

UC Berkeley
CLACS Working Papers

Title

Cycles of Electoral Democracy in Latin America, 1900-2000

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5w21n8kd>

Author

Smith, Peter

Publication Date

2004-01-02

Center for Latin American Studies
University of California, Berkeley



Cycles of Electoral Democracy in
Latin America, 1900-2000

Peter Smith

Professor of Political Science,
University of California, San Diego
Visiting Scholar, Center for Latin American Studies,
University of California, Berkeley

January 2004
Paper No. 6

The Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at the University of California, Berkeley publishes working papers and policy papers relating to Latin America. This series represents the diverse and coordinated activities of faculty and affiliated scholars at CLAS. You may order papers from us by sending a check or money order for US \$5.00 made out to "UC Regents" along with the paper title and number to:

Working Papers Series
Center for Latin American Studies
University of California, Berkeley
2334 Bowditch Street
Berkeley, CA 94720

Cycles of Electoral Democracy in Latin America, 1900-2000

Peter Smith

Professor of Political Science,
University of California, San Diego
Visiting Scholar, Center for Latin American Studies,
University of California, Berkeley

January 2004
Paper No. 6

* This paper is adapted from my forthcoming book *Democracy in Latin America: Patterns and Prospects* (Oxford University Press). I wish to thank Scott Bailey, Michael Hawes, and Kati Suominen for their superb work as research assistants.

CONTENTS

1. CYCLES AND TRENDS.....	2
2. DEMOCRATIC DOMINOES?.....	13
3. LESSONS OVER TIME: PRIOR EXPERIENCE.....	15
SUBREGIONAL VARIATIONS	18
4. DEMOCRACY AND INSTABILITY	21
5. GLOBAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES.....	25
APPENDIX: CLASSIFICATION OF ELECTORAL REGIMES, 1900-2000	31

Democracy has faced turbulent times in Latin America. For generations the region was regarded as the province of domineering military tyrants. Civilian reformers would enter the fray, only to have their mandates interrupted by generals from the barracks. Democracy was viewed as fragile, temporary, superficial in content. Over the past quarter-century or so, however, democracy appears to have taken root in the region. Many observers regard this development as a sign of political maturation, the idea being that citizens of the region have (finally!) passed from adolescence to adulthood; others regard it as the inexorable and benevolent result of economic liberalization and free trade; still others credit the influence and example of the United States. The broad implication is that democracy now is vibrant, resilient, and improving with the passage of time.

Which viewpoint is correct? To approach the question, this article explores the incidence and durability of electoral democracy in Latin America during the course of the twentieth century. The analysis traces the timing and spread of democratization, tests some key hypotheses about explanatory factors, examines the durability of democracy within the region, and locates Latin America's patterns of political change within a broad global context. In contrast to most studies, which limit their attention to the last 30-35 years, this investigation focuses on the hundred-year span from 1900 through 2000. This makes it possible to detect long-term transformations and to place recent developments within appropriate historical perspective.

1. CYCLES AND TRENDS

As Latin America prepared to enter the twentieth century, it exhibited three distinct forms of political rule. One was *caudillismo*, the system through which military or paramilitary strongmen fought with each other in order to assert authority over the nation (or local region) and to enjoy the spoils of victory. These were raw struggles for power: rules of engagement were primitive, and governments rose and fell with steady regularity. A second pattern took the form of “integrating dictatorships”—centralizing dictatorships that sought to curtail the centripetal tendencies of *caudillismo* and to establish the hegemony of the national state. Examples ranged from Diego Portales in Chile to Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina to Porfirio Díaz in Mexico. Such rulers often came from the ranks of the military and, once in power, they always relied on armed forces to uphold their rule.

A third variation might be called “competitive oligarchy” or “oligarchic republicanism.” Regimes of this kind made use of regular elections for political office, and they usually complied with formal constitutional procedure. At the same time, they restricted effective competition to factions of the ruling elite. (This was accomplished through sharp restrictions on suffrage and through formidable eligibility requirements for candidates.) In effect, the system established a non-violent means for settling disputes among contending factions of dominant elites. It was also a means of wresting power away from *caudillos* and/or military dictators. Though it boasted a democratic façade, it had little to do with rule by the people—on the contrary, it consecrated domination by the few. And in relations between elites and masses, competitive oligarchy showed precious little respect for the rule of law: in situations

of class conflict, raw power prevailed.¹ This kind of regime typically flourished in societies with expansive gaps between elites and popular masses.

How and where did electoral democracy emerge in Latin America, and how has it evolved over time? The response to these questions involves a systematic survey of 19 countries from 1900 through 2000. As a group, these countries comprise what is commonly viewed as “Latin America,” stretching from the Rio Grande to the Tierra del Fuego—from Mexico to the southern tip of Argentina and Chile, including Brazil and nations of the Andes. Included are Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which occupy the island of Hispaniola. Excluded are English- and Dutch-speaking islands of the Caribbean, as well as Surinam, Guyana, French Guiana, and Belize.² Also omitted is Cuba—not for cultural or geographical reasons, but because it has had no meaningful experience with electoral democracy. By the year 2000, the total population of these 19 countries was approaching 500 million.

To trace political change over time, each year for each country has been placed into one of four categories:

- “democratic” when national leaders acquired or held office as a result of free and fair elections—that is, when there was open competition for support among a substantial portion of the adult population;
- “semi-democratic” under leaders who came to power through elections that were

¹ Terminology here is not felicitous. This kind of regime could be referred to as “oligarchic constitutionalism,” “oligarchic contestation,” “oligarchic electoralism,” or even—stretching categories—as “oligarchic democracy.”

² Additional reasons for exclusion are size, since most of these countries are very small; colonial legacy, since British and other traditions differed markedly from those of Spain and Portugal; and political experience, since many Caribbean countries acquired independence only in the 1960s and 70s.

free but not fair—where only one candidate had any reasonable prospect of winning, or when elected leaders were obliged to share effective power with or cede it to non-elected groups (such as landowners or the military);

- “oligarchic” when electoral competition was free and/or fair but limited to dominant elites, with suffrage restricted to a very small proportion of the adult population; and
- “non-democratic” or autocratic at all other times, or during years of military coups.

In practice, the non-democratic rubric is a residual category. It could include periods of chronic instability, caudillo politics, dictatorial rule, or military occupation by a foreign power. Years of military coups are coded as non-democratic, even if there might have been semi-democratic or democratic activity during other parts of the year. (See the Appendix for a classification of 1,919 country-years from 1900 through 2000.)

This analysis focuses exclusively on the *electoral* component of political democracy. It does not deal with the *quality* of democratic life—on the protection of citizens’ freedoms and rights—or with the policy *performance* of democratic regimes. Those are critical issues that form a central part of my larger study, still in progress, which argues that the most prevalent political form in contemporary Latin America consists of “illiberal democracy.”³ As part of that overall effort, this paper assesses and explores the nature of elections.

