

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Breakdown, Cooperation, or Backsliding? A Return to Presidents and Legislatures in Latin America

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This essay reviews the following works:

Legislative Institutions and Lawmaking in Latin America. Edited by Eduardo Alemán and George Tsebelis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvii + 266. \$90.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780198777861.

Democratization by Institutions: Argentina's Transition Years in Comparative Perspective. By Leslie E. Anderson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 292. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780472053230.

Political Institutions and Party-Directed Corruption in South America: Stealing for the Team. By Daniel W. Gingerich. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 282. \$34.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107040441.

Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change. By Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman. New Jersey Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 396. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780691172156.

Institutions on the Edge: The Origins and Consequences of Inter-Branch Crises in Latin America. By Gretchen Helmke. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii + 183 pp. \$28.99 paperback. ISBN: 9780521738408.

How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future. By Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. New York: Penguin, 2018. Pp. 320. \$16.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781524762940.

Introduction

It has been nearly thirty years since Juan Linz published his now seminal paper on the perils of presidentialism in the first-ever issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.¹ Linz contended that there was something fundamentally amiss with the presidential constitutional format of Latin American states. For Linz, the separate origin and survival of presidential governments discouraged executives from cooperating with, and respecting, the opposition. Relative to parliamentary governments, where minority prime ministers must form a coalition to survive, presidents have no such incentive and so they become legislatively ineffective, eventually generating tension and gridlock between the executive and legislative branch. Lacking a vote of no confidence to relieve the pressure, the fixed term of presidential systems will exacerbate the situation, potentially leading to democratic breakdown.

This argument, though contested from the moment it was published, has inspired three decades of work on the political institutions of Latin America.² Linz's paper emerged as rational-choice institutionalism was becoming a central plinth of comparative politics,³ and it quickly inspired work arguing that the weakness of

¹ Juan J. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990): 51–69.

² For example, see Donald L. Horowitz, "Comparing Democratic Systems," *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 4 (1990): 73–79.

³ See John M. Carey, "Parchment, Equilibria, and Institutions," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, nos. 6–7 (2000): 735–761.

Latin American democracies lay not with presidentialism per se but with the combination of presidentialism and excessive constitutional executive power,⁴ or the “difficult combination” of presidentialism and multiparty systems,⁵ or a combination of partisan and constitutional power.⁶ Robert Elgie has dubbed this body of work, which focuses on some combination of presidentialism with subregime institutional variables, the second wave literature.⁷ In turn, this work has provided the inspiration for a literature on coalition management in Latin American presidential systems,⁸ and work that systematically rejects the observable implications of Linz’s argument by concluding that the correlation between presidentialism and democracy was spurious,⁹ in addition to “third wave” studies that propose completely different theoretical frameworks to explain political outcomes and transcend the divisions between parliamentary and presidential regimes.¹⁰

Linz continues to inspire comparative institutional work. The six books that I review here are all very much in the broad Linzian tradition. Three of these books focus on the role of political institutions in explaining democratic reversals (and transitions, to a lesser degree) in Latin America, while the other three employ institutional explanations for variation in general political outcomes across the region, from interbranch crises, to political corruption, to the production of legislation. In an era of interbranch conflict and populist presidents, from the US to Brazil, these six books also offer a neat opportunity to reflect on Linz’s original assertion about the perils of presidentialism. Although as a whole, these books cast doubt on Linz’s blanket contention that presidentialism was inherently more democratically unstable than parliamentary systems, some of the work reviewed here also acknowledges that in certain contexts, presidents can be a threat to the institutions of the state by attacking, and undermining, legislatures and judicial systems. At the same time, they all reiterate Linz’s insight about the centrality of political institutions. Indeed, every book cites Linz, bar the edited volume from Eduardo Alemán and George Tsebelis (and they do obliquely refer to Linz in the conclusion). Regardless as to whether you think Linz may have been right or wrong, his argument continues to undergird comparative work on Latin American political institutions to this day.

A Return to Institutions?

