

# Democracy in Latin America: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges

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I'm very honored to receive an award dedicated to Guillermo O'Donnell. Guillermo's writing has fundamentally shaped the way we think about dictatorship and democracy. In the 1970s, when I first met him, his analysis of bureaucratic authoritarianism structured the debate about the failure of democracy to take hold in the more modernized countries of South America. In the 1980s, he produced seminal work on transitions to democracy, in collaboration with Philippe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead. And during the 1990s and early twenty-first century, as new democratic regimes struggled to gain footing in Latin America, Guillermo again defined the central issues of the day, with major work on citizenship, participation, and political accountability.

I did not always agree with Guillermo—for example, I thought his emphasis on political agency in transitions to democracy underestimated the importance of economic constraints, including some that he had written about in his earlier work. But whenever I engaged Guillermo's writing on democracy, it never failed to yield new insights and lessons. And his personal commitment to democracy was always inspiring. He was a political philosopher as well as a political scientist. And above all, he was a *democrat*—a man who was motivated throughout his career by a strong commitment to defining and acting on democratic values.

Let me begin my remarks about democracy in Latin America with a reflection on how things have changed during the 50 years that I have been studying the region.

When I was getting started in the late 1960s and early 1970s, authoritarian regimes ruled the day. Costa Rica and Venezuela—and in some respects, Colombia—appeared to be the only durable democratic regimes in the region. Autocracies dominated the rest of Latin America: personalist dictatorships in Central America and the Caribbean; dominant party regimes in Mexico and Cuba; and military regimes in most of the rest of Latin America—including the right-wing authoritarian regimes that seized power in Argentina and Brazil during the 1960s and a few years later in Chile and Uruguay.

As O'Donnell pointed out so vividly, the emergence of military regimes in the more developed countries of South America was surprising not only because they were installed in relatively modernized societies, but also because of the ferocity with which they repressed popular sectors and their representatives in unions and the political left. It is important not to allow the passage of time to blur memories of how brutal these regimes were. They collaborated across national boundaries to pursue and murder political opponents, tortured political prisoners, and engaged in pervasive censorship of the press and academia. In the case of Argentina, the most "modernized" country of Latin America, the dictatorship that seized power in 1976 stole newly born children from their imprisoned mothers, threw people out of helicopters, and "disappeared" thousands of victims.

In the political science world of that time, most of our attention was directed to why such regimes emerged, what it would take to push them from power, and how to establish democracies in their place. As I will discuss below, the electoral regimes

that eventually replaced these dictatorships face major challenges. But if you look back it is also possible to point to considerable progress over the past 40 to 50 years.

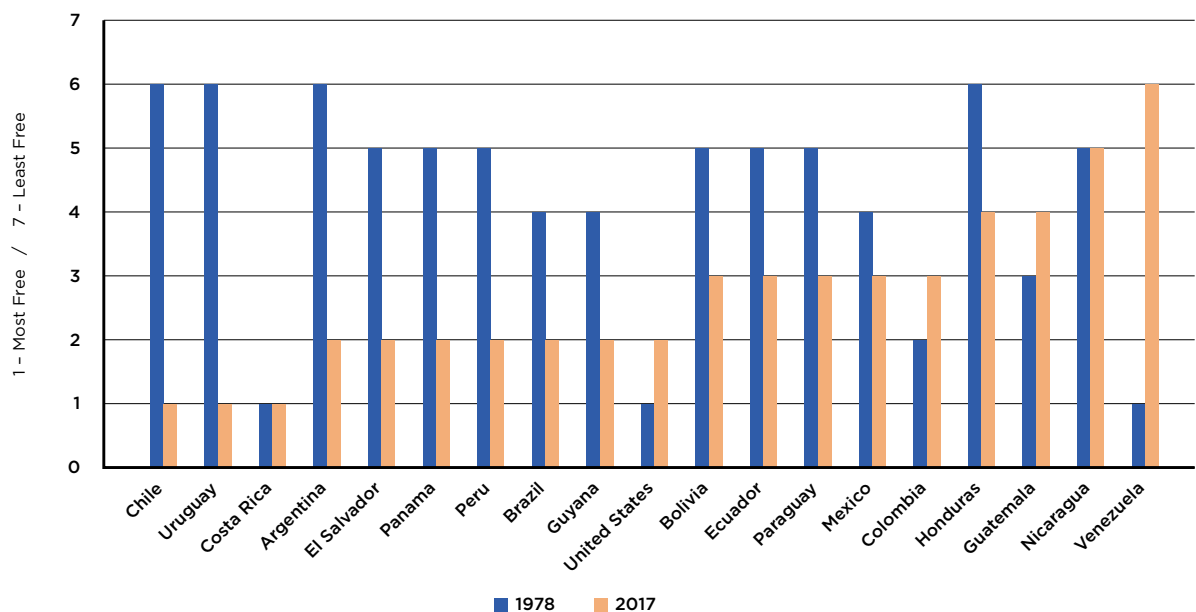
For one thing, people are significantly less subject to systematic political repression than they were 40 years ago. Governments continue to abuse power throughout the region, but generally not with the scale and ferocity of previous decades. People are far from being free from abuse, but in most countries, they are considerably freer than they were.

