

From Authoritarianism to Democracy and After

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For a long time, authoritarianism has been the modal political regime in Latin America. When LASA was founded in 1966, a handful of countries in the region, including Brazil and Argentina, were ruled by dictatorships. During the decade that followed, even such model democracies as Chile and Uruguay were overthrown by military coups that imposed autocratic regimes notorious for their political violence and violations of human rights. For almost two decades, only Venezuela, Colombia, and Costa Rica escaped the authoritarian tide.

Although they were similar in their disregard for democratic institutions, civil liberties, and basic citizen rights, these authoritarian regimes diverged greatly with regard to their economic policies, social bases of support, and the degree to which their autocratic rules were institutionalized. Some practiced developmentalist policies; others appropriated neoliberal doctrines. Some of these regimes were modernizers, others purely reactionary. Some permitted controlled elections and muzzled parties; others banned both. Some were based on dictators' personal rule; others were more impersonal governments of military and civilian bureaucrats.

This gamut of authoritarianism posed analytical challenges for intellectuals inside of Latin America and internationally, inaugurating an extremely rich debate that produced seminal contributions to the study of autocracies. The most outstanding theoretical contribution came, first of all, from Juan Linz, who differentiated among autocratic regimes according to the degree of pluralism, the presence or absence of an official dominant ideology, the existence of limits to the leader's discretionary behavior, and the regime's efforts to mobilize the population. Linz's typology gave us distinctly political criteria that permitted

a better understanding of the institutional and ideological varieties of autocratic rule, other than totalitarianism, a clearly inadequate concept to explain the nature of recent Latin American dictatorships. The second seminal theoretical contribution was Guillermo O'Donnell's concept of bureaucratic authoritarianism, which shed light not only on the political economy of some types of autocracy, but also on the complex state structures that sustained them.

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, Latin American countries lived the uncertainties and surprises that accompanied transitions from authoritarianism to liberal democratic regimes. Varying in terms of their timing, speed, and the challenges they faced, such transitions resulted from societal mobilization, but also, and primarily, from the complex interplay of radical and moderate political actors in both the authoritarian ranks and among the opposition forces. Transition processes featured strategic choices made by democrats and authoritarian moderates who acted amid great uncertainty. How far could one go without calling for violent repression; how far could one concede without losing power to the democratic opposition; how far could one negotiate without betraying one's goal to defeat autocracy or to maintain it?

Here, too, the transition to democracy in Latin America gave rise to innovative theoretical and empirical contributions for understanding regime change and processes of democratization. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, the work of an outstanding group of scholars under the leadership of Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, in short order became a classic in comparative politics. Meanwhile, throughout this extended time of troubles,

the Latin American Studies Association provided an open and lively forum where seminal ideas were thoroughly examined, improved, and disseminated.

In Latin America, authoritarianism has ebbed since the 1990s, with the sole exception of the Cuban regime. I do not think that pure authoritarian regimes constitute a menace in the near future, nor can they offer an equitable solution to the multiple and recurrent crises of Latin America's current democracies. Even governments that are trying to silence their political opposition, control the press, and thwart congressional and judicial powers—such as those in Venezuela and Ecuador—have been chosen in free and competitive elections and are being forced to live with a reasonable degree of citizen's freedom, a tribute authoritarian leaders must pay to democracy's prevalence in the hearts and minds of the people of the region.

Let us therefore concentrate on current democracies' weaknesses and strong points. I would like to raise three issues that seem particularly important for this discussion. The first issue has to do with beliefs and attitudes. Leading recent surveys conducted in the region, by Latinobarómetro, LAPOP, and World Values Survey as well as national polls, all converge in showing support for democracy—in varying degrees—but also a pervasive dissatisfaction with its workings, as measured by negative evaluations of governments, parliaments, and, most notably, parties on the Right, Center, and Left.

Of course, this is far from being just a regional problem: as recent watershed national elections have demonstrated, disaffection haunts democracies all over the world, and in this matter Latin America seems to follow a global

trend. Indeed, disaffection and mistrust regarding representative institutions seem to be an inherent and durable feature of contemporary democracies. These trends have been accentuated by the long-lasting world economic crisis and its slow and difficult recovery, but certainly they are a constitutive feature of what Bernard Manin, in *The Principles of Representative Government*, has called democracy of the public. By this he meant a political system where parties are no longer the main source of information and no longer forge strong political identities; and where political information is more easily available to citizens, with increasing exposure of both the daily routines of governments and the internal rifts of political parties, as well as of the public and private lives of politicians. Due to these changes, electoral choices become more volatile and less determined by party identification.

A long time ago, Bismarck said something like, “Oh, if people only knew how laws and sausages are made!” Well, now they know how laws are made, or at least information is within arm’s length. Disaffection does not entail political apathy but, more frequently, it entails protest. The novelty of democracies, old and new, both in the North and the South, is manifested in individuals occupying streets and squares to assert their opinions and aspirations, frequently independent of traditional mobilizing organizations such as unions, civic associations, and parties.

The second issue is a sociological one and has to do with important processes of social mobility that have occurred during this century in almost all of the countries in the region. Some have referred to it as the rise of new middle classes due to a significant reduction of poverty. (I prefer to talk about emerging social strata, in order to avoid the strong valences associated with

the concept of middle classes.) We have barely studied the political consequences of such an important social change. But I would argue that these emerging groups may be associated with the demise of traditional forms of authority and with aspirations for citizen equality as they translate into claims for better public services and universal social policies, as well as for governments and public officials less corrupt and more accountable and open to people’s scrutiny. I would dare to say that these processes echo what Tocqueville called the increasing passion for equality nested in the hearts of individuals. There are the sounds of Tocquevillian revolution in the streets of La Paz, Mexico City, São Paulo, and Santiago. On the other hand, since Tocqueville, we know that there is not an easy answer to the question of how the passion for equality relates to liberal democracy.

Finally, the third important issue has been the significant wave of institutional innovation at different levels of the democratic political system in Latin America. Such institutional innovation encompasses new forms of participation, new tools for citizen advocacy, new mechanisms of electoral supervision, the modernization of voting procedures, new instruments of monitoring and controlling governments’ activities, and new forms of public-private partnerships. Behind these institutions there are actors trying to give efficacy and efficiency to an array of antimajoritarian powers, that is to say, institutions and mechanisms that protect the rights of minorities and moderate the excesses of majoritarian rule.

The impact on real existing democracies in Latin America of these three issues—dissatisfaction regarding representative institutions, aspirations for actual equal rights, and antimajoritarian institutional

innovation—are not predetermined: they can foster democracy or allow for forms of electoral autocracy. In brief, their positive or negative impact depend fundamentally on political systems’ capacity to open up spaces to new actors and demands in electoral competition, as well as in the day-to-day exercise of government. It also depends on the room left for the kind of leadership that Juan Linz once referred to as disloyal oppositions: that is, politicians and groups willing to exploit within the democratic system feelings of disaffection, the quest for equality or the fear of its expansion. Needless to say, the closure of the political system and the formation of new oligarchies, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the emergence of disloyal oppositions—on the Right or the Left—are possibilities lurking just around the corner.

