

From Guns to the Ballot Box: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America

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Abstract

Evidence shows that Latin American democracies are healthier than ever. With few exceptions, competitive electoral processes tend to be the only legitimate means of recruiting political talent throughout the region. In the past, the military establishment has been the main cause of democratic retreat in the region. I argue that keeping the military in its barracks is most likely in countries that meet the following three conditions: (1) a longer democratic experience, (2) higher popular support for democratic governance, and (3) international condemnation of previous coup d'état attempts. Democratic regime breakdown, then, is far less likely in the Southern Cone than it is in Central American countries.

Keywords: Democratization, democratic stability, Latin America, military, U.S.-Latin American relations

1. Introduction

On June 28, 2009 the Honduran president-elect Manuel Zelaya was deposed in yet another military coup in the land of *caudillos*. The expelled president sought refuge in neighboring Costa Rica, claiming that the coup had violated his constitutional right to serve his country to the end of his term. Less than a month later, he briefly returned to his homeland. Greeting a military colonel who stood guard at the Honduran border, Zelaya declared: "I'm the constitutional president of Honduras, and therefore your commander-in-chief, colonel." "As soon as we have the order to detain you, we will do so," the colonel retorted (Heraldo.es 2009). Anyone familiar with Latin American history will hardly find the retreat of democracy and reversal to military authoritarianism in Honduras surprising. The timing of the overthrow does present a puzzle, for it occurred three decades after the last coup in the country (1978) and at a moment in history where military overthrows are no longer the norm in the region.

The military coup that led to Zelaya's ouster is instructive, for it clearly shows that while democracy has taken root in most of Latin America, there are still pockets of political instability. Recent quantitative research has shown that the health of Latin American democracy is contingent on regional political trends. As a matter of fact, the evidence suggests that regional political trends are the only statistically significant political variable that affected the likelihood of democratic transitions in Latin America between 1946 and 1999 (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005: 28). "A more favorable regional political environment was a major factor in accounting for both the increased transition rate and the sharp drop in the breakdown rate after 1977," (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005: 38). In light of this evidence, it is important to analyze and discuss regional trends in the development of Latin American democracy. The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the practice of liberal democratic principles, assess the risks to democratic governance, and discuss the role of the United States and regional organizations in promoting democracy in the region.

2. Whither Latin American Political Development?

The analysis presented here is laid out in three sections. Section 1 presents eight-year trends in Latin American democracy using average Freedom House scores since 2002. As we will see in the analysis, Latin American countries are, for the most part, stable electoral democracies. Cuba, of course, is the notable exception to the general trend, whereas Venezuela's democracy has been tarnished by Hugo Chávez's presidency. Section 2 discusses conditions under which the two traditional sources of threat – the armed forces and the left – might pose a menace to democracy in Latin America. I conclude that Latin America's armed forces are more likely to threaten democracy (a) the shorter a country's democratic experience, (b) the higher the popular support for non-democratic governance (or the lower the popular support for democratic governance), and (c) in the absence of strong international response to condemn and deter military overthrow. Section 3 analyzes the role of the Bush administration in promoting democracy in Latin America. I also offer some observations on the attempts of the current administration to define its position on democracy promotion and its foreign policy goals in Latin America.

3. Electoral Democracy in Latin America

Most Latin American constituents now rely on the ballot box to vest political aspirants with the authority to govern their societies. Undoubtedly, elections are not equally clean and fair in all countries in the region. Electoral fraud such as vote buying, ballot stuffing, and manipulation of voter registries occurs even in the most advanced of Latin America's democracies and is the norm in the least advanced ones. Brusco, Nazareno and Stokes (2004), for example, have documented and analyzed the prevalence of vote buying in Argentina, particularly in the ranks of the *Partido Peronista*. Let us also recall the political tension generated by the last presidential elections in Mexico, which led to a razor-thin victory for the center-right candidate of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) candidate Felipe Calderón. Calderón's vote counts were so close to those of the runner-up from the left-wing *Partido Revolución Democrática* (PRD) that the latter and his supporters demanded a vote recount. Though there might have been some electoral fraud, the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary certified the results and affirmed that the electoral victory rightfully belonged to the PAN candidate (Estrada and Poiré 2007). The manner in which the presidential elections and subsequent recount were conducted has been considered a triumph in a country where a single party machine had claimed one assertive electoral victory after another for decades on end.

