

Regime Legacies, Military Coups and the Institutional Route to Dictatorship: Evidence from Latin America

Latin America's third wave of democratization coincided with a remarkable shift in the ways in which democratic breakdown and decay materialize. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, several of the region's democracies fell prey to military coups and the subsequent imposition of outright dictatorship. But by the time that the Third Wave reached its crest in Latin America in the late 1990s, the most viable threats against democracy had taken the form of opposition groups that embark upon the electoral and parliamentary routes to dictatorship. The rise to power of Fujimori in Peru, Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador exemplifies the efficacy of such endeavors, where radical political actors exploit democratic institutions before subverting them. Bolsonaro's election to the presidency in Brazil in 2018 reveals that the institutional path to dictatorship continues to pose its looming threat. This also holds across the globe. To be sure, today's democracies remain vulnerable to military coups, which are more often than not followed by authoritarian rule, albeit less so in the post-Cold War era.¹ But as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) note, the electoral path to dictatorship has become the modal form of authoritarian backsliding around the world.

Yet perhaps more puzzling than the ascendancy of the institutional route to dictatorship is the sharp contrast between the regimes of Latin America's Third Wave era and those of its more distant past. This contrast is particularly pronounced within countries. For instance, as the twentieth century drew to a close, Colombia and Venezuela had been continuously governed through competitive elections for more than four decades, whereas Chile and Uruguay had by that time each suffered through more than a decade of authoritarian rule. But it is the former pair of countries that are still making international headlines about rampant political violence and faltering democratic institutions, while the latter two countries have been held up as the poster children for successful democratization in the region.

By these accounts, the Latin American experience thus begs three vexing questions: (1) what explains the rise and resilience of democracy's adversaries in the region's longstanding democracies?; (2) what accounts for the emergence of the institutional route to dictatorship as the predominant mode of authoritarian reversals?; and (3) do instances of successful democratization occur despite lengthy experiences with dictatorship, or because of them?

This proposed study addresses these questions by extending my research about *regime legacies*, which refer to the lasting impact of past instances of democracy and dictatorship. Its basic undercurrent holds that over time democracy creates and empowers its own adversaries, whereas authoritarian regimes leave behind legacies that are conducive to the democratic resolution of domestic political conflict. First, by proliferating and strengthening organized interests, the historically accumulated 'stock' of prior democratic experiences, which I refer to as the *stock of democracy*, augments the stakes and intensity of the competition for political power.² By doing so, it creates a political environment that encourages all major domestic political actors, including the government, the military and opposition groups, to *radicalize*,

¹Marinov and Goemans 2014; Bell 2016.

²Gerring et al. 2005.

understood as the adoption of an intransigent and impatient approach to political conflict. As Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013b) show, this radicalization diminishes the prospects of successful democratization. In a similar vein, and following Bernhard and Karakoç (2007), Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017), Albertus and Menaldo (2018) and others, I focus on the legacies left behind by the dictatorships of the past, rather than the immediate effects of authoritarian rule. Accordingly, I argue that extensive experiences with authoritarianism, which amount to a greater *stock of dictatorship*, eliminate and weaken opposition groups. By doing so, the stock of dictatorship mitigates the degree of political competition, deradicalizes all major political actors, and strengthens their commitment to democracy.

In a separate **working paper**, I have tested the implications of my core argument for the proliferation, empowerment and radicalization of non-state groups in Latin America. This research plan proposes to incorporate the attitudes and behavior of Latin American governments and military actors as additional testing grounds for my theory. As such, two key empirical tasks remain that structure my research plans for this project.

First, I plan to estimate the effects of the stock of democracy and the stock of dictatorship upon the breakdown of democracy and the endurance of dictatorship as mediated through their effects upon the radicalism of governments. Using a global sample covering the years 1900-2016, I start by uncovering the empirical associations between the regime stock variables and the survival of democracy and dictatorship. I can readily do so by drawing upon my latent class analysis (LCA) measurement models, which operationalize a three-type political regime typology using several democracy indicators of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset.³ I will subsequently confine the empirical analysis to 343 presidential administrations in Latin America (1944-2010) to determine whether these patterns are driven by the proposed mechanism of government radicalization, which I measure using the political actor dataset developed by Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013a).

Second, I plan to investigate the regime legacy effects upon the occurrence of military coups as mediated through their effects upon the radicalization of the military. After estimating the overall effects of the stock of democracy and the stock of dictatorship upon the outbreak of military coups, which I measure using the global dataset (1950-2010) developed by Powell and Thyne (2011), I narrow down the scope of the empirical analysis to Latin America in order to test the proposed mechanism of the radicalization of the military, which I measure across 237 presidential administrations included in the political actor dataset.

To the extent that the empirical evidence validates my claims, the three research questions posed above can be answered as follows. First, the persistence of threats against democracy is driven by the persistence of democracy itself. As democracy endures, its stock accumulates, thereby widening the field of powerful adversaries of democracy. Second, by enhancing their organizational resources, this accumulated stock of democracy also strengthens their electoral prospects. This encourages democracy's adversaries to exploit electoral and legislative institutions, and further diminishes the relative appeal of costly military coups. Third, I contend that by deradicalizing the government and the military, an extensive history of dictatorship creates the conditions that are conducive to successful democratization.

³Coppedge et al. 2017.

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