Criteria for classification are relative, not absolute. They attempt to capture standards of

the time. One conspicuous problem concerns disenfranchisement of women. Denial of the vote to more than half the adult population is patently undemocratic; according to fundamental principles, any regime lacking female suffrage should be classified as non-democratic or authoritarian. Yet it is worth noting that the United States, commonly regarded as “democratic” by the 1820s, did not grant suffrage to women until 1920; within this historical context, Latin American countries with free and fair elections (and fairly broad voting rights for adult males) would be considered “democratic” too. And in fact, Latin America gradually extended the vote to women in succeeding decades.⁴

Of necessity, application of these categories has been somewhat subjective. Chile, for example, was treated as a “competitive oligarchy” under the “parliamentary republic” that lasted from 1891 to 1923. It was classified as non-democratic during a series of coups and dictatorial interludes that stretched from 1924 to 1932. With the onset of free and fair elections, the system became an electoral democracy from 1933 through 1972. The military coup of 1973 and ensuing dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet placed the country under authoritarian rule through 1988. From 1989 through 2000—and beyond, as of this writing—Chile managed to restore its democratic traditions.

The “semi-democratic” category is perhaps the most elusive. Argentina provides a case in point. Under the aristocratic “Generation of 1880,” Argentina displayed a strong and confident system of oligarchic competition through the year 1915. Implementation of a major

³ See Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997): 22-43.

⁴ Accordingly, the basic criterion for electoral participation was effective extension of the suffrage to at least one-half the adult male citizens. In many cases this required removal of literacy requirements.

reform led to free and fair elections in 1916—marked by the victory of the opposition Radical Party—and the installation of a democratic regime that was overthrown by a military coup in 1930. A dictatorial interlude then gave way to more than a decade of “patriotic fraud,” under which elections were explicitly understood to be free but not fair: the official candidate was always destined to win, so the 1932-42 period could be unambiguously scored as “semi-democratic.” After another military coup in 1943, Juan Domingo Perón triumphed in elections of 1946. His election to a second term was tightly controlled, however, so the 1951-54 phase was coded as semi-democratic. After another military intervention in 1955, elections were reinstated from 1958 through 1965—but Peronists were prohibited from either running or winning, so this period too was classified as semi-democratic (except for 1962, when a non-democratic military coup prevented a Peronist victory in elections). Thereafter Argentina endured military dictatorship from 1966 through 1972, a brief period of open democracy from 1973 through 1975, a brutally repressive military regime from 1976 through 1982—and then, from 1983 through to the end of the century, an extended period of electoral democracy.

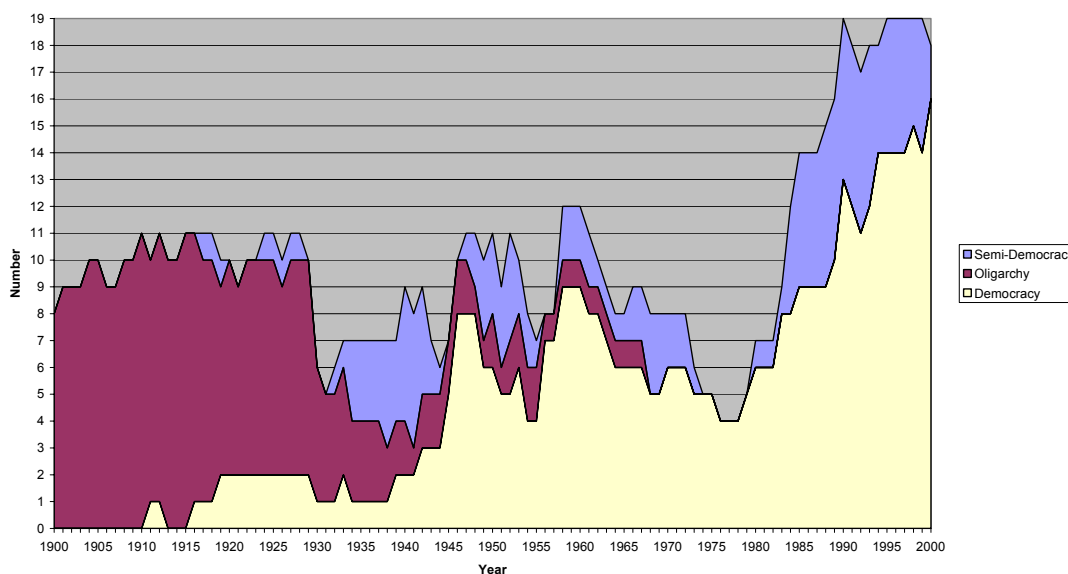
Mexico offers still another illustration. The twentieth century opened under the rule of Porfirio Díaz, an iron-fisted dictator who dominated the country’s politics from 1876 until his overthrow in 1911. There followed, that same year, relatively free elections that gave the presidency to Francisco Madero (since remembered as “the apostle of Mexican democracy”). Madero was ousted (and murdered) in a military coup in 1913. Years of revolutionary fighting led to alternation of military domination with a “semi-democratic” system that was interrupted by an assassination in 1920. In 1929, after yet another assassination, the political

elite created a one-party system that lasted until the end of the century. From that point forward there were regular elections—but they were neither free nor fair. It was a foregone conclusion that the official candidate would win; in 1976, for example, the ruling party's presidential nominee ran unopposed. This situation changed when a left-wing splinter group broke off from the dominant party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI) and ran a strong campaign in the late 1980s—and might even have won, but was denied victory. The election of 1988 was free, in other words, but not fair. It was not until the year 2000 that Mexico had a genuinely free and fair presidential election, one that an opposition candidate could—and did—win.

To illustrate long-term patterns for the region as a whole, Figure 1 plots the incidence of democratic, semi-democratic, and oligarchic regimes for Latin America from 1900 through 2000: the vertical axis measures the number of countries with each regime type, and the horizontal axis represents year-by-year change over time.⁵

Over the span of the century, Figure 1 reveals a remarkable progression for electoral democracy in Latin America. Around 1900 there were no democracies anywhere in the region; by the year 2000 the vast majority of countries were holding free and fair elections. Democracy was on the rise. The process was not predetermined, inexorable, irreversible, unchangeable—nor permanent. But it persisted over time, and it constitutes a fundamental fact.

⁵ Weighting the data by population size does not alter the overall picture; differences in the resulting curve are due largely to the influence of Brazil.

Figure 1: Cycles of Political Change in Latin America, 1900-2000

Within this pattern, the figure circumscribes three broad periods or “cycles” of democratic change. The first cycle stretches from 1900 approximately through 1939, and it was dominated by oligarchic competition. At its peak, around and after 1910, intra-oligarchic elections held sway in more than half the countries of Latin America—and in such influential nations as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru. During this first cycle there were also some signs of emergent democracy—very briefly in Mexico (1911-12) and more durably in Argentina (1916-29) and in Uruguay (1919-33). By the early 1930s Chile also qualified as an electoral democracy. In general, however, this first phase was not a time of democratic governance; it was an era of oligarchic domination through electoral means.

Second is a cycle between 1940 and 1977 that is marked by the partial rise and near-complete demise of electoral democracy. To be precise, the democratic curve within this period is M-shaped. The data reveal a sharp upturn in democratic politics coinciding with end

of World War II—in Guatemala (1945), Peru (1945), Argentina (1946), Brazil (1946), Venezuela (1946), and Ecuador (1948)—in addition to pre-existing democracies in Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia (dating from 1942). There was a temporary downturn in the early 1950s, largely as a result of military coups, followed by a fairly swift recovery. By 1960, the peak year within this period, nine countries of Latin America were electoral democracies; three others were semi-democracies, bringing the total up to twelve (63 percent of countries of the region). Thereafter, the remainder of the 1960s and the early 1970s bore witness to an escalating pattern of increasingly brutal and invasive military interventions—most notably in Brazil (1964), Argentina (1966 and 1976), and Chile and Uruguay (both 1973). By the mid-1970s there were only four democracies throughout the region—in Colombia, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic.