There has also been an expansion of civil, as well as political, rights. Again, it is important to emphasize that these rights are very unevenly advanced. In many countries, indigenous communities continue to struggle against powerful forces, there is pervasive racial discrimination, and women have yet to attain rights over their bodies. Even so, throughout the region, you also see a vibrant civil society, a vigorous debate in the media and the academic community, and people exercising their rights to protest and demonstrate. You would have seen none of this 50 years ago in most countries.

Finally, with some disturbing exceptions (for example, in Honduras in 2009) the threat of outright military coups has declined considerably. The military establishment, to be sure, has not retreated fully to the barracks. In some cases, it has been used to enforce order at the state and municipal level, and this has opened the way to serious abuses of rights. Moreover, as political polarization has deepened in Brazil, some voices on the political right have expressed support for military intervention. But in general, governments must submit to legitimation through competitive or semicompetitive elections and cannot rule through the military establishment as they did in so many countries 50 years ago.

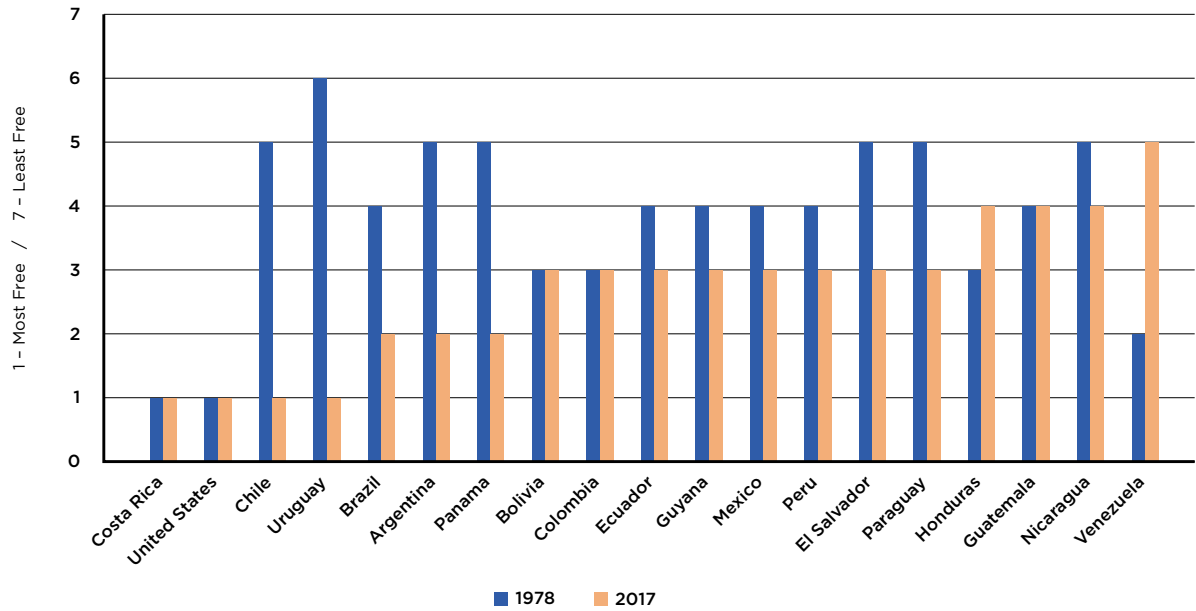
At best, elected leaders govern imperfect democracies, and at worst, they tilt the playing field so drastically that their governments cannot reasonably be considered democratic at all. But even “competitive authoritarian” regimes face constraints that come with the need to demonstrate popular approval through the electoral process.

