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Political Regimes and Democratic Stability

Currently, most Latin American countries are considered to be democratic. The situation was strikingly different over most of the 20th century, when authoritarian governments prevailed. During the mid-1970s, for example, most Latin Americans lived under dictatorial regimes that severely curtailed civil rights and freedom of the press. In some cases, these dictatorships embarked on violent campaigns to eliminate opponents. While dictatorial regimes sometimes allowed elections to take place, the results were often questionable. Most of the democratic regimes that emerged before the 1970s were relatively short-lived and politically weak. It was only after the wave of regime change that began at the end of the 1970s that **democracy** became the norm across the region.

There are good reasons to consider democracy as the best form of government. According to the philosopher Karl Popper, democracy is the best type of political system because it provides a nonviolent, institutionalized path to get rid of bad rulers.¹ Democracies are more likely to produce accountable government than non-democracies and to make governments more responsive to a wider range of citizens.² The extent to which democracies work to make governments responsive and accountable varies across countries and often has to do with their institutional arrangements, as will be discussed further in this book.

In a democracy, citizens choose governments in free elections. If one assumes that an adult is the best judge of his or her own interests, then a free vote makes equal consideration of everyone's interests more likely. Democracy offers an arena favorable to peaceful compromise. According to political theorist Robert A. Dahl, democracy provides a more extensive domain of personal freedom than any other political regime, increases the

likelihood that people live under laws of their own choosing, and provides an orderly and peaceful process that a majority of citizens can utilize to induce the government to do what they most want it to do.³

Scholars have long debated the proper way to define different political regimes. The first part of this chapter reviews various definitions of democracy and describes patterns of democracy and **authoritarianism** across Latin American countries. It reveals which countries have been democratic underachievers and which have had a more consistent record of competitive elections, with long-term patterns illustrating the instability of democracy over most of the 20th century. The second part of the chapter examines the emergence and fall of democracy. It discusses the impact of economic, institutional, cultural, and international factors as well as the role of the military.

What Is Democracy?

The word *democracy* originated in ancient Greece, combining two concepts: *demos*, which meant the citizens of a city-state, and *kratos*, which meant rule. While various cities in ancient Greece had governments characterized by “rule by the people,” Athens was the first city to have a long-lasting regime called *democracy*. For Aristotle, the basis of a democratic regime was liberty. Greek philosophers advanced a classification of political regimes that remained influential until the 19th century. These early approaches tended to divide political regimes into three categories: monarchies, oligarchies, and democracies. According to the definition advanced by the Greek historian Herodotus, *monarchies* concentrate power in a single individual; *oligarchies* concentrate power among a few members of the elite; and *democracies* are based on equality with accountable office holders selected by lot.

Modern analyses of political regimes abandoned these early classifications and advanced alternative definitions of democratic and non-democratic regime types. For most scholars, democracy did not originate until the 19th century and was not embraced by most countries until the late 20th century. In Latin America, the only countries that are consistently identified as having had democratic governments before 1945 are Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay.

Contemporary definitions of democracy can be placed along a continuum from minimalist to maximalist, depending on the number of features considered to be necessary to qualify as a democratic regime. Minimalist approaches focus on competitive elections, and their related indicators tend to produce rather reliable cross-national indices. Middle-range definitions expand on the procedures considered to be democratic to include some core political freedoms and limited military interference. Maximalist definitions of democracies incorporate a variety of characteristics that go beyond a handful of procedures to include various governance indicators and aspects of **political culture**.

Minimalist Definitions

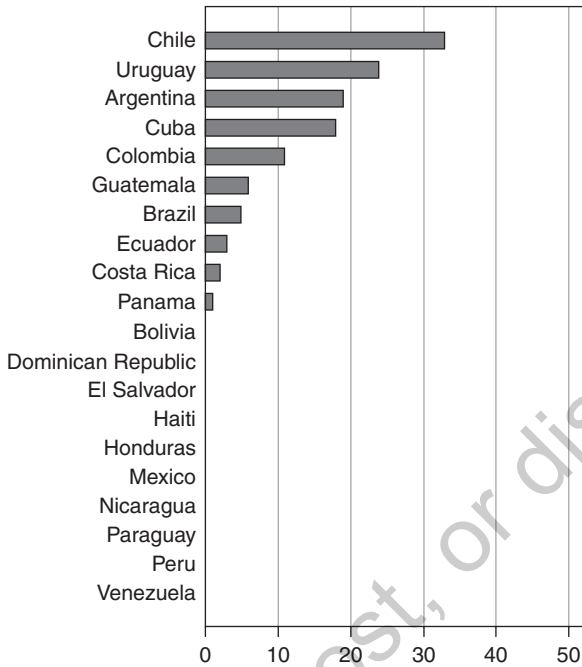
Procedural definitions underline processes and rules to define democracy. According to the minimalist perspective, a democracy is a system in which rulers are selected in competitive elections. The classic definition comes from Joseph Schumpeter, who stated that a democracy is “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”⁴ In his view, democracy was a method for arriving at political decisions based on free competition for a free vote.

Several scholars have adopted Schumpeter’s minimalist definition of democracy. The best-known contemporary advocate of this definition is the political scientist, Adam Przeworski. He argued that democracy, as defined by the minimalist perspective, is highly consequential: **Contested elections** mean that a government may change, and this possibility opens the door to the peaceful regulation of conflicts.⁵ The long-term benefits of alternation in office overcome both the short-term incentives of rebellion for the electoral losers and the short-term benefits of refusing to give up power for the electoral winners. The simple fact that political contenders expect to take turns helps to avoid bloodshed and allows for conflicts to be processed according to rules.

Supporters of the minimalist conceptualization of democracy disagree with the idea of attaching normatively desirable political, social, or economic characteristics to the definitional features of democracy. By defining democracy in minimalist terms, they provide a simple and analytically clear definition that is well-suited to empirical analyses. In short, it avoids conceptualizing democracy based on outcomes we would like to see democratic governments deliver. This is particularly helpful because it facilitates a nonarbitrary way of classifying countries and allows us to examine whether democracies are, in fact, more likely to deliver desirable political, social, and economic outcomes.

Consider the operationalization of democracy in the following two data sets built by scholars who embrace the minimalist perspective. The first one has three specific requirements for a country to be classified as democratic: an elected chief executive and legislature, more than one party competing in the elections, and an alternation in power under the same rules as the ones that brought the executive to office.⁶ Countries not meeting these three requirements are classified as authoritarian. The second one defines a country as democratic if it has competitive elections and has enfranchised a majority of the male population.⁷ This approach retains the dichotomous classification, which means countries are either democratic or authoritarian, but also adds a minimum level of participation as a defining feature.