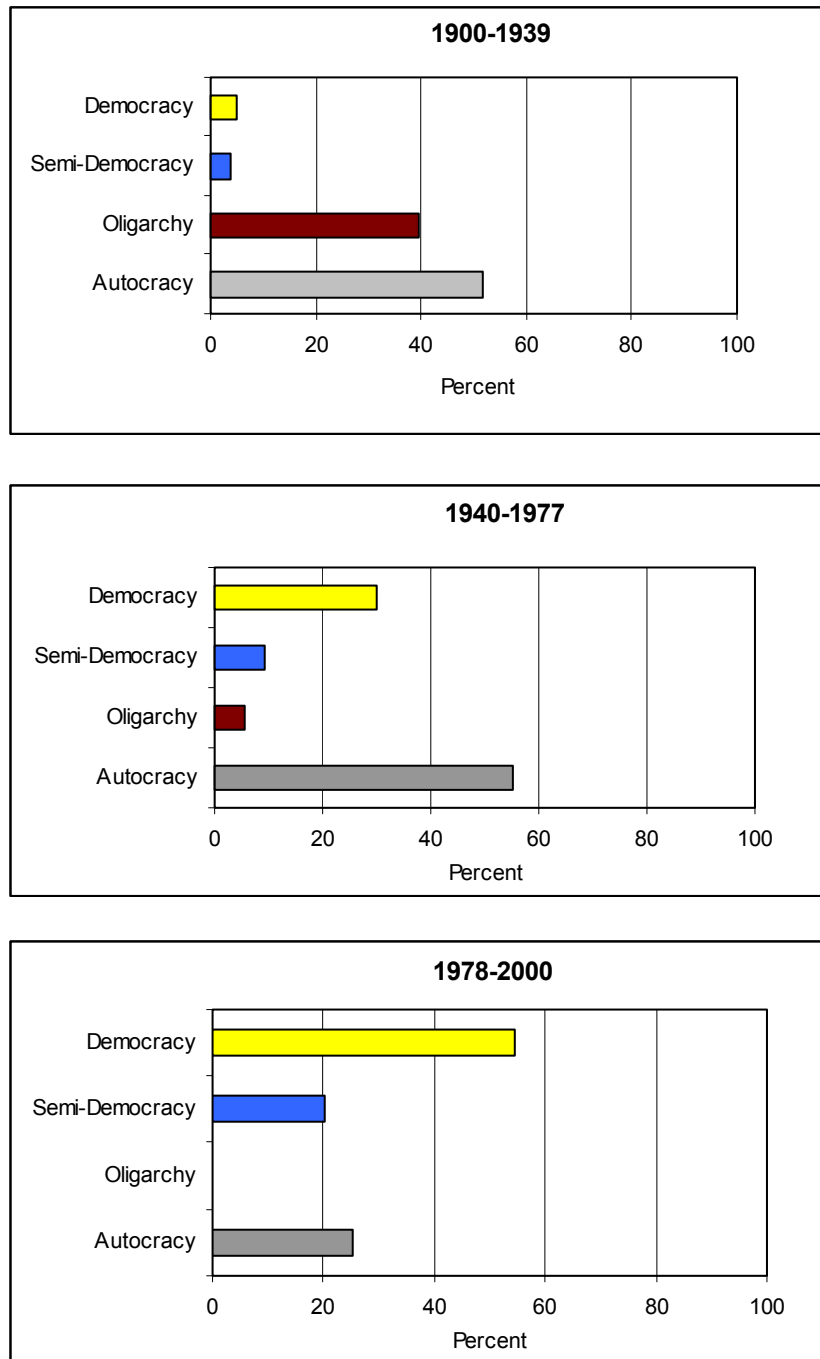
Under these unlikely circumstances a third cycle began in the late 1970s, continued through the 1980s, and crested in the late 1990s. By 1998 there were fifteen electoral democracies, four semi-democracies—and no autocratic regimes. And by the year 2000, fifteen nations of Latin America—80 percent of the total—could boast democratic electoral regimes. At the end of the twentieth century nearly 90 percent of the people of Latin America were enjoying the fruits of electoral democracy.

Figure 1 yields additional insights. One concerns the eclipse of oligarchic regimes and the rise of mass politics. As evinced by a sharp decline in the number of oligarchic arrangements around 1930, the onset of the Depression decimated the export-import model of economic development and led to the widespread displacement of traditional elites by military dictatorships. By the early 1950s systems of intra-oligarchic competition remained

only in Honduras and Panama. Throughout the rest of the region, socio-economic development was leading to the rise of middle classes and, in larger countries, to the creation of mass-based parties and organizations, including labor unions. Such emerging sectors tended to advocate electoral reform—partly out of democratic conviction, and partly because it would enhance their prospects for gaining access to power. These developments would bring permanent change to Latin America’s politics. (Among other things, they would help explain the increasing reliance on semi-democratic regimes, as middle- and upper-class leaders took steps to prevent working-class movements and radical parties from triumph in the electoral process.)

A second finding relates to the predominance of non-democratic or autocratic politics, represented by the shaded upper portions of Figure 1. Of all the 1,919 country-years from 1900 through 2000, the non-democratic category accounts for 47 percent—nearly one-half the total. This compares with 26 percent for electoral democracy, 10 percent for semi-democracy, and 18 percent for competitive oligarchy (with allowances for rounding). This reveals another fundamental fact: By quite a wide margin, the most frequent form of political rule in twentieth-century Latin America was autocracy.

There was, of course, significant change over time. To emphasize the point, Figure 2 presents changing distributions of country-years in three summary periods: 1900-39, 1940-77, and 1978-2000. Non-democratic rule prevailed just about half the time during the initial phase of the century (52 percent), slightly more than that during the middle period (55 percent)—and then it dropped to 24 percent throughout the final phase. Oligarchic regimes were widely prevalent in 1900-39, about 40 percent of the time, and then dropped almost out

Figure 2: Changing Incidence of Political Regimes, 1900-2000

of sight—falling to 6 percent in 1940-77 and disappearing altogether by the final period. In contrast, the relative incidence of democracy climbed steadily and strongly, from 5 percent in

the initial phase to 30 percent in the second phase to 55 percent in the third and final phase. Semi-democracy followed a similar path, but to a lesser degree, increasing from 4 percent to 9 percent to 20 percent.

Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 serve to dispel one common notion—the idea that Latin American culture is inherently undemocratic, or even anti-democratic, and that peoples of the region are simply unsuited for political democracy. Undemocratic cultural traits have variously been attributed to climatic conditions (since democracy can't flourish in the tropics), racial and ethnic legacies (especially among indigenous civilizations), the passions of Latin temperaments (which impede rational discourse), and, of course, the nefarious influence of the Roman Catholic Church (which peddles ignorance and superstition). If these pathologies were correct, there should never have been sustained experiments in political democracy anywhere in Latin America at any time. Instead the data clearly show earnest (and temporarily successful) efforts to install democratic politics as far back as the 1910s.