**Figure 1: Change in Freedom House Political Rights Scores in Latin America and the United States**



Source: Freedom House (2018) “Country and Territory Rating and Statuses FIW1973-2018”

**Figure 2: Change in Freedom House Civil Liberties Scores in Latin America and the United States**



Source: Freedom House (2018) "Country and Territory Rating and Statuses FIW1973-2018"

The Freedom House political and civil rights scores shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, provide a useful picture of both the limits and extent of this improvement, comparing country ratings in 1978, the year prior to the onset of the “third wave,” with those in 2017. The ratings range from 1, the most free, to 7, the least. Figure 1 on political rights shows that Venezuela, Guatemala, and Colombia—as well as the United States—suffered declines between 1978 and 2017, but most of the other countries experienced at least partial improvements. The ratings on civil liberties, shown in Figure 2, present a similar picture. Although eight countries were rated as only partly free in 2017 (i.e., with scores of 3), most countries experienced substantial improvement over their scores in 1978. And civil liberties declined only in Venezuela and Honduras.

As we turn to the challenges facing contemporary democracies in Latin America, we should keep these improvements in mind. But if we fast-forward to the present, it is also clear that today’s democratic regimes are in danger. With a few exceptions, they have not worked very well in any of the countries of Latin America, and in some places, they have slid backwards. Moreover, democracy is

also on the defensive throughout the rest of the world, including in Western Europe and—most importantly—in the United States.

In addressing these challenges, I will not try to discuss specific countries in depth, and it is important to acknowledge that there are wide differences among them. But I will attempt to offer some generalizations and hypotheses that have broad applicability.

First, let me be clear about what I mean by “democracy.” I follow the practice of most political scientists (including O’Donnell) by restricting the definition primarily to *political* procedures and institutions. Class relations and economic conditions may affect the quality and effectiveness of these institutions, but they are analytically distinct from the concept of democracy itself. The main criteria are:

- free and fair elections, in which all adult citizens are granted equal right to vote and in which the winners are allowed to govern;

- governments that enforce the right of citizens to freely engage in public life between as well as during elections;
- and finally, presidents or prime ministers who submit to what O'Donnell called "horizontal accountability," checks and balances that derive from legislative and judicial institutions and from a free press.

No country ever meets these criteria perfectly, and this is especially true in highly unequal societies such as those in Latin America, where the very wealthy exercise disproportionate power and large segments of the population remain marginalized socially and economically. But the capacity of Latin American democracies to confront the issues of inequality and marginalization will depend on how they confront other major political and institutional challenges. I want to highlight three of these in particular: (a) the limited capacity of states to extend the rule of law throughout their territories; (b) the threats to "horizontal accountability"; and (c) the strong international headwinds created by the deterioration of democracy in the United States and in the West more generally.

First, the issue of state capacity. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have famously argued that what they called a "usable state" is a crucial requisite of democratic consolidation.<sup>1</sup> By that, they meant a state bureaucracy that can effectively deploy its human and financial resources to protect the rights of citizens and deliver basic services that citizens demand.

Some states in Latin America are more "usable" than others, but in general, state capacity is limited. The most visible signs of this weakness have been the corruption scandals at the top of the system—in Peru, Brazil, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and elsewhere—where politicians exploit their office to line their own pockets or fund their campaigns. But I'd also like to point to another form of state weakness that is evident at the local level, where states have the most direct contact with citizens.

O'Donnell coined the expression "brown areas" to describe parts of a country where the state has limited capacity to establish a lawful presence.

Such areas have spread in recent decades, largely as a consequence of drug- and arms-trafficking. Those of us concerned with problems of democratic consolidation need to pay much more attention to the dangers posed by the inability of states to provide basic security, impede the encroachment of gangs and criminal enterprises, and prevent extortion by public officials themselves.