Figure 2.1 shows the number of democratic years for the period 1901–1950 from the second data set, which was built by Carles Boix, Michael Miller, and Sebastian Rosato. It shows that authoritarianism prevailed during the first half of the 20th century, with half of the countries not having

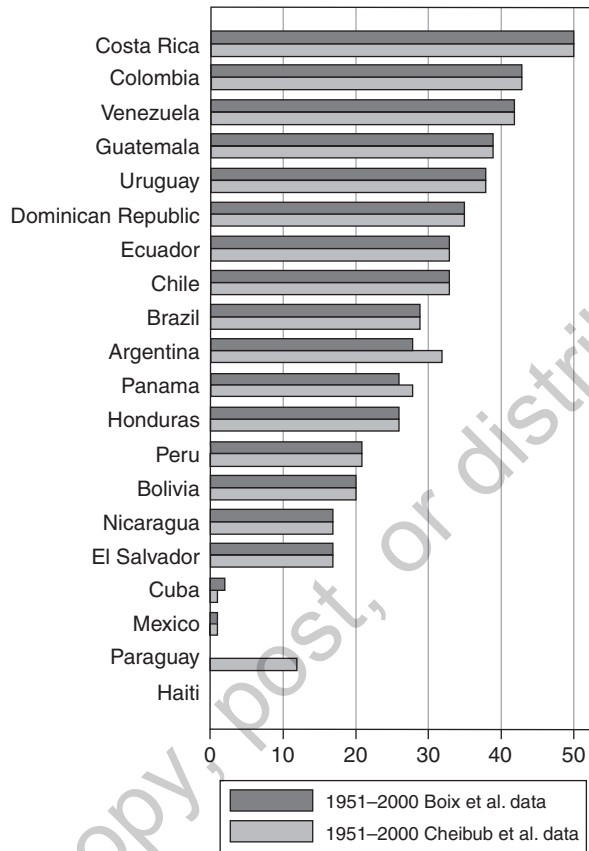
FIGURE 2.1 ● Democracy in Latin America, 1901–1950

Source: Carles Boix, Michael Miller, and Sebastian Rosato. 2013. "A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800–2007." *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(12):1523–1554.

a single year of democratic rule before 1951. Among those that experienced some degree of democracy, only Chile had more years of democracy than authoritarianism. Uruguay is a close second in terms of years of democracy, followed by Argentina, Cuba, and Colombia, respectively.

Figure 2.2 shows the number of democratic years for the period 1951–2000, according to the two mentioned sources that follow the minimalist perspective. The first bar is based on the data set constructed by Boix and his colleagues. The second bar is based on the data set constructed by José Antonio Cheibub, Jennifer Gandhi, and James Raymond Vreeland, who adopt the narrower minimalist operationalization of democracy that does not consider enfranchisement levels.

Democracy was much more common during the second half of the 20th century than during the first half, with twelve of the twenty countries having more years of democracy than authoritarianism. Both sources agree in terms of the best democratic performers in the second half of the century. Costa Rica ranks on top and is the only country that was consistently democratic throughout this period. Colombia and Venezuela follow it. At the bottom of the list are Haiti, Paraguay, Mexico, and Cuba.

FIGURE 2.2 • Democracy in Latin America, 1951–2000

Source: Carles Boix, Michael Miller, and Sebastian Rosato. 2013. "A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800–2007." *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(12):1523–1554. José Antonio Cheibub, Jennifer Gandhi, and James Raymond Vreeland. 2010. "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited." *Public Choice*, 143(1): 67–101.

When looking at the entire 20th century, four countries had more years of democracy than years of authoritarianism: Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, and Costa Rica. The two sources discussed are very consistent in their classification of democracy in Latin American countries. In sixteen of the twenty countries, they provide the same classification, and in two cases (Cuba and Panama), the difference is minimal. Differences are more significant in the cases of Paraguay and Argentina, which will be discussed later in greater detail.

More Complex Procedural Definitions

Not everyone agrees with the minimalist conceptualization of democracy; a common critique is that such definitions do not consider civil

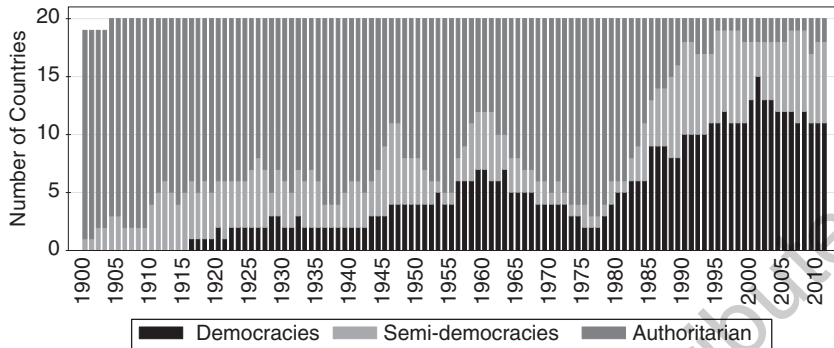
liberties. While holding free and fair elections and alternation in power are essential components of democracy, many have argued that some basic freedoms are essential as well. For example, political scientist Larry Diamond argues that without civil liberty, electoral competition and political participation cannot be truly meaningful.⁸ Among these civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are considered to be paramount. From this perspective, governments elected in competitive elections that impinge on these civil liberties cannot be considered to be fully democratic.

Another criticism is that minimalist definitions do not consider whether elected individuals actually govern. This challenge highlights situations, present in several instances in Latin American countries, where de facto power was retained by the military despite the holding of elections. Military influence may be manifested by holding veto power over policy in areas not related to the armed forces or by dominating outright major policy areas. Examples of this state of affairs are Guatemala between the presidential election of 1985 and the signing of the 1992 peace accords, which ended that country's civil war; and El Salvador between the presidential election of 1984 and the signing of the 1996 peace accord, which brought that country's civil war to a close.

With these criticisms in mind, some scholars have advanced alternative conceptualizations of democracy, retaining the focus on procedural characteristics but extending necessary conditions beyond those of the minimalist perspective. One influential classification that follows this alternative view was offered by political scientists Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán.⁹ For a country to be democratic, they argued, four characteristics must be present: free and fair competitive elections, inclusive adult citizenship, protection of civil and political rights, and a military that is under civilian control. They observed that dichotomous classifications are insufficiently sensitive to regime variations and instead proposed a trichotomous classification that builds on all four dimensions of their definition of democracy. If a country suffers a partial (but not flagrant) violation of any of the four principles, it is classified as semi-democratic. When one or more flagrant violations of these principles take place, a country is considered authoritarian. Figure 2.3 shows the total number of countries in each category from 1900 to 2011.

This figure illustrates the incidence of political regimes over the long term. The first country to be classified as democratic under this scheme is Argentina in 1916, the second is Uruguay in 1919, the third is Costa Rica in 1928, and the fourth is Chile in 1932. The proportion of democratic countries begins to increase slowly during the 1940s and has a first peak in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Afterward, it decreases until reaching a low point in the mid-1970s. From the late 1970s onward, the number of democracies increases markedly. A turning point comes about in 1990, when democracy becomes the most common regime type in the region.

When evaluating the entire 20th century under this classification, three countries had more years of democracy than years of authoritarianism and

FIGURE 2.3 ● Political Regimes in Latin America, 1900–2011

Source: Scott Mainwaring and Anibal Pérez-Liñán. 2013. *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

semi-democracy combined: Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile. These three countries are also among the top democratic performers, according to the minimalist classifications discussed in the prior section. Among the worst democratic performers are Haiti, Cuba, and Paraguay, which were also poorly ranked under the minimalist classification.

One relevant difference between this ranking and the ones discussed before is the classification of Colombia. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán classified Colombia as a semi-democracy for most of the 20th century but never as a full democracy. However, under the minimalist classifications discussed in the prior section, it is one of the countries with the best democratic record. This discrepancy will be addressed further in this chapter.