These six books, in their own way and after something of a behavioral turn, represent a return to institutions for the comparative politics of Latin America. I will start with Gretchen Helmke’s excellent volume, simply because of all six books reviewed here, Helmke’s is probably the one that cleaves most closely to work in the vein of Juan Linz. Helmke, in *Institutions on the Edge*, sets out to provide a systematic explanation of how and why interbranch crises, understood as an episode where one branch of government challenges the composition of another, originate. Specifically, she is interested in explaining the variation across eighteen Latin American countries, between 1985 and 2008, in presidential, legislative, and judicial crises. Her explanation is intuitive yet novel. Helmke (4–5) suggests that the puzzle of interbranch crises is analogous to the puzzle of interstate wars: “Assuming that political actors are rational—or at least boundedly so—and that inter-branch conflicts are potentially costly and risky, such crises beg the fundamental question of why institutional actors fail to resolve their disputes through negotiation and compromise.”

She argues that the answer to this puzzle is rooted in asymmetric information and the inability of actors to make credible commitments: “Political actors are often uncertain about the costs of the political crisis and, more fundamentally, about each other’s tolerance for such costs” (59). The argument, based on an innovative dynamic formal model, suggests that if the president and legislators had perfect information, then the president would be aware as to how far she could push her power and would therefore offer the legislature a deal close to the limit of what they might tolerate. But in a world of imperfect information, presidents simply do not know much they need to concede in a crisis and so overshoot their power, a miscalculation that can lead to their removal from office.

⁴ Matthew Soberg Shugart and John M. Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵ Scott Mainwaring, “Presidentialism, Multipartyism, and Democracy: The Difficult Combination,” *Comparative Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 198–228.

⁶ Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Soberg Shugart, eds., *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷ See Robert Elgie, “From Linz to Tsebelis: Three Waves of Presidential/Parliamentary Studies?,” *Democratization* 12, no. 1 (2005): 106–122; Linz; and work that focuses directly on the relationship between constitutional format and democracy, being the first wave.

⁸ For example, Eric D. Raile, Carlos Pereira, and Timothy J. Power, “The Executive Toolbox: Building Legislative Support in a Multiparty Presidential Regime,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2011): 323–334.

⁹ José Antonio Cheibub, *Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ For example, George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

For cases in which the legislature attacks the president, the core of the problem can be found in the disparity between the president's de facto and de jure powers. The more that formal powers outstrip partisan powers, the greater the likelihood that a bargaining problem will emerge. Presidents need to calculate the risk-return trade-off, but given their lack of information, they often miscalculate and will concede too little, or too late, to appease the legislature. A similar dynamic occurs with legislative crises, cases where the president attacks the legislature. The information asymmetry and the bargaining problem that arise when the formal powers of presidents outstrip their partisan powers also applies in this context. If "presidents are able to anticipate such bargaining failures, then they can be tempted to preventively shut down recalcitrant legislatures and/or pack potentially hostile courts with their own supporters" (14).

Legislative Institutions and Lawmaking in Latin America, the edited volume from Eduardo Alemán and George Tsebelis, is very much in the tradition of new institutionalism but insists that we must move beyond the prerogatives of privileged actors, such as presidents, if we are to truly understand legislative outcomes across Latin America. Building on the veto player theory of Tsebelis in their introductory and framing chapter, they propose a theoretical model for analyzing legislative outcomes that incorporates the three dimensions of agenda setting: the partisan, the institutional, and the positional. The partisan dimension, echoing Helmke and earlier work by Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Shugart,¹¹ refers to the stability and cohesiveness of the majority. The institutional dimension captures the prerogatives of those responsible for the initial legislative proposal, such as executive decrees, urgent bills, and the scheduling of the legislative agenda, together with the degree to which others can amend any proposal. The positional dimension examines the relative ideological positions of all actors involved, and as Alemán and Tsebelis (2) argue: "The way these dimensions of agenda setting are organized is almost lexicographic: in the case of partisan majorities, the institutional dimension will not be very influential. But in their absence ... one must focus on the institutions regulating the prerogatives of each actor." The subsequent seven chapters apply this framework to legislative outcomes in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. Each empirical chapter assesses the validity of this framework through a mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence and in doing so provides real insight into the legislative process in each country. This important book is less a return to institutions than a reiteration of their centrality to political outcomes, but by incorporating the positional dimension, it also acknowledges the importance of behavioral considerations.