Criminality in "brown areas" can have both direct and indirect effects on political life.<sup>2</sup> Most directly, criminals themselves can occupy public office or strongly influence those who do. Armed groups can also play an active role in the electoral process through their influence on ballot access, campaigning, and even voting itself. And civil society mobilization can be reshaped by the need to coordinate with gangs or by the ongoing threat of street violence. Indirectly, the infestation of armed criminal gangs has created a pervasive sense of insecurity in which the police as well as the criminals can be viewed as threats to life and property. Such problems are perhaps most acute in Central America, but they are evident as well in middle-income countries such as Brazil and Mexico.

For obvious reasons, research into the scope and dimensions of local-level criminality is highly fraught, and it is only beginning to appear on the radar of those of us political scientists who study democratization. But the broader challenge of creating "usable states" is clearly evident at the level of mass opinion. A few findings from recent surveys published by LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project) illustrate this very well.<sup>3</sup>

- Almost 24 percent of respondents reported in 2016/2017 that they had been victims of crime, the highest in a series of surveys since 2010. Venezuela, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Bolivia were at the top of the list.
- Approximately 40 percent felt somewhat or very unsafe in their neighborhoods. The 18 percent who felt very unsafe was higher than any previous round of surveys.
- There was also very little faith in government: about 20 percent reported having to pay a bribe to government or police officials. The proportion was highest in Bolivia, Haiti, Paraguay, Mexico,

Peru, and Venezuela. Given the social-desirability bias in such questions, the actual number was probably higher.

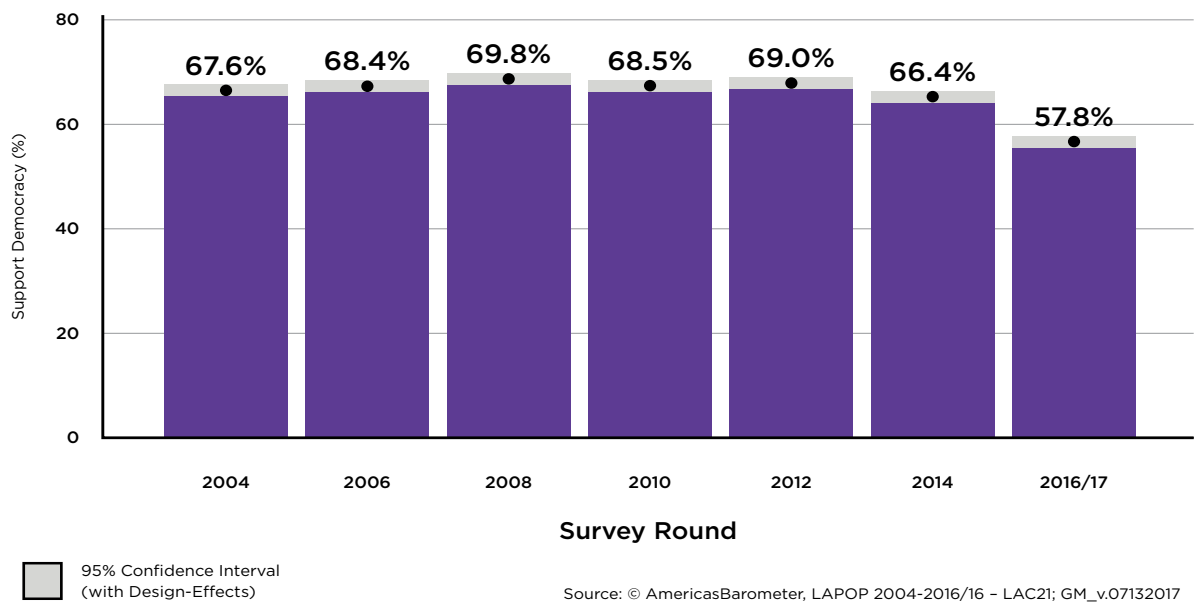
- Over 60 percent had little or no confidence that the judiciary would punish the guilty, the highest registered in surveys since 2006. Approximately 60 percent of the LAPOP sample also believed that at least half of all politicians were corrupt. Brazil, Mexico, and Peru were at the top of the list, with Colombia and Venezuela next.