Another well-known source that provides a trichotomous classification of democracy is Freedom House. It utilizes information on political rights and civil liberties to construct a rating that determines whether a country is *free*, *partly free*, or *not free*. As does the prior source, it includes information on the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and civil liberties but also considers information on corruption and government transparency. Table 2.1 shows the status of each Latin American country during the year 2018. The last column shows whether Freedom House considers the country an *electoral democracy*, which is a less restrictive category that considers whether countries have met certain minimum standards for political rights and civil liberties. This measure gives greater weight to the electoral process category, and as a result, partly free countries may or may not pass this threshold.¹⁰

According to Freedom House, the vast majority of Latin American countries are classified as electoral democracies, with only five failing to meet this standard in 2018: Cuba, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Among this group, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are also classified as not free. Freedom House characterized the 2018 presidential elections in Venezuela as

TABLE 2.1 • Freedom Status and Democracy in Latin America, 2018

Country	Freedom Status	Electoral Democracy
Argentina	Free	Yes
Bolivia	Partly Free	Yes
Brazil	Free	Yes
Chile	Free	Yes
Colombia	Partly Free	Yes
Costa Rica	Free	Yes
Cuba	Not Free	No
Dominican Republic	Partly Free	Yes
Ecuador	Partly Free	Yes
El Salvador	Free	Yes
Guatemala	Partly Free	Yes
Haiti	Partly Free	No
Honduras	Partly Free	No
Mexico	Partly Free	Yes
Nicaragua	Not Free	No
Panama	Free	Yes
Paraguay	Partly Free	Yes
Peru	Free	Yes
Uruguay	Free	Yes
Venezuela	Not Free	No

Source: Freedom House. 2020. *Freedom in the World 2019*. <https://freedomhouse.org>

“profoundly flawed” and noted bans on prominent opposition candidates and voter intimidation.¹¹ That same year, the Nicaraguan government pursued a brutal crackdown on political opponents, which included the imprisonment of opposition figures and “violence by state forces and allied armed groups resulting in hundreds of deaths.”¹² Freedom House labeled nine Latin American countries as partly free and eight as free. This highlights how, even if most countries meet the basic standards of an electoral democracy, several fall short in some aspects of civil liberties and political rights.

Maximalist Definitions

Not everyone agrees with the idea that democracy should be measured solely by a few essential procedural features. Some see the focus on voting and elections as too narrow. They propose instead a maximalist definition that goes beyond procedures to include practices and beliefs considered to be beneficial to a thriving democracy. From this perspective, democracy is seen as a principle to be aimed at rather than a method. As a result, this “thick” approach to conceptualizing democracy may more accurately reflect the ideals of democracy than do minimalist conceptualizations.

Maximalist definitions, however, are controversial among political scientists. On the one hand, it is difficult to agree about which of the many possible desirable features of an ideal democracy should be counted. On the other hand, assessing the actual scores of countries along many of these features can be highly subjective and difficult to replicate. By incorporating desirable characteristics and political outcomes into the definition, a maximalist definition precludes studying whether democracy (in a narrow sense) is actually more likely to produce such outcomes.

Maximalist definitions work well to differentiate among countries, as they favor more detailed classifications than two or three categories. One good example of this approach is the Democracy Index produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). This index is based on a total of sixty indicators grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. The resulting Democracy Index is a continuous measure that ranges from 0 to 10.

Several aspects of politics not included in the indices previously discussed are incorporated into the sixty indicators that make up this index. For example, the category “electoral process and pluralism” goes beyond questions regarding the free and fair contest for the executive and the legislature to include an assessment of whether laws provide for broadly equal campaigning opportunities, whether the process of financing political parties is transparent and generally accepted, and whether municipal elections are also free and fair. In the category “the functioning of government,” the Democracy Index moves past evaluating whether the elected government is free of undue influence by the military to examine, for example, public confidence in government and political parties, levels of corruption, and the willingness and capability of the civil service sector to implement policies.

As in middle-range conceptualizations, the Democracy Index also includes categories for “political participation” and “civil liberties” but evaluates a variety of other features. For example, in the former category, it considers the proportion of women in parliament; adult literacy; authorities’ efforts to promote political participation; the extent to which adults follow politics in the news; and whether ethnic, religious, and other minorities have a reasonable degree of autonomy and voice in the political process. In the latter category,

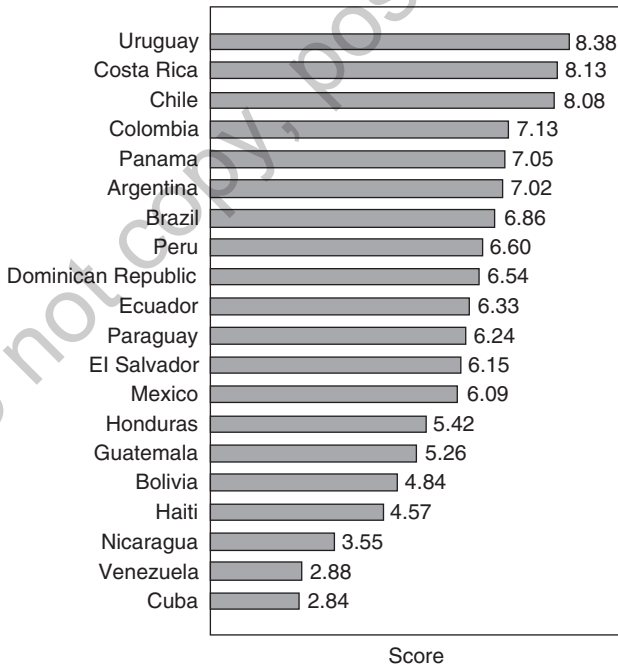
it considers political restrictions on access to the Internet, freedom to form trade unions, the use of torture by the state, judicial independence, religious tolerance, and the protection of property and human rights.

Lastly, the Democracy Index is unique in including a “political culture” category within which it assesses such things as popular support for democracy, separation of Church and State, proportion of the population that would prefer military rule, whether there is a degree of societal consensus and cohesion sufficient to underpinning a stable functioning democracy, and the proportion of the population that desires a strong leader who bypasses parliament and elections.

The Democracy Index has been calculated by the EIU since 2006, which precludes its usage for evaluating long patterns of democracy. However, it presents a revealing picture of contemporary politics in the region. Figure 2.4 shows the score for each Latin American country in 2019; the higher the number, the closer to the democratic ideal.

Among the top performers, we find three countries that were among the best ranked under the most restrictive classifications: Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Chile. Remarkably, the best-placed country in Latin America, Uruguay, ranks among the top fifteen countries in the world. Uruguay,

FIGURE 2.4 • EIU's Democracy Index, 2019



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit. 2020. *Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protest*. Available at <http://www.eiu.com>

Costa Rica, and Chile have scores greater than eight and are, according to the Democracy Index, *full democracies*, which means that they enjoy not only basic political freedoms and civil liberties but also a political culture conducive to the flourishing of democracy.¹³

Ten Latin American countries have a score greater than six and lower than eight which, according to the Democracy Index, means that they are democracies, even if they are flawed. Countries in this category are characterized as having free and fair elections and respecting basic civil liberties, although there are some weaknesses in the other essential features (e.g., governance, political culture, or political participation).

Four countries (Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Haiti) have scores between four and six, which, according to the Democracy Index, makes them *hybrid regimes*. It means that there are substantial irregularities regarding electoral competition and severe weaknesses in other fundamental aspects of its characterization of democracy. The worst-ranked countries in the Democracy Index are Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba, which have scores below four and are labeled as *authoritarian*. As noted in the previous section, these three countries are also considered not free by Freedom House.

Just as the EIU's Democracy Index underscores that all democracies are not the same, several scholars have argued that there are substantial differences among authoritarian countries. The next section examines these claims.

Non-Democratic Regimes

Authoritarianism is an important research topic in political science. One of the main findings from this field of research is that authoritarian governments differ in significant ways, which affects how they govern as well as their survival in office. A well-known classification of authoritarian regimes was developed by political scientists Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz.¹⁴ They considered whether control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus are in the hands of a governing party, a royal family, the armed forces, or a small group centered around an individual dictator. While they classified a variety of authoritarian regimes all over the world from 1946 to 2010, the Latin American cases they examined can be grouped into five distinct types. Definitions for each of these appear in Table 2.2.

Military regimes were the most common type of authoritarian regime in Latin America during the 20th century. Such regimes are characterized by the prominent role of the armed forces in controlling policymaking, the selection of leaders, and the security forces. In these regimes, the formal leader is typically a military officer, but the military institution constrains the behavior of whoever happens to hold such a leadership position.

