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Building Democracy in Latin America

THIRD EDITION

John Peeler

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Introduction

Liberal democracy has shown itself to be both feasible and desirable in Latin America.¹ It is feasible because the Latin American tradition includes ways of thinking and acting (e.g., elite settlements) that are adaptable to liberal democracy. It is desirable because it works to protect individual freedom and to restrict the concentration of power. Over the past generation there has been substantial movement toward that goal in virtually every country of the region. If the struggle for democracy is a struggle to create a humane and democratic political order in the region, then it is increasingly clear that liberal democracy does not suffice. Democracy may not be able to survive in Latin America under conditions of globalization, unless democracy is substantially deepened within the region, and unless steps are taken to impose governance in the human interest on the global capitalist system.

Although the term *democracy* literally means “rule by the people,” it has come to be synonymous with “liberal democracy,” an increasingly widespread type of polity. A liberal democracy is *democratic* insofar as it involves government by popular, competitive election, thereby providing democratic legitimation to the polity. But the people do not rule directly outside these periodic elections. A liberal democracy is *liberal* in that it limits governmental authority and protects individual rights, constructing dikes, as it were, against the supposedly sovereign people. Liberal democracy is the best and most durable system yet invented for protecting individuals against government oppression, but it is not fully democratic. A key issue is whether it is possible to move toward a more democratic polity without losing the benefits of liberal democracy.

What do I mean by “possible”? It can mean being consistent with prior and predetermining conditions. Some scholars argue that the history and culture of Latin America are such that democracy could never thrive there.

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Chapter 2 addresses this issue and concludes that democracy can indeed find indigenous roots in Latin America. Others argue that democracy requires a particular class structure, without which it will be fragile at best. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John Stephens (1992) developed such a structural argument with notable sophistication and meticulous research. Structures in general and class structure in particular clearly matter a great deal in determining what is possible. The cases examined here suggest that structures limit possibilities, but they do not determine outcomes.

Much research on regime transitions has emphasized the importance of statecraft, that is, purposeful action by political leaders to shape outcomes. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986), for example, in their *Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies*, sum up many cases in their multivolume study by emphasizing the indeterminacy of transitions from authoritarian rule. Outcomes are not determined by structures; they depend on the interaction of decisionmakers. This book tends to support this perspective, but it does not negate the importance of structure.

Structure and human action should be seen as mutually constituting each other. Any social structure, such as an economic system or a religion, sets boundaries on what any given individual can do without incurring costs (e.g., some would say that poverty results from refusal to do remunerative work under capitalism, or ostracism results from behavior considered immoral by the dominant religion). Social structures, in turn, are products of human actions that created them over time. For example, the comprehensive structure that is the capitalist system resulted in part from actions by landowners in seventeenth-century England to change traditional patterns of land tenure. That is, the landowners acted to change an existing structure, and in the process contributed to the creation of a new structure (capitalism). Action constitutes structure; structure limits action. Structures do not prevent actions, but rather affect the probability of their achieving their purposes. Weak structures are obviously more susceptible to change through human action than strong ones. By the same token, powerful actors (e.g., leaders who can mobilize large numbers of people or other resources) are more capable of changing structures. Neither structure nor action alone can explain social and political phenomena. It is essential to see them as interacting through time, mutually shaping each other.

Any political system has a broad range of structures—called the regime—that determine which actors actually have governmental authority, how political conflict and cooperation take place, which actors receive or lose resources, and what role, if any, the vast majority of nonpowerful actors play in the political process. Like any other structure, the regime is the consequence of prior action and may be changed by action. But at any given time the regime constrains elites as well as other actors. Moreover,

nonelite actors, though having less power than elite actors, nevertheless individually and collectively structure the environments of elites. And, of course, elites continue to be subject to global economic and political structures.