With these responses, it should not be surprising that there is considerable public skepticism about democracy in Latin America. A standard survey indicator of support for democracy has been to ask respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement: “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” In Latin America, as we can see in Figure 3, there has been a decline of almost 10 percentage points agreeing with that statement between 2004 and 2016/2017—from over 67 percent to around 58 percent.

In the breakdown by country (shown in Figure 4), the percentage agreeing with the statement was relatively high in Uruguay and Costa Rica (along with the United States and the British Caribbean). But percentages in most of the rest of the Latin American countries were substantially lower, and two of the largest countries—Mexico and Brazil—ranked near the bottom, along with poorer countries like Guatemala, Paraguay, and Haiti, with only around 50 percent of respondents expressing unconditional support for democracy. Put somewhat differently, about half of these populations did not see democracy as the “only game in town.”

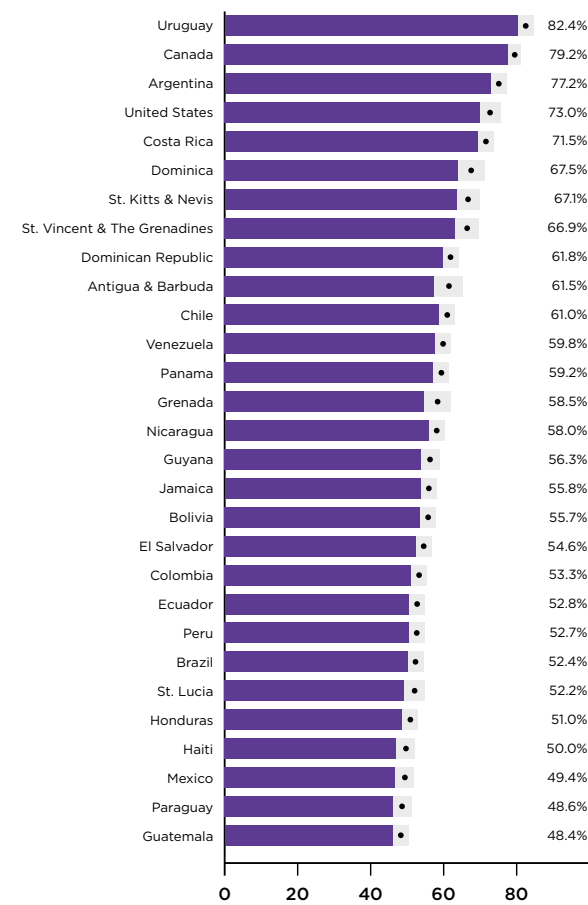
Let me turn next to a second, more immediate challenge to democracy: the threats that arise from elected officials who come to power through democratic channels, but who then act in ways that undermine constitutional government from within. In the last several decades, the most notable threats have come from autocratic presidents who have incrementally dismantled civil liberties and constitutional checks in the name of popular majorities. Hugo Chávez, of course, is the iconic figure in this regard, but the model has parallels in

**Figure 3: Support for Democracy in Latin America over Time**



Source: Cohen et al., “Support for Democracy over Time in the LAC-21 Region,” in *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016-2017: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Government* (2017), p. 6, figure 1.2.

**Figure 4: Cross-National Support for Democracy in the Americas**



95% Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP 2004-2016/16 - LAC21; GM\_v.07132017

Source: Cohen et al., "Support for Democracy over Time in the LAC-21 Region," in *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016-2017: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Government* (2017), p. 5, figure 1.1.

Bolivia, Nicaragua, and (until recently) Ecuador. In the past, democracies were typically overthrown by military coups. In the present, they are more likely to suffer a slow death at the hands of elected autocrats.

Now, it is important to acknowledge that in recent years, populists have identified with the political left and that they do give voice to marginalized sectors of the Latin American population. Their support reflects widespread dissatisfaction with high inequality, slow economic growth, and the

feckless performance of democratic governments. But popularly elected governments are not democratic if they use their power, as they have done in the cases I mentioned, to foreclose opportunities for voters to withdraw their support as conditions change.