Further, the data reveal that the most recent democratic wave cannot be attributed to the ending of the Cold War. The onset of current electoral democracy in Latin America began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, well before 1989 or 1990, and therefore could not have been due to the collapse of socialism or of the Berlin Wall. To be sure, the U.S.-Soviet rivalry exerted a powerful negative influence on prospects for democracy from the 1940s through the 1980s. Termination of the Cold War thus removed a major obstacle to democratic change, but did not cause it to occur. Other factors were clearly at work.

2. DEMOCRATIC DOMINOES?

Upon inspection, Figure 1 suggests the possible existence of a regional or “domino” effect, a process of accumulation that suggests the possible presence of common causal factors and/or mutual influences. Does there exist such a trend?

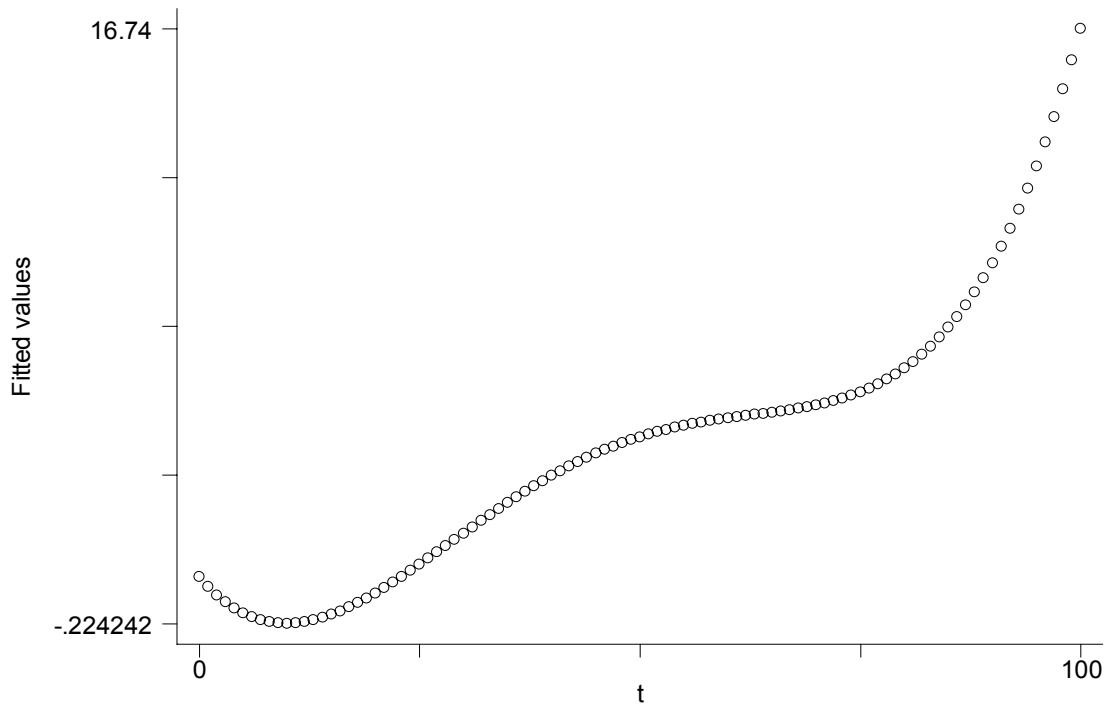
To unravel this puzzle, Figure 3 displays the underlying pattern or “path” of democratic change in Latin America as determined through time-series regression analysis. The resulting curves show a clear and distinctive shape. There were halting efforts at first, marked by the slight downturn early in the century; then came a modest but steady upward rise, peaking at the midpoint and flattening out thereafter; and, finally, there was a sharp upturn near the end.⁶ A regional pattern was plainly at work.

Why would this be so? It would be overly mechanistic to claim that the trend is self-generating—that the incidence of democracy in any given year is a function of the incidence of democracy in the previous year. This kind of assumption does not fare well in the uncertain world of politics. Nor does it spell out causal processes. A more persuasive interpretation is that there may well have existed a process of diffusion, a demonstration effect in which the rise (or fall) of democracy in one country fostered similar outcomes in nearby or neighboring nations. This is especially plausible in societies with high levels of

⁶ The curve represents the number of Latin America countries that are “predicted” or “expected” to be democratic as a function of change over time. More precisely, the model correlates the observed incidence of electoral democracies with the variable t , for time, with 1900 recoded as zero. The equation thus takes the form of:

$$\text{Expected } N \text{ democracies} = a + b_1t + b_2t^2 + b_3t^3 + b_4t^4$$

The R^2 value comes to .878, and the adjusted R^2 is .873. The negative predicted value early in the century is a statistical artifact.

Figure 3: The Path of Democratic Change, 1900-2000

awareness of regional phenomena. Thus opposition groups in Country X could draw moral and material sustenance from the downfall of a dictatorship in Country Y. It could convince them that victory is possible, inspire them to persist in their struggle, and help expand their base of support. Brazilian demands for direct elections in the latter 1980s no doubt drew inspiration from the Argentine elections of the early 1980s, for instance, and the overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua gave heart to rebels in El Salvador.

Similarly, military rulers could draw lessons from developments in nearby countries. They were especially mindful of the terms under which military governments leave office in other countries: if they could find ways to protect themselves and their interests once they are back in the barracks, it might be entirely acceptable to take leave of presidential palaces. And as Paul W. Drake has observed, “the authoritarian forces learned from each toppling domino

that a transition to an elected government did not necessarily usher in communism, populism, economic disaster, social chaos, the destruction of the military, or the reduction of national security. For many despots, the risks and costs of authoritarianism soon surpassed those of democratization.”⁷

Yet another possibility is that countries were subject to common influences and causal factors. These forces were more likely to be external than internal, in view of the broad diversity in the domestic composition of Latin American societies. They could be intellectual or ideological, including the rise (and demise) of Marxist theory and a growing conviction that electoral democracy was more promising than violent revolution. They could be economic, especially for countries so dependent on international trade and transnational capital. And they could be political—ranging from unilateral impositions by the United States to such momentous events as the conclusion of the Cold War.

3. LESSONS OVER TIME: PRIOR EXPERIENCE

An alternative approach to explaining the incidence of democracy rests on historical experience. One of the most common theorems in political science holds that countries with prior democratic experience are more likely to become democratic than countries without such experience. In contrast to the idea of regional contagion, which stresses the role of simultaneous developments in neighboring countries, this hypothesis focuses on the role of historical experience within individual countries.

⁷ Paul W. Drake, “The International Causes of Democratization, 1974-1990,” in Paul W. Drake and Mathew D. McCubbins, eds., *The Origins of Liberty: Political and Economic Liberalization in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 85-86.

As given, of course, the proposition begs a crucial question: How to initiate democracy in the first place? How do countries acquire “prior” experience? Moreover, the thesis rests on a two-fold assumption: that prior democratic experience will put reinstatement of democracy at or near the top of the societal agenda, and that there will be a collective popular nostalgia for the democratic age. For this reason, though, it is of fundamental importance to consider the *qualities* of previous democratic experiments. If the experiences were positive, it seems likely that nostalgia would exist—but what if they were negative?