Examples of military governments abound. For instance, Brazil was governed by a military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985. This authoritarian

TABLE 2.2 • Types of Authoritarian Regimes

Regime Type	Definition	Examples
Military	Control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of the military institution.	Argentina 1976–1983 Brazil 1964–1985
Indirect military	Formal political leaders are chosen through competitive elections, but the military either prevents parties that would attract large numbers of voters from participating or controls key policy choices.	Guatemala 1985–1995 El Salvador 1984–1992
Personalist	Control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of a narrower group centered around an individual dictator.	Dominican Republic 1930–1962 Nicaragua 1936–1979
Dominate party	Control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of a ruling party.	Colombia 1949–1953 Mexico 1915–2000
Oligarchy	Regimes in which leaders are chosen through competitive elections but most of the population is disenfranchised.	Bolivia 1946–1951

Source: Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2014. "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(2): 313–331.

regime came to power after the armed forces overthrew the government of João Goulart. He had been elected vice president in 1960 and became the head of government after the elected president, Jânio Quadros, resigned in 1961. During this authoritarian period, five different military men held the presidency, while the armed forces controlled government policy.

Military dictatorships ruled Argentina on several occasions. The last time was between 1976 and 1983, after overthrowing Isabel Perón, who had become president after the death of her husband, Juan Perón, in 1974. The government was organized as a **military junta** (administrative

council) made up of the leaders of the different branches of the armed forces, with one officer assuming the formal role of president. During its eight-year rule, four different officers held the position of president. The dictatorship finally fell from power after being defeated militarily by Great Britain in the 1982 Falklands War.

Another type of authoritarian government is the **indirect military regime**. In this type of regime, elections lead to the selection of a president, but the military plays a preponderant role by either controlling key aspects of policymaking or preventing the participation of parties that would attract a large number of voters.

The governments of Guatemala (1985–1995) and El Salvador (1984–1992) in the years before the end of their respective civil wars are examples of the indirect military regime category. In El Salvador, the military withdrawal began with the elections of 1982, which led to a constituent assembly and an indirectly elected civilian president. Subsequent elections took place in 1984 and 1989, but the armed forces continued to play a prominent role in policymaking, and the guerrilla forces continued to boycott the electoral contests. This changed in 1992, when a peace agreement ended the civil war and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas became a legal political party. In Guatemala, the military withdrawal began after the election of 1985 but, despite subsequent elections in 1990 and 1993, the armed forces remained highly influential and significantly constrained the authority of elected presidents. The peace process between the guerrillas and the government culminated in 1996, when the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerrillas laid down their arms.

Personalist regimes are the third category of authoritarian governments identified by Barbara Geddes and her colleagues. This type of regime is characterized by an individual dictator who is unconstrained by the armed forces or a strong party. Policy and the security apparatus are typically in the hands of a narrow group centered around the ruler. These regimes often begin with a **military coup**—the abrupt overthrow of a government by the armed forces or a military faction—but soon after, power shifts to an individual officer who becomes the country's ruler.

A classic example of a personalist dictatorship is the regime led by Brigadier General Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. He came to power in 1930 after the military overthrew Horacio Vásquez, who had been elected president after the end of the country's occupation by United States (U.S.) military forces. Trujillo maintained a tight grip on power for three decades and vigorously persecuted political opponents. During his reign of power, he appointed others (including his brother) to the presidency but remained the country's undisputed political leader. In May of 1961, he was assassinated by other military officers.¹⁵

Another well-known example of a personalist dictatorship is the regime led by the Somoza family in Nicaragua between 1936 and 1979. Anastasio Somoza García, the head of the army, led a military coup that ousted a

civilian president in 1936. He then became president in an election boycotted by the opposition. Until his assassination in September of 1956, he ruled the country either as the formal president or as the real power behind handpicked figureheads. His eldest son, Luis Somoza Debayle, became president after Anastasio's murder and controlled the government until 1967, when he died from a heart attack. After this, power shifted to Luis's younger brother, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who had been the head of the army. He ruled directly and indirectly until being ousted from power by the Sandinista Revolution in 1979.

Another authoritarian category is the **dominant-party regime**. It is characterized by a single party that controls policymaking and access to political office although, on occasion, small parties are allowed to exist and sometimes compete for office. In this type of authoritarian regime, leaders are constrained by the party organization, which exercises control over the career paths of officials and the legislature. In dominant-party regimes, elections frequently take place, but opposition parties are either illegal, subject to persecution, or must confront severe institutional disadvantages.

The best-known dominant-party regime in Latin America is the one that was in place in Mexico between 1915 and 2000. The regime, which originated after the end of the Mexican Revolution, created the National Revolutionary Party in the 1920s, which was renamed the Mexican Revolutionary Party in 1938 and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1946. The ruling party monopolized Mexican politics for most of the 20th century. The first time the PRI lost a gubernatorial election was in 1989, and the first time it lost its majority in the lower chamber of congress was in the 1997 election. Mexico's dominant-party regime came to an end in the year 2000, when the PRI lost the presidency for the first time in its history.

Another example of a dominant-party regime is the one that was in place in Colombia between 1949 and 1953. Laureano Gómez Castro of the Colombian Conservative Party came to power in 1949 amid widespread political violence and the killing and intimidation of political opponents, who boycotted the presidential election and the subsequent congressional elections. The Conservative-dominated regime came to an end as a result of a military coup that took place in 1953.

The last authoritarian category identified by Barbara Geddes and her colleagues is the **oligarchic regime**, which is characterized by leaders chosen in competitive elections but with most of the population disenfranchised. In Latin America, such a regime was common at the beginning of the 20th century but later disappeared. The only oligarchic regime in the post-1945 era was in Bolivia between 1946 and 1951. During that time, less than 5 percent of the Bolivian population voted. Most individuals were excluded from voting as a result of restrictions based on literacy and wealth requirements. This regime was overthrown by the Bolivian Revolution of 1952, which ended the prior restrictions on voting rights.

Authoritarian regimes differ with regards to their relative stability, how they come to an end, and whether they are likely to be followed by

democracy. The second part of this chapter addresses outcomes related to the transitions away from authoritarianism, but one relevant finding from the literature on authoritarian regimes worth noting here is the difference in their survival rates. Typically, dominant-party regimes stay in power much longer than others, with military regimes remaining in power for the shortest time.¹⁶

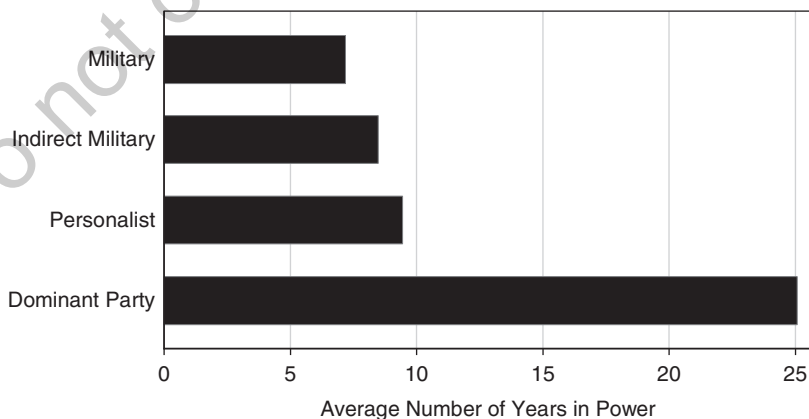
From 1946 to 2010, there were 11 dominant party regimes, 20 personalist regimes, 28 military regimes, four indirect military regimes, and one oligarchic regime in Latin America. Figure 2.5 shows the average number of years in power for the first four categories. Consistent with prior cross-national findings, dominant-party regimes tend to stay in power the longest: On average, they rule for 25.1 years. Personalist regimes last an average of 9.5 years, indirect military regimes 8.5 years, and military regimes 7.2 years.