The point may be illustrated by the wave of left-of-center presidents who have challenged the status quo in the region since the last years of the twentieth century. All are committed to taking actions that would make significant changes of policy and priority in their countries, but all are at the same time constrained by domestic and international structures that limit the scope of their actions. Hugo Chávez of Venezuela came to power by election in 1998, in a context of complete disarray of the preexisting party system. He was able to push through major institutional changes in the country's democratic system, essentially transforming it from a liberal democracy, emphasizing checks and balances and individual rights, to a radical democracy, based on the principle of relatively unimpeded majority rule. On the other hand, Michelle Bachelet won the 2006 election in Chile for the center-left Concertación in a highly stable party system. She has been much more constrained by institutionalized power structures and has been able to pursue only incremental changes of policy and priority.

The termination of a regime is a matter of great interest in the study of comparative politics. Regime structures are more durable than lower-order structures, but they are nonetheless subject to change as a consequence of actions. Regime change will occur when some combination of elite and mass action disposes enough power to overcome regime structures. Often, the defection of regime supporters will help to shift the power balance and thereby create conditions appropriate to regime change.²

Every time an authoritarian government gives way to a democracy, every time a democracy is overthrown and replaced by a dictator, that is regime change. The particular patterns that lead to such fundamental change are a major focus of this book. But the case of Hugo Chávez, cited above, is an example of regime change *within* democracy, from a liberal to a radical model.

One additional set of factors in regime termination should be considered: international influences, including direct political or military intervention by a foreign power. The United States terminated several regimes in Central America and the Caribbean by this means between 1898 and 1933, as well as in the Dominican Republic in 1965, in Grenada in 1982, in Panama in 1990, and in Haiti in 1994. Such influences also include international economic actors such as the International Monetary Fund, which is often in a position to force politically destabilizing policies on Third World governments. Finally, international influences may include worldwide economic or political conditions, such as recession, that function as structural constraints on political regimes.³ This book shows that such international

influences have been very important in shaping the political and economic evolution of Latin America.

When a regime is overthrown, many structures that had constrained action cease to do so. A very important set of constraints on action has been removed—that is, the structures that most directly affect the political elites.⁴ The scope for elite choice and action—what is possible—is abruptly widened. Those elites dislodged from political power will find their capabilities for action substantially reduced if not eliminated. Other elites will find their capabilities suddenly much stronger. However, this period of increased scope for choice is unlikely to persist for long, since actions inherently create new structures.

Further, the destruction of political regime structures still leaves structures intact in other levels and sectors. Sectors of the mass population may well be making demands that newly dominant elites cannot ignore. Aspects of the traditional social structure, such as ethnicity, are unlikely to have undergone fundamental change. The structure of the international economy will in all likelihood be unaffected by the end of the political regime in one country. The governments of powerful neighboring states may have strong preferences about the outcome of political struggles in the system in question.

Thus, in the wake of the termination of a regime, interaction among political elites constrained by surviving structures will create the structures of a new regime. If power in the interregnum is relatively concentrated in the hands of a single, relatively unified elite, it will be able to establish regime structures according to its preference and thereby dominate the regime. Good examples would include the victorious communist revolutionaries in China (1949) and Cuba (1959). More commonly, a winning coalition fragments after the destruction of the old regime. At the same time, elements of the losing elite may still have substantial power, as may other elites who did not participate on either side. The interregnum may therefore witness intense political conflict unconstrained by regime rules. The potential for violence is high, and the risks to both elite and mass actors are substantial. Conflict within the interregnum may produce a single dominant elite or coalition that triumphs over competitors in relatively short order (Russia, 1917). Alternatively, the interregnum may persist through a prolonged and possibly violent impasse (Mexico, 1910–1934; Vietnam, 1941–1975; Lebanon, 1975–1991).

Interregnum conflicts may lead competing elites to arrive at an explicit or tacit agreement about new regime structures that protect the vital interests of all participating elites.⁵ John Higley and Michael Burton (1989) distinguish “elite settlements” (involving an explicit agreement among competing elites about regime rules) from “elite convergence” (reduction of conflict and increasing cooperation within a set of regime rules, without an explicit, comprehensive settlement). The type of political regime we know

as liberal democracy, if stable, has usually been rooted in such settlements or convergence rather than in either unresolved conflict or clear dominance by one elite or coalition.⁶ This is not an accident, since liberal democracy implies civil competition for political power within constitutional rules. If one elite is dominant, then competition will not be meaningful; if elites will not be bound by constitutional limits on their competition, they are essentially engaged in civil war, not civil competition.