Daniel Gingerich, in *Political Institutions and Party-Directed Corruption in South America*, also offers an analysis of Latin American politics that builds on, and is rooted in, work on rational-choice institutionalism. This superb volume sets out to explore the effect of a change in institutional structure on political corruption, which Gingerich understands as the "abuse of public office to advance a political goal" (10). Given the current fallout from the Odebrecht affair, never has such a book appeared more apposite or needed.

Gingerich's argument focuses on ballot structure, and specifically the effect of closed-list and open-list proportional representation (PR), which are the pervasive electoral forms across Latin America, together with the interdependence of the political classes with state bureaucracies. In contrast to the traditional demand-side theories of corruption, stemming from the incentives to seek electoral resources to perpetuate a personal vote in open-list PR systems, Gingerich proposes a supply-side theory of political corruption, which captures the effect of closed-list ballot structures on the incentives of political actors to extract resources from the state (7). In Latin America, given the interdependence between parties, the political classes, and the progressive ambition of political bureaucrats, this argument can help us to understand why, in some contexts, various forms of machine politics appear to be so robust.

On the basis of a formal model presented in chapter 3, Gingerich anticipates that in open-list PR systems, where the party leadership has weak control over the ballot and where the incentive to cultivate a personal vote is greatest, candidate-centered corruption will reach its apex. This is what he terms "free agent" corruption. In contrast, in closed-list systems, where party leaders have complete control over access to the ballot and where the imperative to cultivate a personal vote is minimal, then the incentive to engage in "party-directed corruption among politically orientated bureaucrats" will be at its highest (97). In a closed-list system, the careers of the political classes are dependent on their party, and given that part of their career progression will occur within institutional structures, they have a rational incentive to divert state resources to their party. This is what Gingerich calls "stealing for the team." He substantiates this argument with an innovative randomized response survey, overcoming issues of social desirability bias that is often prevalent in questions about corruption, and examines the responses of 2,859 public employees across thirty different federal agencies in Brazil (open-list PR), Bolivia (mixed closed-list PR), and Chile (open-list

¹¹ Mainwaring and Shugart, *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*.

PR). His core point is clear. Abandoning open-list PR, long hailed as the root cause of Brazil's persistently high levels of corruption, for a closed-list variant may not actually solve the problem; it will just change the *form* of political corruption.

The three books on democracy link variation in institutional structures to democratic consolidation or breakdown. This is exactly what Leslie Anderson does in *Democratization by Institutions*. For the case of Argentina, frequently juxtaposing it against the US constitutional order in a qualitative comparative analysis, Anderson argues that "institutions can be a path towards democratization without strong civil society support or in the face of citizen resistance" (5). The book draws on a Skocpol-inspired, polity-centered approach to highlight the proactive role of the president in kick-starting the democratic process, and the roles of Congress and the judiciary in curbing the worst excesses of executive power.¹² This book is really about democratic consolidation as opposed to transitions from authoritarianism per se, and as Anderson herself suggests, the book "illustrates how leaders used institutions to push forward startling and much needed reforms without which democracy would have died soon after its return" (12). This point is again reiterated with reference to the division between the newly elected Argentine civilian leaders and the military: "Moving that struggle inside the institutions of the state fortified democracy and gave it the strength to overcome military resistance and address human rights" (74). In an era when several countries in the region are increasingly reflecting only the facade of procedural democracy, institutions, despite their endogeneity to democracy itself, are crucial bulwarks against a tide of authoritarianism and essential to consolidate nascent democratic processes.

Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, in the very impressive *Dictators and Democrats*, also explore the institutional factors that shape democratic transitions and democratic consolidation. Haggard and Kaufman set out, in a largely inductive fashion, to assess the validity of structural theories that focus on inequality and the level of economic development as the main impediments to democracy, for all third wave democratic reversions and transitions between 1980 and 2008. Even more specifically, they "seek to steer the discussion about transitions ... back toward more political accounts, rooted in factors such as the nature of authoritarianism and democratic institutions, regime performance, and capacities for collective action on the part of civil society" (3).