Table 1: Combined Freedom House Scores of Latin American Countries (2002-2009)

Combined Freedom House score	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1	Uruguay	Uruguay	Chile Uruguay	Chile Costa Rica Uruguay	Chile Costa Rica Uruguay	Chile Costa Rica Uruguay	Chile Costa Rica Uruguay	Chile Costa Rica Uruguay
1.5	Costa Rica Panama	Chile Costa Rica Panama	Costa Rica Panama	Panama	Panama	Panama	Panama	Panama
2	Bolivia Chile Dominican Republic Peru	Dominican Republic Mexico	Argentina Mexico	Argentina Dominican Republic Mexico	Argentina Brazil Dominican Republic Mexico	Argentina Brazil Dominican Republic	Brazil Dominican Republic Mexico Peru	Argentina Brazil Dominican Republic
2.5	El Salvador Mexico	Bolivia Brazil El Salvador Peru	Brazil Dominican Republic El Salvador Peru	Brazil El Salvador Peru	El Salvador Peru	El Salvador Mexico Peru	El Salvador	El Salvador Mexico Peru
3	Argentina Brazil Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua	Argentina Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua	Bolivia Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay	Bolivia Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay	Bolivia Colombia Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay	Bolivia Colombia Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay	Bolivia Colombia Ecuador Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay	Bolivia Ecuador Honduras Paraguay
3.5	Guatemala Paraguay	Paraguay Venezuela	Venezuela	Venezuela		Guatemala	Guatemala	Guatemala
4	Colombia Venezuela	Colombia Guatemala	Colombia Guatemala	Colombia Guatemala	Guatemala Venezuela	Venezuela	Venezuela	Venezuela
6.5								Cuba
7	Cuba	Cuba	Cuba	Cuba	Cuba	Cuba	Cuba	

Table 1 displays information about the state of Latin American democracy between 2002 and 2009. It allows us to track which countries have made improvements in the extent to which political freedoms and civil liberties are respected and protected. If we were to examine the last column in Table 1 (for the year 2009), we notice that the 'typical' Latin American country received a combined Freedom House score of 2.5. El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru all fall into that category. Bearing in mind the history of these countries, 2.5 is a really good score on political freedoms and civil liberties. Nonetheless, half of the countries included in this study are still facing substantial challenges in reinforcing the democratic institutional architecture of their political systems. The list of countries, which received scores higher than 2.5, includes Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Paraguay, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Cuba. The institutional foundations of Honduran democracy have already shown their cracks after its most recent *coup d'etat*. Venezuelan democracy has been severely, but not irreversibly, compromised by the actions of President Chávez, as we will see later in this essay.

4. Sources of Threat to Latin American Democracy

Latin American countries have experienced a large number of military coups, which, in many cases, have compromised the solid foundations of democracy in the region.

Democratic breakdowns before 1978 were very common (twenty in number); between 1978 and 1999, they virtually ceased to occur. The only breakdown after 1978 was Peru in 1992, and it took tremendously adverse conditions for democracy to break down that year: a devastating and prolonged economic recession (a mean growth rate of -2.36 percent per capita per year from 1980 to 1991) coupled with hyperinflation (a mean inflation rate of 1,060 percent from 1980 to 1991), one of the most virulent and powerful terrorist groups (Sendero Luminoso) in the history of Latin America, and intense conflict between the president and the executive (Kenney 2004; Tanaka 2005).

Scholars have identified numerous economic and political causes of democratic regime breakdown – regime performance (in terms of growth, per capita GDP, and inflation), economic development, regional political environment, multipartism, and the percentage of the labor force in industry. A statistical analysis probing into the effects of economic, structural, and political variables on democratic regime breakdown in Latin America shows that political variables enhance the predictive power of economic models of regime collapse. Political variables such as multipartism, semidemocracy, U.S. foreign policy, and regional political environment are statistically significant causes of democratic regime collapse in Latin America. I will merely outline the direction of association between each of these variables and breakdown without dwelling on all the plausible causal paths.