In its most optimistic form, the hypothesis stipulates that countries should be able to achieve stable democracy on the basis of one previous democratic experience. Countries with repeated prior experiences are clearly having difficulty with democracy. Countries with no prior experience will not have had the opportunity to absorb important lessons.

Table 1 sets out to test this broad idea. For nations involved in each of the three historical cycles of electoral democratization in Latin America, it summarizes information on prior experience—year of initiation, number of experiences, and total duration of experiences—together with date of initiation of the current or most recent democratic experience.

As might be expected, the results are somewhat ambiguous. Several of the most durable democracies have only one prior experience: Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, and, somewhat surprisingly, the Dominican Republic. Uruguay had two prior experiences. Only Costa Rica achieved a long-lasting democracy with no prior democratic episode.

Intermediate cases are indeterminate. Such countries as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru have numerous prior democratic episodes and fairly extensive prior experience (an

average of more than 16 years per country). They contradict the prior-experience hypothesis by having multiple prior episodes and by suffering repeated meltdowns. Yet they were democratic at some point in the 1990s.

Table 1: Historical Experience with Electoral Democracy, 1900-2000

	Year of Initiation	Prior Experience		Current/ Most Recent Years*
		N Spells	N Years	
Cycle I (1900-1939):				
Argentina	1916	3	22	1983-
Chile	1933	1	40	1989-
Mexico	1911	1	2	2000-
Uruguay	1919	2	49	1985-
Cycle II (1940-1977):				
Bolivia	1956	1	8	1983-
Brazil	1946	2	16	1990-
Colombia	1942	1	7	1958-
Costa Rica		-----		1953-
Dominican Republic	1962	1	1	1970-
Ecuador	1948	1	13	1979-95
Guatemala	1945	1	9	1996-
Peru	1945	3	14	1980-91
Venezuela	1945	1	3	1958-98
Cycle III (1978-2000):				
El Salvador		-----		1994
Haiti	1990	-----		1990
Honduras		-----		1998
Nicaragua		-----		1990
Panama		-----		1994
Paraguay		-----		1993

*Through the year 2000.

A third category consists of recent cases of democratization with no prior experience. This includes virtually all countries whose initiation to democracy came during the third and final cycle of the century—Haiti (whose one-year experience in 1990 barely counts), Paraguay, and four countries of Central America. But for its brief flirtation with democracy

in 1911-12, Mexico would also be in this group. At this writing it is simply too early to tell how durable these governments will be.

In sum, Table 1 provides partial confirmation of the prior-experience hypothesis. Yet it also reveals potential circularity within the underlying logic. Turning the thesis on its head, one might argue that countries that are especially well suited for democracy (for whatever reasons) might need only one prior experience at most: thus Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, Costa Rica. Countries lacking such endowments (whatever they are) would endure repeated failures: thus Argentina, Brazil, Peru. Other countries would not even have the opportunity until the last decade of the century: thus Haiti, Paraguay, Honduras. In social science argot, it is entirely possible that prior democratic experience should be construed not as an independent variable (the cause of something else) but as a dependent variable (the result, not the cause).

SUBREGIONAL VARIATIONS

Extending the analysis, Figures 4 and 5 compare century-long patterns of change for two subregions—continental South America, on the one hand, and Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, on the other. As revealed by Figure 4, the picture for South America clearly reveals three distinct cycles: an oligarchic period (with modest but incipient democracies) from 1900 through the late 1930s, an M-shaped democratic curve from the mid-1940s through the mid-1970s, and a subsequent democratic surge from the late 1970s to (and beyond) the year 2000. Almost every country that turned toward electoral democracy in this final period had experience with a democratic experiment during the 1940s-70s period; they also had prior experience with oligarchic competition after the turn of the century. The only

newcomer to the process was Paraguay.

Figure 4: Cycles of Political Change by Region: South America, 1900-2000

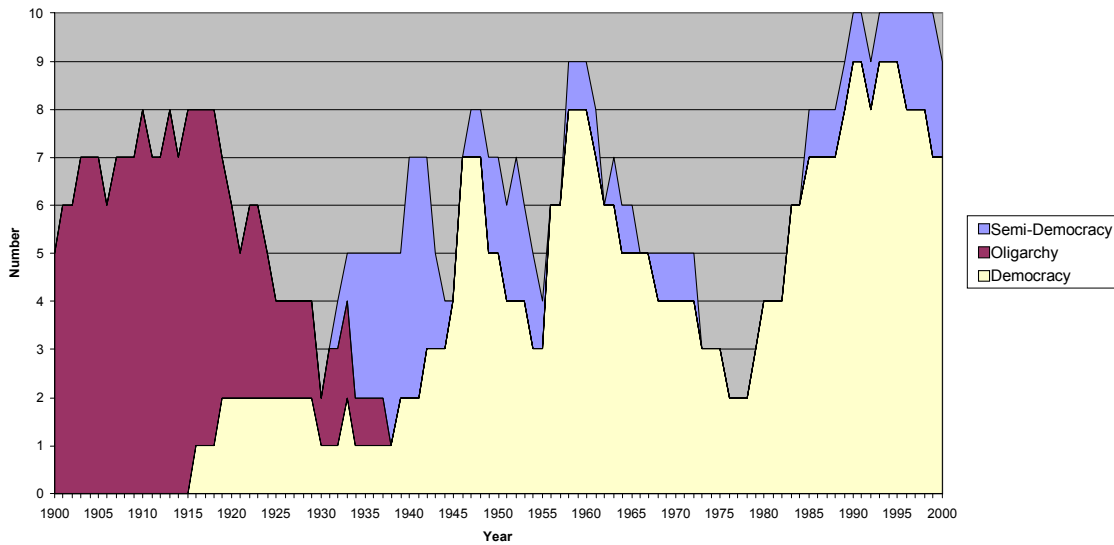
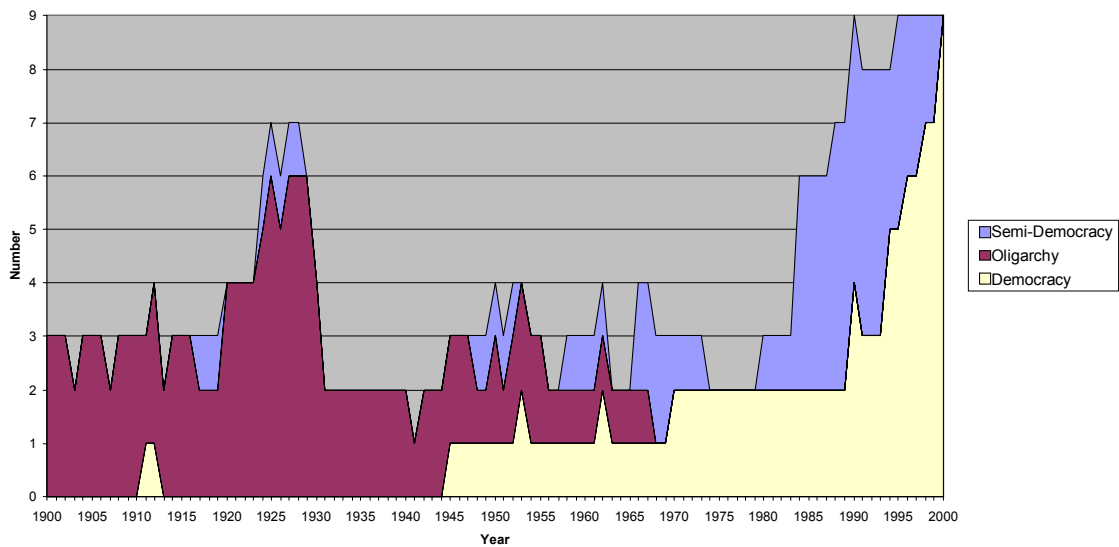