Disagreements on Difficult Cases

So far, this chapter has explained alternative definitions of democracy and has described how experts classify democracies and dictatorships. As noted previously, despite differences in how democracy is conceptualized, there is agreement on how to classify many governments in Latin America. Most measures underline the long democratic history of countries such as Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Chile; the prevailing authoritarianism in Haiti and Cuba; and the lasting dominant-party regime in Mexico.

However, there are some significant disagreements on the classification of particular cases that reflect more than merely subjective assessments by those constructing those classifications. They underline noteworthy

FIGURE 2.5 ● Average Number of Years in Power by Authoritarian Regime Type, Latin America 1946–2010



Source: Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2014. "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set." *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(2): 313-331.

differences regarding what constitutes a democracy. Discussing some of these cases can exemplify substantive differences in how we define political regimes. The rest of this section reviews some disagreements in the classifications of governments in five Latin American countries: Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Venezuela.

One significant disagreement revolves around the classification of Juan Perón's first two governments in Argentina. Perón was one of the classic populist leaders of the mid-20th century. He was a military officer who rose to prominence during the military dictatorship that ruled the country in the period 1943–1946, when he occupied the positions of secretary of labor, minister of war, and vice president. He was then elected president in 1946 and again in 1951. During this time, he founded the most prominent political party of Argentina, which remains the largest one in the contemporary era.

Perón was accused of using the state resources at his disposal and his prominent role in the military dictatorship, when political parties were banned, to promote his candidacy for the 1946 elections. Once in power, he modified electoral rules to benefit his political movement, packed the Supreme Court, purged the state administration of non-Peronists, and changed the constitution to eliminate presidential term limits. Perón also restricted freedom of the press and his supporters harassed the opposition, often violently. Violations of civil liberties intensified around the 1951 presidential election, when the government suspended constitutional guarantees, restricted opposition access to the media, and imprisoned several opposition politicians. Political conflict between the government and the opposition increased dramatically during Perón's second term in office. As political polarization grew, Perón publicly encouraged his supporters to respond violently to those attacking the government. Finally, in 1955, the military rose up and overthrew him from power.

Was Perón's government democratic? Scholars disagree. By adopting a minimalist definition of democracy, Cheibub and his colleagues classified both of Perón's governments as democratic, but Boix and his colleagues, following a similar perspective, categorized them as authoritarian. It is true that in the presidential elections of 1946 and 1951, the non-Peronists camp was able to run candidates for office, but the fairness of such contests is in doubt. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán classified Perón's first government as a semi-democracy and his second government as an authoritarian one. Geddes and her colleagues classified Perón's second government as a personalist dictatorship, but not his first one. In short, scholars clearly disagree about the democratic credentials of Perón's first government. There is less disagreement about the classification of Perón's second government: three of the four sources discussed so far classified it as authoritarian, despite his coming to power through an election.

Another difficult case to categorize is Guatemala between 1966 and 1981. In 1966, Julio Méndez Montenegro was elected president

in an election from which several political parties were banned from participation. Despite being a civilian who had advocated democratic reforms, he was not allowed to act independently from the military, which remained in control of important areas of policy beyond security. During his government, the armed forces began a major anti-guerrilla campaign and committed widespread violations of human rights. In 1970, he was succeeded in the presidency by Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, who ran as a candidate of the military-dominated Institutional Democratic Party in an election where, once again, several political parties were not allowed to participate. During this government, top administrative positions were in the hands of the military, and the killing of members of the opposition at the hands of death squads linked to the government was common. Subsequent presidential elections in 1974 and 1978 were also won by officers belonging to the military-backed Institutional Democratic Party. They took place in contexts of violent political conflict and widespread violation of human rights, with several parties excluded from electoral participation and amid accusations of fraud. In early 1982, a faction of the military led by General Efraín Ríos Montt overthrew the president and took control of the government.

Was Guatemala democratic during the 1966–1981 period? According to the two sources advocating a minimalist definition of democracy, the answer is yes. Elections took place and several parties competed for office. However, Mainwaring and his colleagues classified these four governments as authoritarian. For Geddes and her colleagues, the civilian government of Méndez Montenegro represents an example of indirect military rule, while the three governments of the military-run Institutional Democratic Party are examples of a military dictatorship.

The case of Paraguay has also generated different assessments among experts. All agree that Paraguay was a dictatorship under the rule of General Alfredo Stroessner, who governed with the support of the Colorado Party and the military from 1954 to 1989. However, there is disagreement regarding the time at which the country actually democratized.

According to Cheibub and his colleagues, Paraguay democratized after the multiparty elections of 1989, which followed the overthrow of Stroessner by a faction of the military. Geddes and her colleagues disagreed because the winner of the 1989 election, Lieutenant General Andrés Rodríguez, was Stroessner's former right-hand man, his son-in-law, and the leader of the military insurrection that overthrew him. Rodríguez ran as a candidate of the Colorado Party in a context not unlike those of previous elections; however, the new government proceeded to undertake various democratizing reforms. So, for Geddes and her colleagues, Paraguay democratized with the subsequent presidential election, which took place in 1993.

Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán argued that Paraguay transitioned from dictatorship to semi-democracy in the 1989 election and to a full democracy in 2008 when, after 61 years, the long-ruling Colorado Party was defeated

in a presidential election by a candidate from an opposition party. For Boix and his colleagues, the transition to democracy took place in 2003, when Nicanor Duarte Frutos was elected president. He came to power following a period of turmoil associated with the resignation of the prior president, Raúl Cubas, amid accusations of complicity in the assassination of his vice president. Duarte Frutos belonged to the Colorado Party but was its first candidate from outside the military and Stroessner's inner circle.

Disagreement regarding the classification of Colombia was noted earlier in this chapter. Most sources classify the country as democratic since the election of 1958, which took place after a bloody civil war and the signing of a power-sharing agreement, called the National Front, between the two main political parties of the country, Liberal and Conservative. However, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán disagreed and classified it as semi-democratic over the same period of time.

There are two main issues that raise concerns about Colombia's democratic credential, the first having to do with restrictions to political competition during the period 1958–1974. As a result of the power-sharing agreement that helped to end the civil war, the two major parties agreed to alternate in the presidency and share bureaucratic appointments. Furthermore, the constitution stipulated that only candidates from the Liberal and Conservative parties could run for election. The second issue has to do with the state's ability to guarantee civil rights. For most of the period following the end of the National Front, the Colombian state failed to exercise a monopoly on the use of force: The country suffered political violence perpetrated by guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug cartels, and death squads. Among the victims of political violence were numerous political activists from leftist political parties, including several members of congress, dozens of mayors and local councilors, trade unionists, and four presidential candidates, who were assassinated in 1987, 1989, and 1990. Electoral campaigns often stimulated violence, particularly at the municipal level. These events have raised questions about Colombia's democratic credentials.

A more recent example of a controversial regime classification is the case of Venezuela during the government of Hugo Chávez. He was a former military officer who went to jail for attempting to overthrow a democratic government and was subsequently elected as president in competitive multiparty elections. Most sources classify Chávez's short first government (1999–2000) as democratic and disagree about how to classify his second (2001–2006) and third governments (2007–2013). But none of the previously discussed sources cover the entire period of Chávez's government. The disagreement centers on assessments of the fairness of political competition—the extent to which the government manipulated electoral procedures and used state resources and institutions to severely curtail the electoral chances and rights of the opposition—as well as on the erosion of civil rights—the often-violent intimidation of members of the opposition and the weakening of press freedoms. These actions have led many observers to characterize Chávez's last two governments as non-democratic.¹⁷

To conclude, the first part of this chapter reviewed definitions of democracy and authoritarianism and provided examples from various Latin American countries. This section presented some examples of cases that are not easily categorized and showed why it is not a simple task to codify political regimes. Part of the reason for the different categorization of governments stems from the different conceptualizations of democracy, but also relevant is how authors judge such aspects as the conditions that surround political competition and the respect of basic civil rights. The next section shifts attention to the analysis of **regime transitions**.