Multipart systems (with more than three effective parties in their legislatures) tend to be more fragile. The typical explanation provided here is that Latin American political systems feature a particularly unfavorable combination of presidentialism and multipartism (which is generally the product of proportional representation electoral systems). Multipartism typically means that Latin American presidents, who are agenda setters, will have to build legislative coalitions to garner support for their legislative proposals. A president's inability to manufacture congressional support might lead to legislative immobilism and heighten the risks of political meltdown, including one that might provoke military intervention (Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Mainwaring 1993; Stepan and Skatch 1994; Kenney 2004).

That semidemocratic societies are more likely to regress back to authoritarianism is hardly surprising. Countries that have little experience with democracy, where democratic principles and practices have not taken root, are more likely to revert to authoritarianism than countries with a long tradition of democratic governance. The United States has had a long and complex history of intervention in Latin American affairs. U.S. foreign policy makers have used a variety of instruments to shape domestic politics in strategically important countries in the region. Scholars have hypothesized that democratic breakdown is less likely when democracy promotion is an important item on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Various scholars have emphasized the causal importance of the regional political environment in affecting a country's chances of democratizing and staying democratic (Lowenthal 1991; Pevehouse 2002; Whitehead 1996). A country is more likely to stay democratic, if it is surrounded by other democratic countries, the argument goes.

In spite of its advantages in helping us assess the big political picture, quantitative analysis falls short in helping us predict the likelihood of regime breakdown in individual cases. In-depth analysis and close observation, as well as familiarity with historical circumstances, are more suitable tools of evaluating whether a *coup d'etat* is likely to occur in a given country. The commentary that I offer in subsequent sections of this article will make references to specific cases and are based on a closer analysis of events in individual countries. I focus on three factors that I think are conducive to democratic stability in Latin America – the length of a country's democratic experience, people's support for democratic governance and rejection of non-democratic forms of government, and international support for democratically elected leaders. A country with a longer tradition of democracy is more likely to stay democratic than a country that lacks solid democratic foundations. There are three countries in Latin America with a long tradition of democracy – Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Venezuela has presented scholars with a puzzle, for it is the only one of the three oldest and most stable Latin American democracies to succumb to elected authoritarianism.

A short democratic experience increases the likelihood that the public would support a military coup. People are more likely to support a military coup initiated by an establishment whose reputation has been untarnished by publicity surrounding human rights abuses. The officer corps is more likely to take the license to intervene in politics when it has the people's backing, as Latin American history has shown on numerous occasions, (Stepan 1971). The resurgence of left and center-left governments, with the possible exception of Venezuela, I argue will not jeopardize the health of Latin American democracy.

There have been significant changes in both the domestic and international context since the last authoritarian reversals in the 1970s. With the demise of Soviet communism, leftist governments are no longer perceived as a subversive threat. Hence, military leaders across the region have a weak motivation to initiate a coup. Moreover, the nature of the left has changed as well. Today's Latin American left is, for the most part, moderate. Its leaders prefer to resort to the ballot box and political dialog rather than armed struggle or other unconstitutional means to resolve political crises.

The twentieth century certainly unleashed "gales of [creative] destruction" in Latin America to use Polanyi's oft-cited phrase (1944). A military junta toppled a democratically-elected government in Chile in 1973. Power changed hands among several military leaders in Brazil between 1964 and 1984. Argentina was besieged by military coups for several decades until the fiasco of its military campaign against Great Britain in the Falkland Islands War of 1982. Latin American history was a sequence of long periods of military rule and brief democratic reversals. Does the third wave of democratization bode for well for the health of Latin American democracy? I argue that Latin American democracy will prosper due to changes in attitudes, the domestic political context within individual countries, and the international context. We did indeed witness oscillation between military authoritarianism and democracy in the twentieth century, partly due to wide domestic support for military intervention as a means of breaking political gridlock. Military dictatorships in the region, however, proved incapable of delivering sound economic management (with the notable exception of Chile's military junta). Moreover, military governments left a deplorable political record of repression and human rights violations. The military establishment across the region has been debilitated and military dictatorship is no longer considered a viable alternative to democratic governance.