Figure 5: Cycles of Political Change by Region: Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, 1900-2000



As shown by Figure 5, Mexico plus Central America and the Caribbean present a

completely different picture. In this area, only one or two countries—Costa Rica and, alternatively, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic—could be described as democratic from the 1940s to the 1980s. Then began a sharp rise in the incidence of democracy and semi-democracy—culminating in Mexico’s free and fair election in the year 2000, by which time all nine countries were electoral democracies.⁸

Simple inspection reveals that these two subregions may have been responding to different opportunities, pressures, and incentives. One important difference stems from alteration of the international environment. As already observed, South American nations managed to achieve democracy throughout the 1980s despite continuation of the Cold War. By contrast, the ending of the Cold War helped make it possible for countries of Central America to install electoral democracies throughout the 1990s.

This analysis also yields a geopolitical observation. In the field of inter-American relations, it is axiomatic that the United States has exerted more pressure, power, and influence around the Caribbean basin—including Mexico and Central America—than in South America.⁹ And it is plainly apparent, from Figures 4 and 5, that electoral democracy started sooner and spread more widely in South America than in the Caribbean. In fact, it flourished initially in countries farthest away from the United States—Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile (with the brief exception of Mexico in 1911). Although the evidence is circumstantial, it prompts speculation that U.S. influence prevented, or at least retarded, the

⁸ Countries included in this grouping are: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

⁹ See my *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, second revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

emergence of political democracy in countries of Latin America. Alternatively, and with more confidence, one could conclude that U.S. influence failed to guarantee the occurrence of free and fair elections. With regard to democratization, Uncle Sam's backyard lagged far behind the Southern Cone and South America.

Further, Figures 4 and 5 combine to make a semantic and conceptual point: while it is possible to speak of "*redemocratization*" in South America, this term cannot apply to Mexico or Central America or the Caribbean. To be sure, Central America had substantial experience with oligarchic republicanism early in the century—especially during the 1920s—but that was long ago, and many of those regimes gave way to military dictatorship in the early 1930s. From then until the mid-1970s, this subregion had minimal acquaintance with electoral democracy. Practically speaking, most of these citizenries were coming face-to-face with democratic practice for the first time.

Clearly, nations of South America could draw upon the wellsprings of collective memory during phases of transition to democracy. Just as clearly, countries in Central America and the Caribbean cannot. This difference may exert a significant impact on processes and prospects for political consolidation.

4. DEMOCRACY AND INSTABILITY

Exploration of the prior-experience hypothesis raises questions about the notion of political stability. How long does democracy last? How durable are its forms? And have patterns of durability changed over time?

To begin the analysis, Table 2 presents data on the overall duration of political regimes

during the course of the twentieth century, from 1900 through 2000. For each regime, the table displays the number of spells (or episodes) that occurred during the course of the century, the range of duration in years, and the average (mean) duration in years.

Table 2: Duration of Electoral Regimes, 1900-2000

Regime Type	N Spells	Duration	
		Range (Years)	Average
Oligarchic	32	1-30	10.6
Democratic	38	1-48	13.0
Semi-Democratic	33	1-17	5.6
Non-Democratic	73	1-90	12.3

Results are revealing. The longest-surviving type of regime was electoral democracy, with a range of 1-48 and a mean of 13 years. The second-highest average belonged to non-democratic authoritarianism, with a mean of 12.3, followed closely by competitive oligarchy, with a mean of 10.6. Generally speaking, the life expectancy of all three regimes was about the same, around 11 to 13 years. These time spans are very short: it is to be remembered that these were changes of regime, not just changes of government. And the spans are remarkably uniform: none of these regimes was inherently more durable than the others; democracy was just as vulnerable to termination as autocracy (and vice versa). As might be expected, semi-democratic regimes—with their intermediate character—had even briefer life expectancies, with an average of less than six years.

Survival rates for democracy underwent suggestive change. Electoral democracies that emerged during the 1900-39 cycle lasted an average of 21 years. Democracies inaugurated during the 1940-77 period were substantially less durable, survived on average only 14.2 years. And although the evidence is incomplete, it appears that electoral democracies

initiated in the 1978-2000 cycle are proving to be relatively stable. By the year 2000, democratic systems of the 1980s had already lasted an average of 14.9 years, and most of them were going fairly strong. Democracy has become increasingly durable.¹⁰ This is a major shift, one that sets the third cycle apart from the previous two eras. (Yet survival was far from assured. During the 1990-2000 period alone, democratic regimes succumbed to overthrows or *auto-golpes* in Haiti, Peru, and Ecuador.)

Overall, this analysis underlines another fundamental fact: political instability was endemic in Latin America. In fact there were 155 regime changes over the 101-year period from 1900 through 2000—at a rate of 1.53 per year. Moreover, there were no fewer than 55 *major* changes of regime—oscillations between democracy and dictatorship, with or without intermediate phases of oligarchic rule or semi-democracy—that is, one every other year. These are very high rates of change. In global and comparative terms, Latin America has displayed an unusually high level of regime instability.¹¹

This seems like a very bad thing. Political discourse generally attaches positive meanings to the concept of “stability” and negative associations to “instability.” But stability refers only to duration in time: by itself, it does not indicate whether what lasts (or does not last) is beneficial. A brutally repressive dictatorship might well be more “stable” than an open and contentious democracy, but that does not make the world a better place; it makes it worse.

¹⁰ Calculation of year-to-year ratios or “probability rates” of survival for democracy makes this point another way: for both 1900-39 and 1940-77 periods the probability rate was around 0.93, and for 1978-2000 it jumped up to more than 0.98.

What have been the political correlates of stability and instability in Latin America? To examine this issue, Table 3 arrays countries of the region along two dimensions: number of regime changes (to or from democracy), as an indicator of instability; and number of years of electoral democracy, as an indicator of political experience.

Table 3: Regime Stability and Electoral Democracy, 1900-2000

Years of Democracy	N Regime Changes		
	1	2-3	> 3
1-20	El Salvador Honduras Nicaragua Panama Paraguay	Guatemala Haiti Mexico	
21-40		Bolivia Dom Rep	Argentina Brazil Ecuador Peru
> 40	Costa Rica	Chile Colombia Uruguay Venezuela	

Somewhat surprisingly, the table reveals the existence of a *positive* relationship between regime instability and duration of political democracy.¹² Or, to put it another way, there is a negative association between regime stability and levels of democracy. Five countries (El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Paraguay) underwent only one major regime change during the twentieth century and enjoyed less than 20 years of democratic experience.

¹¹ For points of comparison see Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40-49.

¹² The gamma coefficient for this table comes out to + .425.

Four countries with three regime changes (Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, and Venezuela) had more than 40 years of democratic experience. All countries with more than three regime changes (Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru) had 21 to 40 years of democratic experience. In fact, Brazil had 37 democratic years while Argentina and Ecuador each had 40).

