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Introduction: Regimes and Democracy in Latin America

David Collier and Gerardo L. Munck

The dramatic alternation of democratic and authoritarian regimes in Latin America has provided both the empirical base and the normative motivation for research that is conceptually innovative, methodologically self-conscious, and richly grounded in the analysis of cases.¹ This tradition of research has generated an impressive range of substantive findings about some of the most important questions of politics. Moreover, it has been associated with significant methodological innovations—helping contribute to new perspectives on small-N comparative analysis, and to the refinement and enrichment of concepts in comparative research. For these reasons, the study of national political regimes in Latin America has been a prominent locus of influential work in comparative politics and comparative social science over nearly four decades.

This special issue of *Studies in Comparative International Development* presents a new set of articles that further advances this tradition of research. The three central concerns are: (1) the ongoing effort to open new agendas and identify new research questions; (2) methodological issues, specifically the measurement of key concepts and the systematic use of subnational comparison; and (3) the empirical assessment of causal claims about regime change, in the present case building on an approach that frames these claims within a long time horizon.

Guillermo O'Donnell's article extends his earlier efforts to formulate concepts appropriate for the analysis of democracy in Latin America since the 1980s. The point of departure is O'Donnell's observation that existing democratic theory does not provide an adequate framework for studying these democracies. He points out that—notwithstanding the recent emphasis on procedural minimum definitions—efforts to conceptualize democracy that draw upon Joseph Schumpeter inherently cannot limit themselves to institutional

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procedures. Scholars in this tradition fail to recognize a key implication of a procedural focus: the need to confront the ultimately unresolvable boundary problem of deciding what freedoms and capacities should be included in a definition of democracy.

O'Donnell's analysis suggests a new, explicit theoretical rationale for the emphasis on the "democratic state" in his work of the 1990s. Once the link between democracy and specific freedoms is acknowledged, scholars are pushed to extend their horizon beyond the political regime, and to focus on the state, especially the state qua legal system, and on certain aspects of the social system. Further, O'Donnell departs from much of the recent literature on "political institutions," which commonly focuses on short-term processes, elections, electoral systems, legislatures, and policy decisions. His analysis draws attention to the importance of longer time spans, specifically the sequence in which civil rights and political rights develop (or fail to develop), as well as social inequality and the legal structure of the state. He thus brings back into the discussion, and treats as a central issue of democratic theory, themes raised some time ago by scholars such as T. H. Marshall and Reinhard Bendix.

The article by Scott Mainwaring, Daniel Brinks, and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán grapples with operationalization and measurement. Their goal is to generate a new data set—organized around the categories of democracy, semi-democracy, and authoritarianism—that occupies a middle ground between dichotomous approaches and approaches that use ordinal or interval scales. Their definition of democracy includes four attributes—contested elections, participation, civil liberties, and the effective power of elected officials—and they carefully explicate the coding and aggregation rules used to arrive at their three-category scale. The authors compare their data set to several others—particularly Freedom House, the Polity data, and that created by Adam Przeworski et al.—in terms of the definition of democracy, the choice of measurement level, and the overall portrayal of historical trends in democracy yielded by the data. This article draws attention to the importance of approaching measurement in a way that combines theoretical justification of the definition employed, clear measurement procedures, and detailed information about cases.

Andreas Schedler's contribution continues the discussion of measurement, focusing on the concept of democratic consolidation. Schedler conceptualizes democratic consolidation in the delimited sense of regime stabilization. Even with this restriction, operationalizing this concept is difficult. Schedler argues, first of all, that operationalization must squarely address actors' expectations. Moreover, because alternative ways of operationalizing the concept assume different causal relations, any effort at operationalization must also confront the causal assumptions entailed in various potential indicators. To meet these requirements, Schedler proposes a measure of consolidation that connects the behavioral, attitudinal, and structural foundations of democratic stability. He then discusses a variety of indicators for each dimension, displaying sensitivity to alternative manifestations of the concept and unusual care in interpreting observations within their context. Finally, Schedler applies his approach to Latin America in the 1990s, showing how the concept of democratic consolidation can be nailed down empirically.

Richard Snyder's article draws attention to an important trend in the literature on regimes: an increased emphasis on a subnational level of analysis. This emphasis provides an invaluable supplement to the more traditional focus on the national level. Snyder reviews the substantive and methodological benefits derived from this focus, laying out key uses and principles of a "subnational comparative method." In substantive terms, many processes of change are sufficiently heterogeneous at a national level of aggregation that it is indispensable to adopt a subnational focus. In addition, this focus provides leverage in analyzing important, but often ignored, theoretical arguments about spatially-uneven processes. Snyder also identifies two methodological advantages. First, subnational analysis can contribute to measurement validity because within-nation variation may pose fewer problems of comparability. Second, it can address standard methodological concerns related to causal assessment: (a) increasing the number of observations and (b) controlling for key variables through carefully matched comparisons within countries. Snyder thus systematizes the contribution of subnational comparisons to the analytic repertoire of comparative researchers.

Finally, James Mahoney focuses on explanations of regimes and regime trajectories. He starts by outlining a critical juncture/path dependent model, which provides a framework for reasoning about how long-term trajectories of change are shaped by the interaction of structures and agents. Mahoney applies this model to regimes in Central America. His argument is that the crucial, and contrasting, choices made by liberal elites in different countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries explain the divergent regime outcomes in the region during long periods of the 20th century. Thus, they help account for harsh military-authoritarianism in Guatemala (1954–86) and El Salvador (1948–79); traditional dictatorship in Honduras (1932–82) and Nicaragua (1936–79); and democracy in Costa Rica (1953–present). The analysis exemplifies nicely the juxtaposition of cross-national comparisons among a small set of cases and the method of process tracing applied over long periods of time. Mahoney also explores the broader applicability of his analysis. He shows how literature on other parts of Latin America and on Europe implicitly or explicitly adopts a critical juncture/path dependent framework, as well as providing further evidence for the importance of causal factors that explain the divergent trajectories of Central American nations.

To conclude, these articles further advance the concerns that have animated research on regimes in Latin America, emphasizing fertile concepts, careful observation and measurement, and causal assessment framed by a long time horizon.

Notes

1. Well-known books in this tradition include O'Donnell (1973, 1999), Linz and Stepan (1978), Collier (1979), O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986), Diamond, Linz, and Lipset (1989), Collier and Collier (1991), Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992), and Haggard and Kaufman (1995), along with dozens of other important books and articles that have debated these themes.

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