According to most recent data released by the *Latinobarómetro*, there is hardly any need to worry about reversals back to authoritarianism. Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government according to the findings of the 2007 *Latinobarómetro* report. Less than a fifth of respondents across the region showed support for authoritarianism. Support for authoritarianism has declined to 17% in two of the biggest countries in the region – Mexico and Brazil. Support for authoritarianism in Mexico reached a peak of 35% in 2001 and 25% in Brazil in 2000. The 2005 poll revealed that 62% of all Latin American respondents claimed that they would not support a military coup under any circumstances. Granted the numbers were much lower in some countries. Only 51% of the respondents in Ecuador, 49% in Peru, and 31% in Paraguay claimed that they would not support a coup under any circumstances (The Economist, October 27, 2005). Paraguay has traditionally been the South American country with the strongest authoritarian streak.

Latin American political institutions, however, are still not the most trusted entities. Latin Americans still show much higher confidence in the church and the military than in their presidents, governments, the judiciary, and legislative institutions. Confidence in all these institutions save the judiciary has grown incrementally between 1996 and 2007. Latin Americans are also questioning the benefits of a market economy. There has been a substantial decline in the proportion of people stating that a market economy is the best model of economic organization for their country. The director of *Latinobarómetro* – Marta Lagos – argues that this loss of faith in the market economy "reflects not just the persistence of poverty but also the impact of the "leftist discourse" of the likes of Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's president, against the United States and against the free market formulae of the Washington Consensus," (The Economist, November 15, 2007).

The survey data published by the *Latinobarómetro* does not introduce any controls for respondents' ideological leanings. The survey data in the AmericasBarometer, however, does allow researchers to control for ideological preferences. When asked whether they prefer an elected leader or a strong unelected leader, most respondents with left leanings tended to support a strong leader (Seligson 2007). Left-leaning respondents in Guatemala and Chile were the exception. Those "whose answers qualified them as left-of-center predominantly support electoral democracy and reject a strong leader," (Seligson 2007).

Surveys of Latin American respondents suggest that though there is preference for democracy across the region, there are a few countries where respondents did express preference for strong leadership. Obviously low popular support for democracy does not automatically imply a high chance for democratic breakdown, just like high support for democracy hardly entails democratic stability. Nevertheless, constituents' attitudes towards democracy do affect the likelihood of democratic regime stability. This study of democracy's prospects in the region will be better served by an examination of Latin America's democratic record since the democratic transitions of the 1980s. There have been a few coup attempts in the region, most of which occurred in the least stable countries – Haiti, Ecuador, and Paraguay. All of these attempts, however, were thwarted and democratic regimes, albeit shaky, were restored. In December 2001 armed commandos stormed the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince causing the death of coup plotters.

The 2001 attempt was preceded by a more violent and successful *coup d'etat*, which sent President Jean Bertrand Aristide into exile; it was followed by another military coup in 2004. This series of military interventions in Haitian politics led Haiti scholar Robert Fatton Jr. (2002) to label Haiti's political metamorphosis an "unending transition to democracy". What characterizes these coup attempts is that the military dictatorships they helped install were all ephemeral. The interim government installed in the 2004 Haitian coup lasted a little over a year. The military faction that overthrew Ecuador's President Jamil Mahuad enjoyed only 18 hours of political control before being ousted by a faction that intervened in favor of the civilian government.

4.1 The Rise of the Left and Center-Left in Latin America

The electoral triumph of Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002 ushered in a new era for the left in Latin America (Panizza 2005). Latin American countries had shied away from experimenting with social democracy since the military coup that led to a sudden reversal from democracy to authoritarianism in Chile in 1973. In the first decade of the 21st century, however, the left has made a definite comeback. The most recent vote of confidence in a presidential candidate with left sympathies is none other than the election of the former Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2008. This latest development is fascinating, for Paraguayan voters have, for a very long time, seemed inoculated against 'democracy' and 'leftist government.' If we were to re-examine the findings of the *Latinobarómetro*, we would find that Paraguayans have consistently expressed highest support for the military and the lowest support for democracy. In Chile the government of Concertación was led by a socialist president (Ricardo Lagos) and incorporated two political parties with leftist origins – *el Partido por la Democracia* (PPD) and *el Partido Socialista* (PS). Argentina's dynamic duo – Néstor and Cristina Kirchner – has been in charge of the executive since 2003. A left-wing coalition brought an end to the hegemony of the traditional Blanco and Colorado parties in Uruguay in the 2004 elections.