Regime Transitions and Democratic Survival

For many decades, the study of the emergence and breakdown of democratic regimes has been an important research topic among social scientists. The topic is not only relevant to academics but also to politicians, activists, and others interested in the survival of democracy. Since most Latin American countries transitioned to democracy not long ago and democracy does not appear fully consolidated across the region, it seems particularly appropriate to investigate what could facilitate regime stability and prevent a slide back into dictatorship.

The political science literature has underlined the importance of several factors to explain regime change. In this section, we review the most significant ones: the economy, **political institutions**, cultural factors, agency, and the international context. While debates about the relative importance of each factor continue, it is important to understand what is meant to be the underlying mechanism linking each of them to regime transition. Reviewing these arguments and describing some relevant long-term patterns should contribute to enhancing our knowledge of the region's politics.

The Economy

The idea that economic development affects the emergence and stability of democracy has a long history in political science. It was a key argument advanced in the 1950s by the well-known scholar Seymour M. Lipset in his seminal work on the social prerequisites for democracy. According to Lipset, economic development was supposed to bring about a series of social changes that would favor the emergence of democracy.¹⁸

Among the most consequential changes associated with economic development is the growth of the middle class. The idea that a middle class is favorable to democracy goes back to Aristotle. Lipset thought that the middle class would help to mitigate social conflict, rewarding moderate and democratic parties over extremist ones. He also thought that economic development would make the rich less likely to fight off democratization and the poor less likely to support radical antidemocratic movements. As incomes rose, the rich would be less fearful of democratization because the threat that a popularly elected government would pursue drastic wealth

redistribution would be lessened. Higher levels of economic development would also bring about greater economic security among those with relatively low incomes, which was supposed to promote moderation, longer time perspectives, and the legitimization of democratic institutions.

Evidence shows that democracy is more common among economically developed countries than among poor countries. However, proving a causal relation is statistically complicated. Several recent cross-national studies have concluded that levels of per capita income increase the likelihood of democratization.¹⁹ They recognize that regime transitions may be facilitated by multiple factors but argue that higher levels of economic development increase the chances that a country will become democratic (even if this effect varies in different periods and even if some authoritarian rulers are better at insulating themselves from this effect). Additionally, democracy tends to be more stable (i.e., less likely to break down) at high levels of economic development.²⁰

Some scholars have looked separately at a set of Latin American countries to evaluate the effect of economic development on democracy. Peter Smith, for instance, underlined that the most prosperous nations in Latin America (i.e., Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) were the first ones to shift toward democracy in the period before the 1940s, but he believed that economic development was less crucial in those transitions occurring later in the 20th century.²¹ Focusing on this latter period, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán found no direct association between economic development and transitions from dictatorship to democracy in Latin America.²² However, they discovered that economic development increased the normative preferences for democracy among the region's key political actors, and this, in turn, had a significant effect in promoting the emergence and stability of democratic regimes.

Not all academics embrace the hypothesis that economic development causes democracy. Some have disputed the causal relationship and argued that both economic development and democracy are caused by historical factors that have made both outcomes more likely to occur simultaneously.²³ For instance, Guillermo O'Donnell, writing in the early 1970s, was skeptical of the democratizing effect of economic development in countries that industrialized late and noted that, at that time, both the richest and poorest Latin American countries had dictatorial regimes.²⁴ He went on to coin the term *bureaucratic authoritarianism* to characterize the military dictatorship of the more modernized countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, and to distinguish them from the oligarchic and personalist forms of authoritarianism prevalent in poorer Latin American countries.

Aside from the effect of overall levels of economic development, scholars have argued that short-term economic growth also affects the stability of political regimes.²⁵ Poor economic performance weakens support for governments and can erode their legitimacy. For example, Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman argued that transitions to democracy in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay took place in a context of economic crises that favored the opposition to the authoritarian regime.²⁶

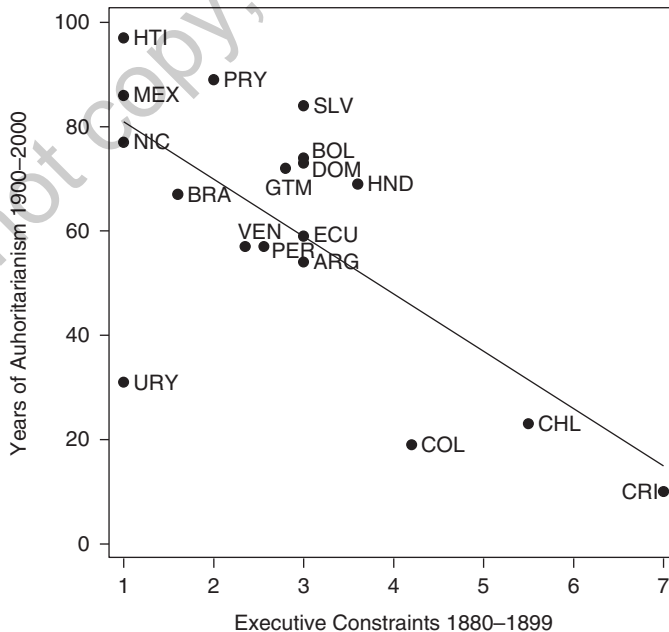
Political Institutions

Political institutions affect policymaking as well as the relationships between the different branches of government. Political scientists have long argued that institutional design impacts the stability of democracy. Since institutions establish the “rules of the game,” they affect the incentives of the different political actors to obey by democratic norms.

An important debate within the institutional literature focuses on the power of the executive. Several scholars have argued that constraints on the executive have favorable implications for both democracy and development. In a series of articles, economists Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson argued that executive constraints at the time of independence have a significant impact on the likelihood of democracy and the emergence of institutions conducive to economic development.²⁷ Executives with weaker constraints are expected to have fewer incentives to bargain with other political actors and to respect the rights of the opposition and more incentives to bypass congress and ignore existing rules. Constraints on the executive are also associated with institutions that protect property rights, which has been found to have a favorable effect on economic development.

The association between executive constraints and regime type in Latin America is illustrated in Figure 2.6. The horizontal axis shows the countries’ executive constraints score in the last two decades of the 19th century,

FIGURE 2.6 ● Executive Constraints and Authoritarianism



when political stability came to the region and political institutions began to take hold. The data comes from the Polity IV Project, which provides a score for executive constraints that goes from 1 (representing no limitations on the executive's actions) to 7 (representing situations in which legislatures and other accountability groups have effective authority equal to or greater than the executive on most areas).²⁸ On the vertical axis, the figure shows the number of years of authoritarianism between 1900 and 2000 from the political regime data set of Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán. The black line inside the figure represents the linear prediction of executive constraints on authoritarianism. Each country is indicated by a dark point with its associated label.

The figure reveals a significant association between executive constraints at the end of the 19th century and regime type in the 20th century. The direction of this association can be seen in the black line that goes down from the upper left corner of the figure toward the lower right corner. Countries where executives had few limits tended to have more years of authoritarianism. This suggests that early institutions in Latin America explain a substantial amount of variation in the presence of dictatorial regimes in the subsequent century.