Marrying statistical analysis with observation of causal processes, Haggard and Kaufman go to great lengths to explore the underlying mechanisms of the transition and reversion events that they observe in their sample of seventy-eight democratic transitions and twenty-five reversions to authoritarianism. Their findings throw down something of a gauntlet to structural accounts of democracy. First, they found no evidence that inequality or the level of development had any effect on the incidence of democratic transitions in their sample. Furthermore, inequality appeared to play no role in democratic reversals. Levels of economic development do appear to have a relationship with reversions to authoritarianism, but as Haggard and Kaufman note, "anomalies abounded" and political factors played a crucial part in many reversions (339). While distributive conflicts were important for some transition processes, conditioned by the institutional and political practices of the previous regime—most importantly, given our focus here, for the consolidation of democracy—their conclusion is unambiguous: political and institutional challenges are of paramount importance. The ability of institutions and political actors to curb the military, together with the effectiveness of institutions to restrain the worst types of executive behavior and populist outbreaks, in addition to fostering convergence around constitutional norms, will reduce the threat of "weak democracy syndrome."

At first glance, it might appear strange to include *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in this review. Not written for a strictly academic audience, this highly engaging and easy-to-read book is an evaluation of the state of contemporary US democracy in the face of the threat posed by the outsider presidency of Donald Trump. The themes that undergird nearly all the other books in this review are also prevalent here. This is perhaps not surprising, given the caliber of both authors as comparativists (and Levitsky's long focus on Latin America). This book is ultimately concerned with the survival of democracies and, just like Haggard and Kaufman, Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize a political path to authoritarianism: "Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power" (3). They stress elements that are, in many ways, analogous to the weak-democracy syndrome of Haggard and Kaufman. While institutions are a crucial bulwark against the worst excesses of authoritarian leaders, constitutions must be defended by political

¹² Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).

leaders and their parties. Again echoing Haggard and Kaufman, Levitsky and Ziblatt reiterate the importance of adherence to constitutional norms, notably mutual toleration (of the executive and opposition) and institutional forbearance, or the avoidance of actions that violate the spirit of the law (106). And in noting that “the tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy’s assassins use the very institutions of democracy ... to kill it” (8), they highlight the role of executives (and occasionally legislatures) in purging, hijacking, and challenging the other branches of government, very much in the vein of Helmke (e.g., 78–79).

In many ways then, Haggard and Kaufman, Anderson, and Levitsky and Ziblatt all reach conclusions similar to that of Juan Linz, albeit via a different mechanism. Well-functioning institutions provide an essential bulwark against a resurgent or rebellious military and are crucial for the consolidation and stability of new democracies.

Reevaluating Linz

Given this, these books provide a useful lens through which to reevaluate Linz’s argument. Again, Helmke’s work is a useful starting point in this regard. By focusing on interbranch crises, Helmke is considering one portion of Linz’s argument: the point at which the branches of government attack one another. Linz, although concerned with the behavioral incentives that institutions, and notably presidentialism, generated for executives, never explicitly outlined the microfoundations of this argument. Helmke’s formal model, however, provides us with clear microfoundations for interbranch crises, and she does not reject Linz’s assertions that presidentialism can be damaging for democracy, at least in some contexts. Very much in the vein of Mainwaring and Shugart and other second wave work, Helmke highlights the role of strong constitutional powers for presidential crises, particularly when the president governs with a minority.¹³ As she argues (14), “the bottom line is that contemporary presidential crises are fueled not by presidentialism per se, but by a certain mix of institutional and partisan features.”

In contrast, Alemán and Tsebelis view the empirical chapters throughout their book as directly challenging Linz. As they note in their conclusion, very much with a nod to Linzian pessimists: “We do not find dominant or deadlocked presidents; instead we observe differences in the extent to which presidents succeed in enacting their programs and, perhaps more interestingly, how this is achieved” (225). In this sense, just as Tsebelis did with his veto player theory,¹⁴ their conclusions push us beyond the second wave literature and encourage us to think about these Latin American democracies through the lens of different theoretical frameworks. While they note that losing a majority in Congress can generate consequences for the legislative process, it has not produced deadlock, as presidents can increase the use of their veto power to prevent unfavorable legislation, as in Uruguay (the chapter by Daniel Chasquetti) or Mexico (the chapter by Ma. Amparo Casar); or else their positional advantage in the center, as in Peru (the chapter by Aldo Ponce), to facilitate the passage of most government bills.