One should, of course, not leave out Venezuela's experience with leftist policies at the hands of President Hugo Chávez whose political machine is oiled by petrodollars and whose popularity rests on redistribution schemes sustained by the oil industry. Bolivians elected a former coca grower – Evo Morales – to the presidency; one of the first items on Morales's agenda was the nationalization of the gas and oil industry, which would limit the participation of foreign investors in the sector. Morales himself is the leader of *el Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) – a leftist political party which is a voice of the poor and indigenous people in Bolivia. Most recently, Mauricio Funes, the candidate of the radical left-wing (and former guerrilla movement) *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) won the presidential elections in El Salvador. The FMLN candidate was trailed closely by the runner-up, the candidate of the right-wing *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA).

Funes's victory marked an unprecedented left turn in El Salvador, which has a long history of right-wing military government. Despite its history of a guerrilla movement, FMLN seems poised to participate in a democratically elected government through democratic means. As a matter of fact, FMLN candidates have vied for elected post in several elections since the end of the civil war in El Salvador during which FMLN took arms to overturn the military dictatorship which had run the country since 1961 with the hand of the right-wing National Conciliation Party (*Partido de la Conciliación Nacional*). In his presidential inaugural address, Funes lauded two of his colleagues – U.S. President Barack Obama and Brazilian President Lula da Silva – and stated his intention to follow in their footsteps (*El País*, June 2, 2009). This is just a brief summary of the electoral successes of left and center-left political parties and coalitions in national-level elections. They have also been victorious in local and regional electoral contests.

4.2 The Case of Venezuela

Even though Venezuela is one of Latin America's oldest democracies, it has reverted to personalist authoritarianism under the leadership of Hugo Chávez. The fundamental problem with Chávez's politics is not his extreme left-wing orientation and statist economic policies; rather, it is his continued effort to augment his political authority at the expense of democratic political institutions that other Venezuelan statesmen have been building for decades. Here are a few examples of some of the 'reforms' introduced by Venezuela's populist president. Following his re-election to the presidency in 2005, President Chávez gained the authority to legislate via decree for 18 months. He later initiated a series of referenda whose main objective was the further increase in his legislative and political authority. In January 2008, he registered a razor-thin loss in a referendum, which would have given him the opportunity to become president for life. A year later, he had tipped the balance of the scales in his favor. The February 2009 referendum on constitutional reform proposed removal of term limits not only on the presidency, but also on other elected posts such as governors, mayors, and legislators.

Chávez also bolstered censorship announcing "that the government would not renew the broadcasting licence of RCTV, the biggest opposition television station," (Reid 2009: 172). As the virtual space of the opposition was shrinking, Chávez's was expanding. After launching his weekly television and radio show 'Aló Presidente' in 1999, President Chávez assumed the status of a political reality TV star. Members of the president's cabinet are required to attend the show, and on occasion, the president uses the show as an improvised policy-making platform. He does not flinch in the face of opposition and criticism and typically silences his domestic critics by taking away their media licenses and tends to ignore his international critics (unless they are on Venezuelan soil). Chávez ushered in 2009 by securing several high-profile resignations and sackings; perhaps, one of the most daring dismissals was that of his former ally – General Gustavo Rangel – who lost his job in March 2009 after a post-referendum cabinet reshuffle (Noticias24, March 3, 2009). The reason for the dismissal was Rangel's affinity with the United States (or rather his membership in a Protestant sect), which automatically placed him on a growing list of undesirables (Analítica, March 4, 2009). The list of political mischiefs orchestrated by Venezuela's Bolivarian President is lengthy. Parrying every action perceived as an attack on his socialist plan, he has earned numerous foes including political rivals, former ministers, military officers, and leaders of non-governmental organizations.