It is, however, wrong to focus solely on populist threats from the left. Populist autocrats can emerge from the right as well as the left, as we see in the cases of Orbán in Hungary, Erdoğan in Turkey, and—of course—Trump in the United States. There are many such examples in Latin America as well, including Juan Perón, who rose to power in the 1940s as an admirer of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

In reality, populists scramble the conventional differences between left and right. What links them together is their political style: their claims that they, and they alone, embody the will of the "people;" that their opponents are traitors or criminals; and that institutions of horizontal accountability—legislators, courts, the press—are impediments to expression of the popular will.

Legislators and judges, as well as presidents, can also abuse their authority in ways that undermine constitutional government. In Honduras and Brazil, for example, legislators have engaged in highly politicized uses of impeachment powers to depose legitimately elected presidents. And in Brazil, judicial attacks on corruption—whether or not they are legally justified—have led to a dangerous political polarization that can potentially open the way to a disintegration of the democratic system. I do not want to enter the debate over whether the imprisonment of Lula was a legitimate exercise of judicial authority. What is important is the polarization of *perceptions* that it has aroused. Whatever the motives of the prosecutors—and they may well be honorable—the rule of law is weakened if the actions of the judiciary are not credible to large segments of the population.

To understand these threats, we need to take into account the tensions that are inherent among the *constituent components* of liberal democracy—among the principles of majority rule usually embodied in elected presidents,

legislators with separate electoral constituencies, and independent judiciaries. Managing tensions among these institutions requires politicians who place a high value on this combination of checks and balances and who are willing to compromise with competitors in ways that respond to changing social and political conditions.

In Latin America, however, the deterioration of public trust in institutions weakens the incentives of officeholders to respect institutional norms and increases their incentive to exploit the advantages of their office at the expense of the system as a whole. The result is what some political science colleagues have called “careening” between conflicting institutional principles of liberal democracy: either constitutional stalemates and policy dysfunction, or the unfettered majoritarianism of populist presidents.

Unlike coups, it is not always very clear when such regimes cross the line from imperfect democracies to what Andreas Schedler has called “electoral authoritarianism.”<sup>4</sup> But even in societies where governments continue to rely on elections to legitimate their authority, these political strategies both reflect and exacerbate the breakdown of norms necessary for the survival of democratic regimes. Democracies are in serious danger when elected politicians begin to view their competitors as existential threats, or when they prefer stalemate and confrontation to incremental compromise.

The degeneration of Venezuela’s Bolivarian model into a full-blown dictatorship provides an appropriate coda to this discussion. Under Maduro, the democratic façade maintained under Chávez has eroded almost entirely, and the government has turned increasingly to coercion to contain the political opposition. Chávez himself tolerated a greater degree of political contestation and relied on more subtle forms of political control, but the Maduro dictatorship is a logical extension of his autocratic practices and economic recklessness. And the humanitarian wreckage that has resulted from these abuses has now extended beyond Venezuela to many of its neighbors, which must now deal with the destabilizing challenges posed by over a million desperate refugees.

A third major challenge to Latin American democracy comes from outside the region—from political polarization and the deterioration of democratic norms in the United States. To an extent, this deterioration is the product of long-term divisions over race and social justice that go back for decades, but it has become particularly acute since the election of Donald Trump. Trump’s autocratic style and his racial and misogynistic appeals closely resemble those of his populist counterparts both in Latin America and Eastern Europe, and this has had a profound effect on the willingness and capacity of the United States to encourage the spread of democracy elsewhere in the world.

What are the implications for Latin American democracy? The answer is not simple. U.S. influence in the region has historically been marked by malevolence or indifference to democratic aspirations in Latin America. This was especially the case during the Cold War, when our government actively backed right-wing dictatorships and subverted democratic governments viewed as dangerously vulnerable to Soviet influence.

Latin America also suffered in important ways from the way the U.S. government wielded economic power. The dogmatic insistence on rigid neoliberal reforms, for example, had profoundly destabilizing social and political effects on the democracies that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s.

But U.S. policy has periodically had positive influences as well, and democratic aspirations in Latin America have benefited when these influences gain ascendancy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, successive U.S. presidents have placed a higher priority on supporting democratic reform as part of long-term U.S. interests. And although the government has not always acted consistently in these interests (for example, in Honduras in 2009), it has generally responded to democratization in the region with either active support or at least benign neglect.

