collier had done for the *old* one.² My concern centered on the inherent difficulties in analyzing recent or ongoing transformations with a method and theoretical model that presupposes temporal distance from the events in question. Looking at the panorama of Latin American politics and party systems more than a decade later, I think many of these misgivings were justified.

In this essay, I reflect upon the challenges of using the critical juncture framework to analyze the political and party-system consequences of the shift to neoliberalism in Latin America. I do so primarily by examining the work of Roberts.³ I should state at the outset that I consider *Changing Course in Latin America* to be a masterful analysis of the transformation of Latin American party systems over the past several decades, as well as a particularly careful application of the critical juncture framework, which is often invoked much more casually. Moreover, as both Roberts’ book and his contribution to this symposium make clear,⁴ we agree on the importance of hindsight in developing a critical juncture argument.

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¹ Roberts 2002; Roberts 2014.

² Collier and Collier 1991.

³ Roberts 2002; Roberts 2014.

⁴ Roberts 2014; Roberts 2017.

Yet I would stress a further point. Rather than merely taking stock of the present as an outcome to be explained, a critical juncture argument requires making the case that a definitive legacy has emerged. Absent such a clear dividing line between the hypothesized legacy and the present day, one risks making an analytical mistake. The outcome being explained might ultimately prove to be just one step in a larger sequence of reactions and counterreactions to the critical juncture.

The Importance of Temporal Distance

Collier and Collier define a critical juncture as “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.”⁵ A critical juncture argument thus constitutes a causal hypothesis linking a major societal transformation to a temporally distant dependent variable that represents the culmination of a process of change, not merely something that happened along the way. Connecting the critical juncture and legacy by means of process-tracing is necessary for evaluating this hypothesis. In order to advance a critical juncture argument, therefore, one needs to specify the legacy *a priori* and describe how countries vary with respect to this legacy. Doing so is crucial not only for establishing that there are distinct legacies produced by the critical juncture, but also for connecting cause and effect.

Given the need to score cases on the outcome when applying a critical juncture framework, it is essential to adopt specific criteria for identifying the end of the legacy, while also remaining open to some ambiguity about its duration.⁶ Collier and Collier had the advantage of a clear analytical endpoint for five of their cases: coups in the 1960s-70s that ushered in long-term military rule and fundamentally interrupted party-system dynamics. More generally, however, the change in Latin America’s economic environment brought on by the debt crisis and neoliberal reform radically altered the conditions that had facilitated the class compromises of the incorporation period and underlain party system dynamics throughout the legacy. In Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, therefore, Collier and Collier were able to argue that the legacy had sufficiently crystallized by the 1980s to allow for analysis, despite important elements of continuity in these countries’ subsequent party system development.

The critical junctures framework is typically used to make arguments about processes that are hypothesized to play out over long periods of time, so extended analytical time horizons are crucial. The point of departure for a critical juncture is typically a cleavage or crisis that calls into question the political status quo. Yet the critical juncture is analytically distinct from this cleavage or crisis, and it is often temporally removed as well. The emergence of the legacy may also be temporally removed from the critical juncture itself. This is particularly true if “the critical juncture is a polarizing event that produces intense political reactions and counterreactions.” These are intervening steps that constitute the “mechanisms of produc-

⁵ Collier and Collier 1991, 29.

⁶ Collier and Collier 1991, 33-34.

tion” of the legacy one seeks to analyze.⁷

In the conclusion to *Shaping the Political Arena*, and in their Authors’ Note in the 2002 edition, Collier and Collier pose the question of a new critical juncture for Latin American politics stemming from the collapse of the state-centric economic model and the ensuing shift to neoliberalism.⁸ Though this economic transformation had many distinct causes, and the height of neoliberal reform happened at different times in different places, for the purpose of analysis we can identify the 1982 debt crisis as playing a key role in the move towards reform efforts in many countries, and in placing the issue on the table in others.