Demonstrably, democracy was not and is not impossible in Latin America, but neither is it inevitable, as the cases of Haiti and Cuba illustrate. This book will show how the interaction of structure and human action has shaped liberal democracy in Latin America.

Having made the case that liberal democracy is both desirable and feasible in Latin America, I conclude the book with the argument that, ethically, the contradictions of liberal democracy ought to be mitigated and controlled by a more equal distribution of resources and broadened opportunities for participation. Liberal democracy presupposes the equality of citizens, but it exists everywhere in a context of greater or lesser economic inequality, which inevitably produces political inequality. Liberal democracy depends for its legitimacy on popular participation, but it depends for its stability on controlling and channeling that participation. Liberal democracy may in fact achieve stability without enhancing equality and participation, but to the extent that it fails to do so, it will continue to embody these contradictions. This set of issues is addressed in Chapter 7, where a strategy for achieving a more profound democracy is laid out. In addition to reforms of liberal democracy at the level of national regimes, I emphasize political decentralization and civil society, democratization of the economy, and international cooperation to achieve increased political regulation of the global economy.

As I complete this new edition, I am both more pessimistic about the future of liberal democracy in the region and more hopeful that Latin America may play an important role in the next stages of democratic development, deepening democracy at the national and subnational levels and imposing democratic governance on the global economy.

Notes

1. This book deals with the conventional political region of Latin America, that is, the independent countries that were formerly colonies of Spain or Portugal, plus Haiti.

2. Przeworski (1991) has analyzed the logic of this process in great detail.

3. Note that these international influences result from actions of other governments, but they function as structures within the society at hand. The actions of *X* thus constitute structures for *Y*.

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4. A change of political regime will not necessarily have affected lower-level structures controlling everyday life or even local political institutions, unless a popular uprising has taken place. Thus the majority of the population may be relatively unaffected by a regime change.

5. See Higley and Gunther (1992); and Peeler (1985).

6. There are some major exceptions to this, perhaps most notably Third Republic France (1875–1940) and Chile (1932–1973). Both persisted for decades without either settlement or convergence.

Professor of Latin American History at Boston University. Building Democracy in Latin America. 03/21/2011 01:00 pm ET Updated May 25, 2011. On Saturday, President Obama met with business executives in Brasilia, a modernist architectural marvel, and on Sunday he visited City of God, a notorious shantytown in Rio de Janeiro. Unfortunately, for most of the twentieth century, Latin American business elites opposed progressive reform, to the point of supporting brutal military dictatorships. In democratic contexts today, however, Latin American businesspeople must grapple with and at times endure changes they do not welcome, and their responses differ markedly from the routine repressions and violences of the past. A few Latin American countries have gained democracy, but not all. Since, they take more time to bring stability to its people. What does OAS mean? - Organization of American States - A group formed in 1948 to promote democracy, economic cooperation, and human rights in the region. What is the US's relationship with Latin America like? People of Latin America admire the wealth of the US and resent what they see as its military, economic, and cultural domination. For example, in 1977 the US signed treaties to turn over control of the Panama canal to Panama in 2002. Many US leaders will also support some leaders of the Latin American gov. giving them an advantage as well. Describe the economic and political upheavals that Argentina has faced. John A. Peeler. The third edition of this historically and theoretically grounded analysis of the democratic experience in Latin America reflects important developments both in the region and in the comparative politics literature. Placing the subject in a normative context, John Peeler gives significant attention to the adequacy of a purely electoral concept of democracy. He also addresses the problems that economic globalization pose for building vital democracies. One focus of this new edition is the recent 'left turn' in Latin America, which has seen the majority of the region&apo