According to Michael Reid's account "the [Venezuelan] government conducted low-level harassment of opponents, bringing trumped-up charges against several of them," (Reid 2009: 172). One of Chávez's pivotal messages was that he would dismantle the semi-democratic two-party system established through the Punto Fijo and would install a purportedly more democratic system in its place, along with the creation of an economically just society. Ironically, his campaign against *puntofijismo* created an even more restrictive democracy (a democracy only in name). Moreover, the inauguration of *chavismo* also added the balance between civilian politicians and the armed forces; while *puntofijismo* had insulated civilian politics from military influences, *chavismo* hurled the armed forces right back into the eye of the political fray (Trinkunas 2002; Trinkunas 2005). "In 2005, nine state governors were military officers, either retired or in active service; by one estimate, more than 500 senior government jobs were held by military men," (Reid 2009: 176). It is obvious that one of the planks upon which Chávez's rule rests is the high command of the armed forces. The President, however, does have potent rivals in the military; Francisco Arias Cardenas, who had participated in an attempted *coup d'etat* by Chávez's side, was a contender for the presidency in the 2000 elections (Trinkunas 2002: 65).

Further changes in the Venezuelan constitution introduced in its 1999 amendment have shifted control over military promotions from the legislature to the presidency. The presidency is now the only political institution, which has the authority to sanction military promotions regardless of any possible objections on behalf of the legislature (Trinkunas 2002: 71-72). The entanglement of military commanders in political affairs could further derail Venezuela's democracy. This cursory examination of Chávez's actions in office leads me to a simple conclusion. Though there is a veneer of democracy in Venezuela, its liberal foundations are warped. The fissures in its foundation are not caused by Chávez's socialist economic policies, but rather by his blatant disregard for the rule of law. As Teodoro Petkoff, one of Venezuela's most influential opposition leaders, Chávez's Venezuela "has 'one foot in democracy' and 'the other foot in authoritarianism and autocracy,'" (Reid 2009: 176). In spite of this challenge to democracy, however, I do not think that there is much need for direct U.S. involvement in Venezuela's domestic affairs. At the very least, there is no such need in the short run. Venezuela does have a strong, though somewhat disorganized opposition and a vibrant student movement, whose leaders even a thug like President Chávez will find it hard to shackle and silence.

4.3 U.S. Foreign Policy toward Latin America

In 2006, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) – Chilean leftist politician José Miguel Insulza – declared, "Fortunately Latin America is no longer a priority for the United States, where priority often signifies crisis." Has Latin American democracy finally ended its birth throes? Are the current leaders of Latin American democracies capable of handling crises 'in-house', without U.S. intervention, whenever they arise?

4.3.1 Policy under the Bush Administration

Following the Sept. 11 attacks, the Bush administration took a hands-off approach to U.S.-Latin American relations. Understandably, Latin America was no longer among the top priorities on the U.S. foreign policy agenda at a time when the United States was fighting prolonged and arduous wars in the Middle East. America's lack of engagement in the promotion of democracy in Latin America might be deplorable, but hardly surprising. At a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2005, "Latin American diplomats rebuffed a U.S. proposal to establish a committee to monitor democracy in Latin America, which was seen as a U.S. effort to put a spotlight on Chávez's democratic failings," (Hakim 2006: 5).

The resistance of Latin American leaders to the formation of this committee could partly be explained by their fear of damaging their countries' trade relations with Venezuela. This is hardly the first instance in which short-term economic interests have trumped long-term political objectives. Latin American political elites may have also expressed a lukewarm reaction toward U.S. democracy promotion initiatives because of America's weakened credibility as an agent of democratization around the world. A 2006 Zogby poll, for example, found that 86% of Latin America's elites "disapprove of Washington's management of conflicts around the world," (Hakim 2006: 7).

4.3.2 Policy under the Obama Administration

Latin American leaders have not been eager to accept U.S. support for democracy promotion. Nevertheless, one ought to ask several important questions – (1) how durable are Latin American democracies, and (2) are the leaders of older and more stable democracies such as Chile and Costa Rica willing and able to deal with regional crises such as the recent *coup d'état* in Honduras? Herein lies the kernel of the issue – can Latin American leaders resolve conflicts that threaten to undermine democratic processes in the region? Allow me to offer some observations on the Honduran crisis. The officially stated reason for Zelaya's ouster from the presidency was a series of constitutional violations. Zelaya had attempted to organize a referendum for the sake of consulting his constituents on a series of proposed constitutional changes. The referendum was merely consultative and its outcome would not have been binding. Mr. Zelaya's opponents, however, argued that the referendum would be a constitutional violation. In the days preceding the referendum, Zelaya had embroiled himself in a conflict with the head of the armed forces and had released him from his duties for failing to offer logistical support for the referendum (BBC News, August 17, 2009).