Given the timing of neoliberal reform, contemporary efforts to develop a “new critical juncture” argument face major challenges. Across the eight cases analyzed in *Shaping the Political Arena*, the average onset of the reform period was the year 1921, or seven decades prior to the book’s publication.⁹ If Collier and Collier had attempted to assess the long-term impact of labor incorporation in the 1940s or 1950s, they would have fundamentally mischaracterized the outcome in most countries. Even if the analyst is convinced that political transformations play out on a faster scale in the contemporary period, analyzing the political legacy of a neoliberal critical juncture only two to three decades after the debt crisis implies a significant challenge. Characterizing this legacy and scoring cases on the dependent variable are obviously difficult when one may be in the midst of the reactions and counterreactions that are producing the legacy itself.

Temporal distance is helpful not only for applying the critical junctures framework but also for making available the sort of data and scholarly sources that are routinely used for comparative-historical analysis. Writing a half-century after the events in question, Collier and Collier drew upon a massive bibliography of country-specific monographs covering various historical episodes. Work of this sort takes time to produce, and less of it will be available to present-day scholars analyzing a more recent transformation.¹⁰ In sum, the lack of temporal distance between the period of neoliberal reform and the present raises serious challenges in assessing the outcome that is being analyzed, and in judging whether it will endure.

Assessing the Legacy of a New Critical Juncture

These reflections on temporal distance have implications for assessing Roberts’ work. In the first published formulation of his argument,¹¹ Roberts maintains that the critical juncture stemming from the 1982 debt crisis fundamentally altered labor-mobilizing party systems by undermining their class-based

character, transforming them into something much more similar to their elitist counterparts. The result, Roberts argues, is a “re-oligarchization” of politics, in which party competition across the region revolves around individual politicians and patronage networks that do little to promote class identities.

This re-oligarchization of politics is an accurate characterization of what Roberts treats as the legacy of the neoliberal critical juncture—the landscape of Latin American party systems at the time. Yet, as Roberts acknowledges in his contribution to this symposium,¹² and as his 2014 book makes abundantly clear,¹³ the year 2002 in no way constituted the endpoint of the party system legacy of neoliberal reform. On the contrary, the early 2000s marked the beginning of a series of reactions to neoliberalism that brought left-wing, class-mobilizing parties to power in much of Latin America, fundamentally altering the political landscape that had prevailed at the turn of the millennium.¹⁴

Moreover, while the re-oligarchization of politics had involved growing similarities among previously diverse party systems, Roberts identified distinct, divergent trajectories that depended on the type of party implementing neoliberal reform.¹⁵ His argument may be summarized concisely. Where conservative parties led these reforms and a strong left party could provide consistent opposition, party systems stabilized along a programmatic axis of competition—as exemplified by Brazil. Where leftist opposition to conservative-led reform was weak, or where independents or labor-based parties themselves were the ones to implement such reforms, the major players in the political system all converged on support for neoliberalism, opening the door to social protest, populist challenges from the left, and high electoral volatility—as exemplified by Venezuela. In these latter cases, Roberts argues, the party system legacy of the new critical juncture was an unstable equilibrium, given the polarizing “reactive sequences”¹⁶ spawned by neoliberal reform.

How confidently can we conclude that the ultimate party system legacy of neoliberal reform is as Roberts describes it in 2014?¹⁷ Is there a reason for greater certainty in 2014 than in 2002? As noted above, Collier and Collier had a strong basis for arguing that the legacy of labor incorporation had crystallized by the time of their analysis: long-term military rule interrupted party-system dynamics in five of eight countries, and an exogenous shock, the debt crisis, fundamentally altered state-society relations in all of them.¹⁸ In the present era, by contrast, we may still be in the midst of ongoing change. Political competition throughout the region continues to be driven by reactions and counterreactions to neoliberal reform and its consequences, as the campaign rhetoric of left-wing candidates often made abundantly clear. As a result, analyzing

⁷ Collier and Collier 1991, 37.