In sum, Table 3 demonstrates that instability did not promote political democracy throughout the region, but did not impede it either. After all, democratization means change; change encounters resistance; the ensuing conflict provokes uncertainty and instability. Experiments in democracy did not always succeed, but they often yielded positive results. Only those who fought for democracy were able to reap its benefits.

5. GLOBAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Questions now arise: Was Latin America's twentieth-century political trajectory in any way unique? Was it similar to patterns in other parts of the world? And if so, was it somehow connected to processes at work around the globe?

At first glance, indeed, it appears that the rhythm of political change in Latin America mirrored broad developments throughout the world. From a global perspective, Samuel P. Huntington has posited the existence of three broad "waves" of democratization:

- A "long wave" stretching from approximately 1828 to 1926, followed (and ended) by a "reverse wave" from 1922 to 1942;
- A "short wave" from 1943 to 1962, with a reverse wave from 1958 to 1975; and
- A "third wave" from 1974 to 1990 (the time when Huntington was completing his research).

This analysis has become so widely accepted that identification of the so-called “third wave” has become part of the standard vocabulary of political science.¹³

Does this scheme apply to Latin America? This question bears a close look. The first, long wave described by Huntington began in the United States (in 1828) and spread mostly throughout nineteenth-century Europe—to Switzerland, France, Great Britain, later Italy and Spain. During the early twentieth century it eventually included four countries of Latin America: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay.

The second wave took shape in the shadow of World War II. It began with the democratization of defeated Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Japan) and Austria and Korea. It gained strength through the process of decolonization that granted independence to former imperial colonies and, in many cases, opened opportunities for political democracy (as in India). It affected Latin America as well, with the addition of Costa Rica, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador to democratic ranks.

As described by Huntington, the third wave began with the overthrow of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 and moved first through southern Europe—to Spain, after the death of Francisco Franco, and then to Greece. As suggested by Figures 1 and 2 above, it spread to Latin America from the late 1970s through the 1990s and embraced Central America and parts of the Caribbean.¹⁴ (This led Huntington to observe, with evident surprise, that the third wave was “overwhelmingly a Catholic wave.”)¹⁵ It also spread to India, the

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), esp. ch. 1.

¹⁴ At the time that Huntington was writing, Mexico did not qualify for inclusion in the third wave.

¹⁵ Huntington, *Third Wave*, 76.

Philippines, and (once again) to Korea. During the late 1980s and early 1990s the fall of communism offered subsequent opportunities for democratization to Eastern Europe, where several countries had substantial prior experience with pluralist politics, and to portions of the former Soviet Union, where most nations had very little democratic history.

This periodization thus seems appropriate for Latin America—but with substantial caveats. One relates to Huntington’s first phase. It would take a stretch of the imagination to interpret political change in early twentieth-century Latin America as a “wave”—more like a ripple, a cynic might say. It involved democratic experiments in only three countries. On the other hand, oligarchic republicanism was making significant advances throughout the region. To the extent that this phenomenon can be seen as “proto-democratic”—with its free and fair elections and formalistic pronouncements of respect for constitutional procedure—it represented a qualitative shift away from *caudillo* politics and, to some extent, a training ground for more authentic forms of electoral democracy. In fact, Latin America’s oligarchic systems bore considerable resemblance to contemporary practices in late nineteenth-century continental Europe. In this perspective—and with a considerable dosage of poetic license—the 1900-39 period might conceivably be characterized as a “wave.”

Subsequent phases pose fewer complications. As mass politics came to Latin America, from the late 1930s through the 1950s, electoral democracy took root in nearly half the countries of the region. This movement was countered by two reverse waves—a brief one in the mid-1950s, and a more enduring (and brutal) one in the 1960s and 70s. The subsequent and final period, from 1978 through 2000, also reveals a clearly defined “wave”—one with

only minor reversals, at least as of this writing.¹⁶ Whether democracies in contemporary Latin America will become more or less permanent—and whether they will become truly “liberal” democracies instead of merely “electoral” regimes—is one of the most pressing issues of the current era.

Terminology raises difficult questions. The use of “waves” as the defining metaphor conveys the impression that the surge and decline of political democracy are natural processes: waves mount in strength and intensity over time, they crest at their peaks, and then, under gravitational pulls, they always recede. This implies a regular rhythm that might not really be suitable for political developments; it also suggests, however implicitly, that the third (and still current) wave is destined to recede at some future point.¹⁷

Another nettlesome problem relates to causality. The idea of a “wave” suggests that there were large and common factors at work. Reflecting on the so-called third wave, for example, Huntington notes: “Overall, the movement toward democracy was a global one. In fifteen years the democratic wave moved across southern Europe, swept through Latin America, moved on to Asia, and decimated dictatorship in the Soviet bloc.”¹⁸ The unmistakable implication is that the “wave” was a universal phenomenon and that it led to uniform consequences as a result.

This is not merely a semantic issue. It affects basic interpretations of contemporary

¹⁶ See Larry Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” *Journal of Democracy* 7, 3 (1996): 20-37.

¹⁷ Paradoxically, our focus on a stable set of cases (19 countries) is more suitable for the detection of “waves” than Huntington’s own approach, which uses a steadily expanding universe of cases. He thus traces variations in the absolute number of democracies, but his own data show that there was no long-term upward trend or rising pattern in the relative proportion of democracies among all states over time. See Huntington, *Third Wave*, 25-26.

phenomena. Huntington's oceanographic metaphor suggests that political transitions around the world were connected to each other, or to a common cause, in some observable fashion. Thus Latin America was simply taking part in global processes—later than the leading countries, and to a lesser degree—but it was nonetheless part of the overall pattern.¹⁹

This may or may not be correct. As suggested in the exploration of the prior-experience hypothesis, the coincidence between democratic trends in Latin America and in other parts of the world could come about in various ways:

- If a widespread structural trend—such as socioeconomic development or social differentiation—were to affect numerous countries simultaneously and push them all in a democratic direction,
- If political actors in relevant countries subscribed to a common ideology (in this instance a democratic one),
- If political actors in laggard countries felt compelled to imitate democratic practices in leading countries, or
- If leaders of stronger—and democratic—countries used their influence to pressure leaders in laggard countries to abide by democratic standards (in this case, to hold free and fair elections).

Alternatively, of course, it is possible that simultaneous transitions toward democracy were

¹⁸ Huntington, *Third Wave*, 25.

¹⁹ There are causal questions as well. If Latin America represented a small proportion of countries undergoing democratization, as in the first wave, then it could have been affected by developments elsewhere; but if it included most of the newcomer nations, as in the third wave, it was an internal part of the process—and cannot have been causally affected by it in the same way.

merely coincidental: that they responded to distinct and local pressures that just happened to occur at about the same time. That is a matter for further research.

APPENDIX: CLASSIFICATION OF ELECTORAL REGIMES, 1900-2000

As indicated in the text, years for 19 countries of Latin America from 1900 through 2000 have been classified according to the following scheme:

- Electoral democracy = Free and fair elections
- Electoral semi-democracy = Elections free but not fair, or elections not the real basis of political power
- Oligarchic republicanism (or Competitive oligarchy) = Elections limited to dominant elites and restricted to less than half of adult male population
- Otherwise = non-democracy.