In addition to the effect of early institutions on the future incidence of democracy, scholars have also debated the influence of current institutions on democratic stability. Along the lines of the earlier argument, it has been observed that institutional rules that give strong legislative powers to the president in comparison to the legislature are problematic for the stability of democracy. For example, political scientists Matthew Shugart and John Carey made the argument that presidential systems allocating weaker constitutional powers to the executive are more stable than those that allocate strong powers to it.²⁹ Using the measure developed by these authors, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán found some evidence that democratic stability after the middle of the 20th century has been negatively affected by strong executive powers. A more recent study that examines Latin American countries from the early 20th century until the early 21st century found evidence that presidential hegemony over the other branches of government (congress and the judiciary) represents a major threat to democratic stability.³⁰

Cultural Factors

Democracy has also been linked to political culture, which consists of the beliefs, values, and norms of a society. For some, political culture also includes an emotional and expressive element. The origins of a society's political culture are typically found in historical events, the individual experiences of its members, and the process of schooling. While it has been central to the work of many political theorists for centuries, modern research on political culture flourished after the end of World War II. Insights from this literature have had a significant influence on studies

regarding the emergence and stability of democracy. Because democracy is associated with tolerance of the opposition, acceptance of different opinions, the rule of law, and the legitimacy of political institutions, many scholars have argued that democracy is fostered by a particular set of views and ideals.³¹

Political culture affects how individuals evaluate political institutions and political outcomes. For example, it influences whether the government is considered a legitimate authoritative body as well as the desirability of particular government activities. As a result, it can strengthen a society's commitment to democracy and help governments survive difficult crises. Many important aspects of political culture have been the focus of extensive research. Chapter 9 of this book will examine the attitudes and beliefs of Latin Americans in more detail. Here, we address how religion and education—two key aspects of political culture—affect democracy.

For a long time, scholars thought that religion played an important role in influencing the likelihood of democracy. The first countries to democratize were in Protestant Europe and in Britain's former overseas colonies. In contrast, at least until the second half of the 20th century, Catholic, Islamic, and Confucian countries seemed to offer an unwelcoming environment for democratic development.

Protestantism, particularly the Calvinist strand, has been described as highly receptive to democracy, given its emphasis on individualism, acceptance of pluralism of ideas and secular life, and promotion of civic associationalism. However, Catholicism, the prevalent religion in Latin America since colonial times, was for a long time characterized as being unreceptive to democratic values. For example, the late sociologist Kingsley Davis wrote in 1942 in an article about Latin America that

Catholicism attempts to control so many aspects of life, to encourage so much fixity of status and submission to authority, and to remain so independent of secular authority that it invariably clashes with the liberalism, individualism, freedom, mobility, and sovereignty of the democratic nation.³²

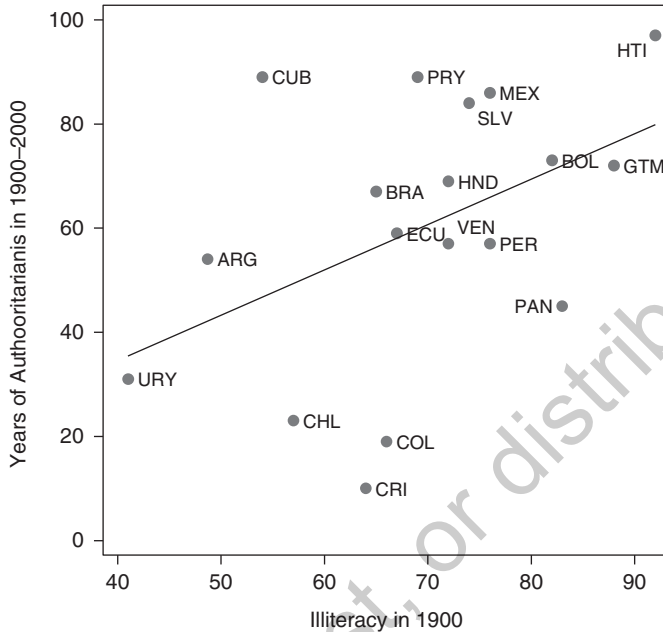
One influential view of the cultural challenges to democracy in Latin America was advanced by political scientist Howard Wiarda, who argued that the region's Catholic history and corporatist sociopolitical structures were fundamentally different from the Anglo-Protestant tradition.³³ According to this perspective, a corporatist, Catholic, and authoritarian tradition was brought over from Spain and Portugal during the colonial period. Wiarda contrasted the individualism and liberalism of the United States with the hierarchical conservative Catholic tradition of Latin America which, according to him, has been historically hostile to democracy. He and Margaret MacLeish Mott argued that Latin America

has had a “political culture that values order over participation and natural law over a mere constitution.”³⁴

But the apparent incompatibility of Catholicism and democracy has been challenged by more recent events. For instance, during the third wave of democratization (1974–1990), Catholic countries were more likely to democratize than others.³⁵ This fact may be explained if one considers that cultures often have heterogeneous values and that religion is able to change over time.³⁶ Catholicism has undergone profound changes since at least the 1960s that have helped to make liberalism acceptable. Liberal Catholics have been vocal in politics for many years, but scholars often underline the lasting impact of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which was an assembly of Roman Catholic religious leaders seeking to address doctrinal matters. It was at that time that the Catholic Church redefined its position on various issues and embraced a favorable view of religious freedom, the secular state, and civil liberties. Many of the ideas that helped to promote this shift in the Catholic Church had been brewing for some time before being adopted by the church’s hierarchy. In addition to doctrinal changes, authoritarian regimes, which had attracted many European Catholics before World War II, were profoundly discredited by the 1960s.³⁷

Aside from religion, another component of political culture is education. The view that education promotes attitudes and values that favor democracy has been common in the social sciences for over a century. There are several mechanisms through which education works to shape a society’s receptivity to democracy. One view argues that education helps to promote tolerance and that more tolerant individuals are more likely to embrace democratic principles. Another view maintains that education instills civic skills and political interests that make individuals more likely to participate in politics and demand voting rights. Various empirical works have found a positive correlation between levels of schooling and democracy at the national level and between years of education and democratic attitudes at the individual level.³⁸

In an illuminating analysis of political legitimacy and democratic values across Latin American countries, a group of political scientists found that education had the largest positive effect on political tolerance.³⁹ This finding is consistent with other studies of public opinion in the region, which found that increases in schooling enhance an individual’s democratic values. At an aggregate level, there is also some indication that education positively affects democratic values. For example, Figure 2.7 shows the association between levels of illiteracy in 18 Latin American countries in 1900 (horizontal axis), and years of authoritarianism between 1900 and 2000 in the vertical axis.⁴⁰ It reveals a positive association between illiteracy at the turn of the century and years of authoritarianism in the subsequent century. While the association is less robust than that between executive constraints and democracy, it is still significant.

FIGURE 2.7 ● Illiteracy and Authoritarianism

Agency: Political Elites

Explanations about the emergence and stability of democracy not only focus on cultural or structural features, such as institutions and the economy, but also on the actions of individuals at a particular juncture in time. Whether key political actors work to strengthen or undermine democracy can significantly impact political outcomes. Such key political actors include individuals such as presidents and influential party, religious, business, and labor leaders as well as organizations, including the military, social movements, trade unions, and guerrillas.

The frequency with which the military overthrew elected (and non-elected) governments in Latin America led to a rich literature focused on the armed forces. Military coups varied across countries and over time. Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Paraguay all experienced more than a dozen coups in the 20th century. Others, such as Costa Rica and Uruguay, only had two each during the same period of time. On some occasions, the military would overthrow a government and quickly withdraw to the sidelines, allowing civilians to form a government; at other times, the military would expel a sitting president and take direct control of the government. While military coups are no longer common, they used to be the most frequent cause of democratic breakdown in Latin America.

The reasons that the military in Latin America overthrew governments varied. Officers typically highly valued the survival of the military

institution and their autonomy from politicians and would resent attempts by civilian governments to act in ways they interpreted as contrary to these ideals.⁴¹ The military tended to dislike attempts by presidents to create parallel armed organizations (e.g., presidential guards or militias) or to politicize and interfere in military promotions. They were also keen on maintaining order, which was interpreted in various ways but often meant that officers saw governments unable to fulfill this objective as problematic for their own institution.