The weakening of U.S. democracy in the Trump era has created a strong international headwind against the building and consolidation of democracy in Latin America. Democracy in the



minimalist sense of free elections is not likely to break down in the United States; but as noted, we do see many of the symptoms of autocratic appeals and behavior that have at times threatened democracy in Latin America, including the weaponization of law enforcement and efforts to undermine the independence of the legislature, the courts, and the press.

This means that Latin American supporters of democracy cannot count on the United States as a supportive ally, at least not for the time being. Especially in view of the depletion of the U.S. Department of State, we cannot expect nuanced policies that both respect the sovereignty of Latin American countries and engage, where useful, in efforts at democracy promotion.

Moreover, the potential damage to the prospects of Latin American democracy goes well beyond the lack of diplomatic support or economic aid. The retreat of the United States from its traditional role as a force for international stability—a role undermined by Trump’s erratic policies toward allies and trading partners—has enlarged the terrain available to China and other non-democratic rivals. And less tangibly, but no less important, Trump has badly damaged the international image of the United States as a model of an open, prosperous, democratic country—an image that, despite our failures, has had important resonance in Latin America.

The Trump era will end at some point, and the political pendulum in the United States is likely to swing back at least part of the way to policies that place a higher priority on democratic and liberal values. In the meantime, though, the United States is contributing to a distinctly unfavorable international environment. And at least some of its effects are likely to endure.

Is there a way forward from this rather bleak picture? One thing to bear in mind is that the challenges I have outlined are not equally severe everywhere. Democracy seems relatively well entrenched in Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica, for example, notwithstanding serious problems in those countries. We should also not underestimate the determination and persistence of democratic

forces throughout the region. I believe that, as scholars and intellectuals, we can encourage these forces by laying out or reaffirming principles that might contribute to building durable, high-quality democracies.

First, I want to return to a point I made earlier in this lecture. The quality of democratic government pivots fundamentally on a sustained effort to reduce economic, gender, and racial inequality. In some of my own research, I have argued that, even in a context of high inequality, democratic institutions can survive. But it is also true that the extreme concentration of wealth has a corrupting impact on these institutions. It reduces the incentives of the wealthy to contribute to public goods (education, health, security) that might expand the role of a “usable state.” And notwithstanding formal principles of equal political rights, money bleeds over into political influence. Where the concentration of wealth is extreme, so is the skewing of political power. Even if formal democracy survives in such settings, the reality is a reduced space for popular voices.

A second, related point is that democracies are unlikely to reduce inequality in the absence of a strong democratic left—progressive parties and vibrant civic organizations that press for a more equitable distribution of wealth and social power. Those who pursue this goal, to be sure, cannot and should not be oblivious to the constraints of the market. However, there is abundant evidence from both European and Latin American democracies that the balance of political power in democratic systems has a marked effect on the reduction of inequality, both directly through labor markets and indirectly through government policies. A strong, democratic left is therefore an essential component of a strong democracy.

But my third point is that a democratic fight to reduce inequality must be conducted with a clear-eyed understanding of what liberal democracy can and cannot accomplish. Rapid and massive social transformations are possible under some kinds of autocratic regimes. Yet in liberal democracies, where the rights of a variety of interests have institutional protections, progress is inherently incremental. It is built around inclusive



coalitions and compromise with rival political groups. Conversely, as we learned from the military overthrow of democratic regimes in the 1960s and 1970s, actors that pursue “maximalist” strategies within a democratic framework risk undermining that framework itself.

Finally, if democracy is to respond to the challenges it faces in Latin America and the world, the defense and expansion of political and civil liberties should be regarded as intrinsically important goals, and not simply as means to more favorable social and economic conditions. It is true, as I have argued above, that support for democratic regimes is likely to erode if they are continuously led by feckless and corrupt governments. But the remedy, if there is one, will rest on a reaffirmation, rather than a subversion, of democratic principles. It depends—to cite the frequently used survey question—on whether citizens and officials view democracy as unconditionally better than the alternatives.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
- <sup>2</sup> Enrique Desmond Arias, *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> All data are from *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016-2017: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Government*, edited by Mollie J. Cohen, Noam Lupu, and Elizabeth Zechmeister (Nashville: Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt University, August 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006). //