⁸ Collier and Collier 1991, 772-774; Collier and Collier 2002, xv.

⁹ Collier and Collier 1991, 164.

¹⁰ The problem is compounded by the fact that new methodological trends and changing standards in comparative politics have made the single-country dissertation based on extensive fieldwork less common than it was a generation ago.

¹¹ Roberts 2002.

¹² Roberts 2017.

¹³ Roberts 2014.

¹⁴ Levitsky and Roberts 2011.

¹⁵ Roberts 2014.

¹⁶ Mahoney 2000.

¹⁷ Roberts 2014.

¹⁸ Collier and Collier 1991.

the legacy of a new critical juncture is inherently more tentative than it was for Collier and Collier. Reactive sequences that had yet to begin in 2002 are clearly in play, but we cannot be certain that they have concluded.

Indeed, recent developments suggest that stable patterns of competition might yet emerge in some of the party systems where Roberts had identified unstable equilibria.¹⁹ One scenario that may be playing out is seen in the right-wing victories by Mauricio Macri in Argentina's 2015 presidential election and the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) in Venezuela's 2015 legislative elections. In these cases, once-fragmented conservative forces may be unifying in order to take on powerful leftist incumbents. If these trends continue, party competition in both countries could eventually stabilize around a populist versus anti-populist axis. Indeed, there is historical precedent for such a transformation. Peronism in Argentina and Democratic Action (AD) in Venezuela were highly disruptive to prior patterns of political competition; "unstable equilibrium" would have been an apt description of Venezuelan politics in the late 1940s and of Argentine politics for several decades at mid-century. Yet both of these new populist movements served to anchor their party systems going forward, generating durable new patterns of competition. If the same happens today in Venezuela and Argentina—and, much more tentatively, in Ecuador, Bolivia, or even Peru—the ultimate legacy of a neoliberal critical juncture will look very different than it did in 2014.

The hypothesis that populist vs. anti-populist cleavages might emerge out of unstable equilibria in Latin American party systems may ultimately prove to be wrong. But critical juncture analysis works best when there is little need for such speculation. If researchers have a strong basis for arguing that a definitive legacy has emerged, they are in a better position to conclusively score the outcome and assess the consequences of a new critical juncture.

Studying Critical Junctures Before the Dust Settles

Roberts' analysis makes clear that, even without a strong basis for arguing that a definitive legacy has emerged, there are still productive ways of using the critical juncture framework. Even in 2002, i.e., even before the "dust had settled," it was evident that the party system consequences of neoliberal reform qualified as an instance of significant, discontinuous change with distinct immediate consequences across countries. The debt crisis and demise of the protectionist model of industrialization placed on the table fundamentally new political questions that were not merely an outgrowth of dynamics from the 1970s. Party systems had converged on more elitist forms as of 2002 with the counter-reactions to "re-oligarchization" yet to occur, but the *paths* that different countries took to this outcome clearly differed cross-nationally.

In other words, some key criteria for a critical juncture were satisfied. Although Roberts could not yet specify a definitive political legacy of neoliberal reform, the evidence at least

did not falsify a critical juncture hypothesis. Thus, he could rule out claims that this transformation did not constitute a critical juncture, which might have been made either on the grounds that (a) change was merely incremental or (b) it occurred in a similar fashion across countries.²⁰

A practical suggestion flows from this discussion. Rather than waiting for one or more decades to justify delving into questions of a "new critical juncture," my suggestion is that, if a definitive legacy has not yet crystallized, scholars can nonetheless focus on criteria such as (a) and (b) above, that do not require positing an enduring legacy. In the short to medium term, there is ample opportunity to debate alternative explanations about antecedent conditions and constant causes, and to look for evidence of both reactive and self-reinforcing sequences.²¹ Doing so will surely lay the groundwork for subsequent, more conclusive research on critical junctures and their legacies.

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¹⁹ Roberts 2014.

²⁰ Roberts 2002.

²¹ Collier and Collier 1991, Chapter 1.