Anderson, by demonstrating that a strong executive can steady the ship during crises, argues that, at least in the Argentine case, executive power can aid in the consolidation of democracy rather than undermine it, while she also acknowledges that presidencies imbued with strong powers provide opportunities for abuse. Carlos Menem’s attacks on the independence of the Argentine judiciary are a case in point. This brings us back to Linz, who emphasized the psychological effects of the executive office in generating conflict between the president and the legislature. Given that the institutions in Argentina have remained constant, Anderson is conceding that under some circumstances, the executive office can be used in a way that might be detrimental to democracy, circumstances shaped not by cross-national heterogeneity in institutions (as per Helmke) but by heterogeneity in the leadership styles of individual presidents.

In contrast, Haggard and Kaufman directly challenge the assertions of Linz. By institutionalization, they are not referring to specific constitutional features but rather a “more fundamental set of expectations on the part of contending actors about the integrity of constitutional and legal constraints on the political game” (227). For this reason, they are not directly concerned with the effect of presidentialism relative to parliamentary systems in facilitating democratic stability, but as they note (227 n. 18), when they include a dummy for presidential constitutions in their quantitative models, it has either no effect or a positive effect on democratic stability. Indeed, through their focus on military praetorianism, they also reinforce a compelling theoretical criticism of Linz. José Cheibub, in a wide-ranging challenge to Linz, argued that presidential democracies experienced a higher proportion of democratic reversions due to an accident

¹³ Mainwaring and Shugart, *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*.

¹⁴ Tsebelis, *Veto Players*.

of history: these were countries where military dictatorships also happened to be in power prior to a democratic transition.¹⁵ For Cheibub, what explained democratic instability was not the constitutional structure of the state but rather the nature of the prior authoritarian regime. Haggard and Kaufman echo this argument; they found “significant qualitative and quantitative evidence of self-reinforcing cycles of military political involvement ... in countries with prior histories of coups, military officers were less inhibited about challenging civilian authority” (334).

Omnipotent Presidents?

One of the main weaknesses with Linz’s original argument was the assumption of homogeneity across presidential forms of government. Shortly after the publication of Linz’s 1990 paper, Shugart and John Carey, in emphasizing the heterogeneity in the constitutional power of presidents, noted that the most powerful presidents have also been the most problematic in democratic terms.¹⁶ Subsequent work reiterated this point.¹⁷ Presidents might dominate the political arena, but the degree to which they can do this will vary significantly, and very few presidents, if any, are omnipotent.

This is a common theme throughout these books, and some of them have clear echoes of Shugart and Carey. Where a danger to democracy does exist, particularly once the threat of a military takeover has receded, for both Levitsky and Ziblatt and Haggard and Kaufman, it is with increasingly unrestrained executive power. Although not strictly concerned with presidents, as Haggard and Kaufman (356) note: “in recent decades ... the major problems arise from executives who are overly strong, rather than ones who are too weak and ineffectual.” Levitsky and Ziblatt are more explicit in their concern about presidents. As they recognize, most constitutions allow for some expansion of emergency power during a crisis, ensuring that “even democratically elected presidents can concentrate power and threaten civil liberties during war” (94). In such a case, when the president is a would-be authoritarian, this concentration of power is highly dangerous.

Helmke emphasizes the weakness of some Latin American presidents, not in a strictly constitutional sense but in a larger political sense. Indeed, when it comes to interbranch crises, presidents are not the primary instigators of attacks on the other two branches of government. Based on Helmke’s incredibly valuable Inter-Branch Crisis in Latin America (ICLA) dataset, which has coded all interbranch crises between 1985 and 2008 according to seven clear selection rules, legislatures have been *more* aggressive than the executive across the region. Legislatures have instigated over thirty-six attacks on the executive and eleven on the judiciary, compared to thirty-three executive attacks on the judiciary and nine on legislatures (30). Even more significantly for Helmke, her argument is in sharp contrast to the conception of presidents as omnipotent. Presidential attacks on institutions in Latin America are not a symptom of their power but of their *weakness*. They attack because they feel vulnerable. As Helmke (125) argues, “presidential instability, not presidential invincibility, triggers legislative instability.”