The conflict unequivocally indicated that tensions between the military and civilian political leaders persist in Honduras. The armed forces in Central America and elsewhere in the region still influence domestic politics and have not fully withdrawn from the political scene. The heads of the armed forces continue to challenge the exclusive authority of civilian politicians over political decision making. How have Latin America's advanced democracies responded to this regional crisis? Members of the OAS unanimously condemned the actions of the Honduran military commanders and voted to suspend Honduran membership in the organization (The New York Times, July 5, 2009). Costa Rican President Oscar Arias became actively involved in regional effort to seek resolution to the conflict. He presented a detailed plan, which would allow Zelaya to return to his homeland and assume his presidential duties till October 2009, when new presidential elections would be held. Arias's mediation efforts bore little fruit (The Miami Herald, August 13, 2009).

The junta that orchestrated the coup refused to allow Zelaya to return. Its leaders as well as other members of Honduran society had been perturbed by Zelaya's left-ward turn in the middle of the presidency and his vocal support of Venezuelan President Chávez. Coup supporters questioned Zelaya's commitment to democracy and claimed that he would insist on changing the constitution, which would merely exacerbate the already complicated situation in the country and could instigate violence and bloodshed. Zelaya remains in exile in the Dominican Republic. The United States has been extremely cautious in its response to the crisis. President Obama almost immediately labeled Zelaya's ouster a coup, but the Obama administration has avoided any direct involvement in resolving it. Its inaction is certainly in consonance with Obama's commitment to reverse the policy of democracy promotion through military means executed by the Bush administration.

As democratization scholar Thomas Carothers has stated, "Obama is trying to set the restart button somewhere back before George W. Bush," referring to the process as a "post-Bush recalibration," (LaFranchi 2009). The Honduran stalemate has demonstrated three important things. First, Latin American countries without a solid democratic tradition and with a history of military overthrows (in the case of Honduras, 11 since 1903) are still at risk of military insubordination. Second, older Latin American democracies are not necessarily equipped to defuse conflict between the military and civilians. Third, the United States is reluctant to meddle in other countries' affairs for the sake of promoting democracy. This reluctance marks a clear turn away from the foreign policy practices of the Bush administration. However, it might be sending coup plotters elsewhere mixed signals. The United States seems poised to usher in a new strategy of democracy promotion; in a liberal vein, it relies on promoting a more organic process of political development by encouraging trade relations and openness rather than trade embargoes or economic and political restrictions.

5. Conclusion

In the first comprehensive quantitative study of regime breakdown in Latin America, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán find that the only variable that consistently affects the probability of regime breakdown is regional context (2005: 40-41). The probability of a transition from democracy to authoritarianism is much less likely in a region comprised of democratic regimes than in a region that is not.

This conclusion suggests that actions taken by the United States and regional organizations to promote democracy in the region will have substantial effect on the health of Latin American democracy. The precise causal mechanisms of this influence are yet to be unwoven and fully analyzed. Perhaps the United States and organizations such as the OAS will leave their imprint on democratic stability on the region by manipulating the costs of undermining democratic principles. The costs of sabotaging democracy will be that much higher if those who engage in such actions have no regional allies whose resources they can rely on. Totalitarianism in Cuba will be more durable with the support of its Venezuelan ally than without it. Hence, any actions taken by the U.S. (economic punishment or diplomatic isolation, among others) will have important consequences for democratic durability in Latin America and elsewhere in the world.

The Organization of American States could influence democratic developments in Latin America by invoking Resolution 1080. The resolution was passed in 1991 and it allowed the OAS to intervene in countries where democratic breakdown had occurred. To date the resolution has been invoked a few times – Haiti (1991), Peru (1992), Guatemala (1993), and Paraguay (1996). "In Latin America the threat of international sanctions against coup players was clear when coup mongers in Paraguay (1996) and Guatemala (1993) backed off when confronted with the likelihood of sanctions, and when Fujimori (Peru, 1992) responded to international pressures by restoring elections," (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005: 42). Yet, the project of democracy promotion will definitely be limited without the express diplomatic support and political action of the United States.

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