Classifications cover consecutive years under each type of regime. The initiation of “democratic,” “semi-democratic,” or “oligarchic” periods is coded according to year of first national election. Non-democracy is a residual category except for years of military coups, which are positively coded as non-democratic. Years of military occupation by a foreign power (i.e., the United States) are also coded as non-democratic.

This categorization is based on qualitative judgments. It is based on first-hand familiarity with some cases, extensive reading in secondary sources, and in-depth consultations with professional colleagues. There is room for disagreement on specific instances and borderline cases. At the same time, I am confident that the cumulative patterns are accurate.

Reassurance comes from a comparison of this categorization with that of Adam Przeworski and his associates, who employed similar criteria to classify country-years for

141 countries over the forty-one year period from 1950 through 1990.²⁰ When both sets of variables are dichotomized (by collapsing their “democratic” categories and by omitting our semi-democratic and oligarchic categories), cross-tabulation yields an enormously positive and strong association—with a gamma coefficient of +.994. (To put it another way, there was agreement on classification for 94.4 percent of 664 country-years.) And when our categorization is treated as an ordered nominal variable, thus including data for all 779 country-years, the gamma coefficient comes to +.963.²¹

This categorization thus appears to be consistent with that of the Przeworski team. As they point out, empirical literature on the analysis of political democracy tends to converge: “from a practical point of view,” they write, “alternative measures of democracy generate highly similar results. The dimensions used to assess whether or not and to what extent a particular regime is democratic seem to make little difference.”²²

Yet this is only partly true. As Gerardo Munck and Jay Verkuilen have observed, operational definitions prevalent in political science literature tend to reveal two distinct dimensions of democracy—one relating to minimalist definitions, usually focused on elections, and another relating to citizen liberties and rights. “In short,” they say, “this pattern suggests that the correlation tables that are usually presented as proof of the high level of agreement between indices may, in fact, mask some real systematic

²⁰ Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. Appendix 1.1, pp. 55-59.

²¹ Categories were ordered as follows: non-democratic, oligarchic, semi-democratic, democratic.

²² Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*, p. 56.

differences.”²³

Ultimately, of course, the validity of the classification used for this project depends on the plausibility, rigor, and consistency of our standards. Herewith the results:

Argentina

1900-15	oligarchic
1916-29	democratic
1930-31	non-democratic
1932-42	semi-democratic
1943-45	non-democratic
1946-50	democratic
1951-54	semi-democratic
1955-57	non-democratic
1958-61	semi-democratic
1962	non-democratic
1963-65	semi-democratic
1966-72	non-democratic
1973-75	democratic
1976-82	non-democratic
1983-00	democratic

Bolivia

1900-19	oligarchic
1920-30	non-democratic
1931-33	oligarchic
1934-39	non-democratic
1940-42	semi-democratic
1943-46	non-democratic
1947-50	semi-democratic
1951	non-democratic
1952-55	semi-democratic
1956-63	democratic
1964-82	non-democratic
1983-0	democratic

Brazil

1900-29	oligarchic
1930-45	non-democratic
1946-53	democratic

²³ See Gerardo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 1 (February 2002): 5-34, with quote on p. 30 and discussion on 35-57; also published as “Conceptualizando y midiendo la democracia: Una evaluación de índices alternativos,” *Política y gobierno*, 9, no. 2 (2002): 403-41.

1954-55	non-democratic
1956-63	democratic
1964-84	non-democratic
1985-89	semi-democratic
1990-00	democratic

Chile

1900-23	oligarchic
1924-32	non-democratic
1933-72	democratic
1973-88	non-democratic
1989-00	democratic

Colombia

1900-09	non-democratic
1910-37	oligarchic
1921	non-democratic
1922-37	oligarchic
1938-41	semi-democratic
1942-48	democratic
1949-52	semi-democratic
1953-57	non-democratic
1958-00	democratic

Costa Rica

1900-16	oligarchic
1917-19	non-democratic
1920-47	oligarchic
1948-52	semi-democratic
1953-00	democratic

Dominican Republic

1900-23	non-democratic
1924-29	oligarchic
1930-61	non-democratic
1962	democratic
1963-65	non-democratic
1966-69	semi-democratic
1970-00	democratic

Ecuador

1900	non-democratic
1901-05	oligarchic
1906	non-democratic
1907-10	oligarchic
1911-12	non-democratic

1913-24	oligarchic
1925-39	non-democratic
1940-43	semi-democratic
1944-47	non-democratic
1948-60	democratic
1961-67	non-democratic
1968-71	semi-democratic
1972-78	non-democratic
1979-95	democratic
1996-99	semi-democratic
2000	non-democratic

El Salvador

1900-12	oligarchic
1913	non-democratic
1914-30	oligarchic
1931-79	non-democratic
1980	semi-democratic
1981-83	non-democratic
1984-93	semi-democratic
1994-00	democratic

Guatemala

1900-22	non-democratic
1923-25	oligarchic
1926	non-democratic
1927-29	oligarchic
1930-44	non-democratic
1945-53	democratic
1954-65	non-democratic
1966-73	semi-democratic
1974-85	non-democratic
1986-95	semi-democratic
1996-00	democratic

Haiti

1900-89	non-democratic
1990	democratic
1991-94	non-democratic
1995-00	semi-democratic

Honduras

1900-02	oligarchic
1903	non-democratic
1904-06	oligarchic
1907	non-democratic
1908-10	oligarchic
1911	non-democratic
1912-18	oligarchic

1919	non-democratic
1920-22	oligarchic
1923-24	non-democratic
1925-31	oligarchic
1932-48	non-democratic
1949-55	oligarchic
1956-57	non-democratic
1958-62	semi-democratic
1963-80	non-democratic
1981-97	semi-democratic
1998-00	democratic

Mexico

1900-10	non-democratic
1911-12	democratic
1913-16	non-democratic
1917-18	semi-democratic
1920-23	non-democratic
1924-28	semi-democratic
1929-87	non-democratic
1988-99	semi-democratic
2000	democratic

Nicaragua

1900-83	non-democratic
1984-89	semi-democratic
1990-00	democratic

Panama

1900-18	non-democratic
1919-30	oligarchic
1931	non-democratic
1932-40	oligarchic
1941	non-democratic
1942-48	oligarchic
1949	non-democratic
1950	oligarchic
1951	non-democratic
1952-67	oligarchic
1968-83	non-democratic
1984-85	semi-democratic
1986-89	non-democratic
1990-93	semi-democratic
1994-00	democratic

Paraguay

1900-89	non-democratic
1990-92	semi-democratic
1993-00	democratic

Peru

1900-13	oligarchic
1914	non-democratic
1915-18	oligarchic
1919-33	non-democratic
1934-44	semi-democratic
1945-47	democratic
1948-55	non-democratic
1956-61	democratic
1962-63	non-democratic
1964-67	democratic
1968-79	non-democratic
1980-91	democratic
1992	non-democratic
1993-00	semi-democratic

Uruguay

1900-02	non-democratic
1903-18	oligarchic
1919-33	democratic
1934-38	semi-democratic
1939-72	democratic
1973-84	non-democratic
1985-00	democratic

Venezuela

1900-45	non-democratic
1946-48	democratic
1949-57	non-democratic
1958-98	democratic
1999-00	semi-democratic