While Alemán and Tsebelis acknowledge the central role of the president in the lawmaking process in Latin America, they too are quick to highlight the heterogeneity in both the participation of presidents and their agenda-setting power. In Chile (the chapter by Alemán and Patricio Navia) and to a lesser extent in Colombia (Royce Carroll and Mónica Pachón), the executive plays an active role in the legislative agenda. While Congress is not some bit player, nonetheless, most *major* bills are introduced by the president. This is largely a product of institutional powers, such as the exclusive right of initiation. Having said that, for cases such as Brazil (Taeko Hiroi and Lucio Rennó), the majority of significant presidential initiatives also include substantive congressional amendments. Even rates of presidential legislative success vary. While presidents in Chile and Uruguay have high rates of legislative success, in Argentina (Ernesto Calvo and Iñaki Sagarzazu), even though presidents can often boast majorities or near majorities, their rate of legislative success is below 60 percent.

When reading these books, a clear picture emerges: presidents are powerful but certainly not omnipotent. They operate in a complicated institutional web with different ideological actors. To ignore these realities is to ignore the very real limitations and constraints that presidents face in the legislative process. Their power varies, but where presidents can draw on significant constitutional (or partisan) prerogatives, then this is where problems may arise.

¹⁵ Cheibub, *Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy*.

¹⁶ Shugart and Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies*.

¹⁷ Mainwaring and Shugart, *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*.

Legislatures Are Important Actors

An important corollary to the discussion above, then, is that legislatures clearly also matter in Latin America. Linz has been criticized for his concern with the president to the detriment of any serious consideration of the legislative branch. The focus on powerful presidents perhaps did not help in this regard; it gave rise to a misconception of Latin American legislatures as mere rubber-stamp bodies acquiescing to the whims of the executive. It removed their agency. This began to change with Gary Cox and Scott Morgenstern, who argued that even in cases where the legislature was weak, the president would still anticipate its likely reaction and alter her behavior accordingly.¹⁸ Others emphasized the various interparty and intraparty variables that would condition the degree to which Latin American legislatures were able, and willing, to check the president,¹⁹ while still others stressed the informal norms²⁰ and dynamics of coalitional presidentialism,²¹ which provide legislatures with varying degrees of sway over the executive. Indeed, one particularly important strand of work examined the central role of legislatures in removing presidents from office, in a manner akin to a vote of no confidence in a parliamentary democracy.²²

Again, these themes are evident in all of these books. For example, for Alemán and Tsebelis (234), given that in the seven countries studied in their book most bills originate with members of congress, this demonstrates the “vitality and pivotal importance of congressional activity” in the contemporary Latin American legislative process. Gingerich’s supply-side theory of political corruption considers political corruption in Latin America as largely a product of the different incentives that legislators, or would-be legislators, have for using state resources either to support and undergird their individual electoral war chest or to bolster the coffers of the party in return for career-oriented awards. Anderson, too, stresses the role that the Argentine Congress, even in the face of a powerful executive, has in shaping political outcomes, such as Argentine human rights policy (75). For Levitsky and Ziblatt, political parties and their leaders are the gatekeepers of democratic and constitutional norms, and they can restrain the worst excesses of an authoritarian-minded leader.

Legislatures in Latin America are not simply passive actors in the executive-legislative relationship; their influence will vary, and importantly, the participation of Latin American legislatures in politics is not always positive or even benign (see Helmke and Levitsky and Ziblatt).