After a coup, military officers often excused their actions by highlighting the need to restore order to the nation and to protect the fatherland from the threat of extreme or violent groups. The threat posed by guerrillas, which represented a serious challenge to many governments from the 1960s to the 1980s, worked to destabilize many political regimes in Central and South America. For instance, when the Argentine military took control of the government in March of 1976, they publicly justified their intervention by claiming that they would end the prevailing climate of ungovernability and corruption as well as the threat of violent subversive groups. In reality, they ushered a new era of state-led violence and widespread human rights violations.

Dominant-class interests cannot adequately explain military interventions. In some cases, military coups coincided with the conservative interests of the wealthy classes but, on other occasions, they put in place left-leaning policy programs. An example of the former is the coup of 1954 in Guatemala, which deposed the progressive government of Jacobo Arbenz and led to a military government that proceeded to reverse various recently enacted social policies. An example of the latter type of coup is the intervention led by General Juan Velasco in Peru in 1968, which deposed the centrist government of Fernando Belaúnde Terry and instituted a leftist military dictatorship.

Military coups have deposed not only democratic governments but often authoritarian governments as well. Civilian elites have frequently conspired with military officers to depose sitting governments. This was the case, for example, with the military coup of 1958 in Venezuela, when a civilian–military movement overthrew the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez and later called for democratic elections.

On some occasions, **political elites** helped to usher in transitions to democracy; on others, they knocked on the barrack's door, seeking to depose elected governments. Political elites who saw democratization as contrary to their interests often worked to prevent it. In a study about democratic breakdown in Latin America during the 1970s, political scientist Nancy Bermeo emphasized the choices of political elites in bringing about the fall of democracy.⁴² She underlined how errors of perception made conservative and leftist elites overestimate the threat and strength of their respective enemies and misinterpret citizens' preferences, which remained (for the most part) supportive of democracy.

The influence of the preferences of political elites was also emphasized in the work of Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán.⁴³ The authors argued that policy preferences and beliefs about the desirability of democracy or dictatorship determine the actions of political elites. To study their effect on the stability of political regimes, they built a measure to capture the preferences of key political actors. Then, they used statistics to examine its effect on democratic stability in Latin America. Results showed that when key political actors had normative preferences favorable to democracy, the likelihood of competitive politics increased and the likelihood of reverting to authoritarianism decreased.

The International Context

Domestic politics are not immune to the international context. Regime change has been linked to significant international events as well as to the actions of major powers. The fact that regime transitions have come in waves and that democracies and dictatorships are usually regionally clustered hint at the importance of non-domestic factors.

Great powers can have a significant influence over other countries in their sphere of influence. During the Cold War era, the two major world powers were the United States and the Soviet Union. Many countries in Eastern Europe were under the constant threat of Soviet intervention, and attempts to move away from communism and toward democracy were met with military interventions (e.g., in Hungary and Czechoslovakia), violent repression, and the imprisonment of significant numbers of people.

The major power influencing politics in Latin America during this period was the United States. Driven by a Cold War mentality, governments in the United States tended to perceive left-leaning governments in Latin America as a potential security problem. Military governments, in contrast, were often (but not always) perceived to be more reliable allies. Political instability and the threat of leftist guerrillas worried policymakers in the United States. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962, which revealed the intention of the Cuban government to deploy Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba, fueled the idea that the United States should actively intervene in the region to prevent further threats to its national security. However, policymakers often overreacted to the threat of communism, which led them to undermine democratic governments and support dictatorial regimes that committed widespread human rights abuses.

One well-known intervention was the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)–orchestrated coup that took place in Guatemala in 1954, which deposed the left-leaning government of Jacobo Arbenz and installed a military dictatorship led by Carlos Castillo Armas. The operation to depose Arbenz was carried out during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who thought the Guatemalan government to be influenced by communists. The military operation, which also received the support

of the right-wing dictators of Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, led to the establishment of a violent dictatorship and triggered a civil war that would last until the 1990s.

In a cross-national study using data covering two centuries, Carles Boix examined how the structure of the international system affected the strategies of pro-authoritarian and pro-democratic domestic factions.⁴⁴ He found that the international system was detrimental to democracy during the Cold War era (1948–1990): Being in an alliance with the Soviet Union lessened the chances of a democratic transition, and being in an alliance with the United States made democratic breakdowns more likely. However, being allied with the United States at a time other than the Cold War appears to have had a favorable effect on democracy.

International organizations can also have a significant effect on the promotion of democracy. The Organization of American States (OAS) has played an active role in the promotion of democracy in Latin America since the last wave of democratization. For example, in the 1990s, it worked to prevent the breakdown of democracy (or semi-democracy) in Guatemala and Paraguay.

In September of 2001, the general assembly of the OAS adopted the Inter-American Democratic Charter. This binding charter states that governments have an obligation to promote and defend democracy. It was invoked for the first time in April of 2002 after an attempted coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. However, Chávez was returned to power soon after and before the OAS' general assembly was convened. The second time the charter was invoked was in June of 2009, when a coup deposed Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. The OAS suspended Honduras from the organization and many Latin American and European countries withdrew their ambassadors from the country.

The stability of democracy may also be affected by the regional context. A common view holds that democracy is contagious. Academics tend to refer to this phenomenon as the “diffusion” of democracy. This perspective stems from the idea that there are connections among countries that facilitate the flow of information that affects democratic (and authoritarian) trends. Academics disagree about whether the effects of democratic diffusion operate primarily through political elites or public opinion, but the evidence suggests that there are clear temporal and spatial effects associated with the spread of democracy. For instance, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington identified three waves of democracy around the world: The first began in the early 19th century with the expansion of the right to vote to a large portion of the male population in the United States; the second began after the end of World War II; and the third wave began in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe.⁴⁵ In Figure 2.2, shown in the first part of this chapter, we can observe how the number of democracies in Latin America increased during the second and third waves identified by Huntington.

Conclusions

When the 20th century began, Latin America lacked democratic regimes. While authoritarianism prevailed for most of the prior century, today, most countries in the region enjoy democratic governments. The move toward democracy was difficult, and many countries experienced significant reversals that delayed the establishment of competitive elections. But overall, the region has made a significant shift away from authoritarianism, which has brought not only free and fair elections but also a much greater respect for human rights.

This chapter focused our attention on the type of political regimes that have been prevalent in Latin America for over a century. It began with a review of the alternative definitions of democracy, including the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. Examples from various classifications helped to illuminate long-term trends across the region and the rationale behind coding schemes that assign countries to one category or another. The chapter also discussed the classification of some controversial cases and reviewed some significant differences between authoritarian regimes.

Transitions from authoritarianism to democracy and the breakdown of democratic regimes have attracted significant attention among academics and policymakers. The second part of the chapter looked at five different factors that are commonly associated with regime transition. First, it examined arguments linking higher levels of economic development to democracy and economic crises with regime instability. Second, it reviewed the connection between political institutions, particularly executive powers, and democratic breakdown. Third, the chapter went over the connection between two aspects of political culture, religion and education, and democracy. Next, it examined the impact of political elites on democratic stability. This included a discussion of the role of the military, which was a significant source of democratic instability throughout the 20th century. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the effect of the international context. Some of the issues introduced in this chapter, such as the importance of political institutions, political culture, and U.S.–Latin American relations, will be addressed in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

Key Terms

Authoritarianism 36

Contested elections 37

Democracy 35

Military coup 47

Military regime 45

Personalist regime 47

Political culture 36

Political elites 60

Political institutions 53

Regime transitions 53

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Web Resources

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The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index: <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

Freedom House: <https://freedomhouse.org/>