Latin American Democracies

So, given this skepticism about Linz’s argument and the emphasis on active legislatures, does this mean all authors here consider democracy in Latin American now to be robust and consolidated? In a general sense, this is the message of Alemán and Tsebelis (at least for the seven countries considered in their volume). As they conclude (234): “The executive dominance and top-down style of governance that characterized their periods of authoritarian rule should not lead analysts to underestimate the legislative processes that now occupy such a central place in public affairs.” For Alemán and Tsebelis, the fact that the tools of the established legislative studies literature can be applied so easily to these cases, notwithstanding continuing issues with atrocious levels of public trust in political institutions, is a clear indication that these seven major countries in the region are part of the wider pantheon of functioning democratic regimes.

This is not necessarily a view shared with the others, however. Helmke’s dataset provides a very useful overview in this regard. Firstly, interbranch crises occur regularly in Latin America and the major variation is between countries and not within countries (47). Within those countries that have experienced interbranch crises, the prevalence of such crises has not diminished over time. In fact, these institutional crises appear to have a self-replicating and near viruslike contagion effect. Although most of the literature has focused on presidential crises, Helmke demonstrates that these particular crises are generally highly correlated with other forms of interbranch battles. For Helmke (40), the data “confirm O’Donnell’s skepticism that Latin American democracies would consolidate over time.”

¹⁸ Gary W. Cox and Scott Morgenstern, “Latin America’s Reactive Assemblies And Proactive Presidents,” *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 2 (2001): 171–189.

¹⁹ Royce Carroll and Matthew Soberg Shugart, “Neo-Madisonian Theory and Latin American Institutions,” in *Regimes and Democracy in Latin America: Theories and Methods*, ed. Gerardo L. Munck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 51–101.

²⁰ Peter Siavelis, “Accommodating Informal Institutions and Chilean Democracy,” in *Informal Institutions and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America*, ed. Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

²¹ Raile, Pereira, and Power, “The Executive Toolbox.”

²² Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Gingerich also paints a somewhat pessimistic perspective. His analysis demonstrates that under either of the predominant ballot structures across South America, political corruption is likely to occur. Abandoning open-list PR for some form of closed-list PR will not address the problem of political corruption. It will simply change its form. Or at least it will if large amounts of posts within the bureaucracy are still subject to executive discretion. For South American democracies, the infiltration of the bureaucracy is stark; in Brazil, nearly 60 percent of deputies have served in the public bureaucracy. In Bolivia, this figure is nearly 50 percent (27). This practice of using the public bureaucracy as a breeding ground and second home for aspirant politicians creates perverse incentives, particularly, as Gingerich notes throughout his book, under closed-list ballot systems. And until these “strategic patronage posts” are removed from executive control, as they have been to some extent in Chile, then the incentive to steal for the team is likely to remain (250).

Haggard and Kaufman, although they focus on a much larger sample of democracies, also offer some cautionary notes for Latin America. In their sample, of the only three examples that they have of middle-income countries backsliding, two, Venezuela (2006) and Ecuador (2007), are from Latin America (chapter 8). Their emphasis on populist reversions, cases where populist leaders challenge existing institutional structures, echoes the arguments of Helmke; executives attacking the institutions of the state, either legislatures or judiciaries, due to their constraining effects or the threat they pose. And again, in their list of six cases of populist reversions, Latin American countries feature prominently. Populism, distributive conflict, and institutional battles between the branches of government, for Helmke, Anderson, and Haggard and Kaufman, still remain prevalent and threatening features of Latin American democracy today.

It is worth concluding with *How Democracies Die*. The warning from Levitsky and Ziblatt is clear: no democracy is immune from the threat of authoritarian backsliding. The US, long held up as the prototypical stable presidential regime for Latin American democracies, is clearly under pressure and weakening. Political polarization and the presidency of Donald Trump have rendered the US constitutional system, although older and more robust than many other countries, “subject to the same pathologies that have killed democracy elsewhere” (230). Secondly, the Trump presidency poses an existential threat to global democracy. Not since the Mann doctrine have US presidents been so ambivalent about authoritarianism. Trump’s lack of interest in promoting democracy and his stated admiration for some authoritarians means that the international pressures, so important for the consolidation of democracies (see Haggard and Kaufman), will lessen. For Latin America, a deteriorating international and regional democratic norm may encourage some opportunistic leaders to further push the bounds of competitive authoritarianism in their countries. Nicaragua and Venezuela come to mind.

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