

DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA: IN SEARCH OF “REGULARIZATION”

By Fabian Echegaray and Carlos Elordi

Since the early 1980s, elections, party politics, citizen participation, and other democratic institutions have increasingly become a part of South America's political life as the region entered into the global “third wave” of democratization—following the Mediterranean countries but preceding the recent sweeping changes in Eastern Europe. As a rule, governments have been freely elected, opposition has been able to replace incumbents, the franchise has been unrestricted, and leaders have been much more accountable to the laws and public opinion than at any other time in history. Yet, the process of regularizing democracy has been anything but problem-free.

Military, economic, and political constraints have heavily influenced the development of democracy, affecting the levels of public opinion support and satisfaction.

From the outset, the legacies of former authoritarian regimes, such as military prerogatives and veto powers remained mostly intact, imposing limits to elected governments' decision-making capabilities, and shaping policies in a much more conservative fashion than the population expected. In Chile, the constitution sanctioned by the military in 1980 could not be modified, nor could army privileges be limited. The military are entitled to a percentage of copper-export revenues; they make their own appointments for chief positions, and exert important leverage in policy-making by controlling the National Security Council. In Brazil, the armed forces managed to keep tight control of the state through state-owned firms and three out of twelve cabinet positions; and their influence in the elaboration of the 1988 Constitution was notorious. In Perú, continuous guerrilla warfare since 1980 only helped the military to regain

influence over civilian governments, and by the declaration of regional “states of siege”, to acquire control of about 40% of the territory.

Expectations that economic progress would follow along with democratic restoration were great. However, the 1980s were characterized throughout Latin America as “the lost decade”, with an average decline in GNP per capita of 9.6%. The Chilean restoration, which took place at the end of the decade, could rely upon the sound economic policies of the late Pinochet's rule and hence was not harmed much, but the cases of Brazil and Perú are different. Huge external debt, capital flight, hyperinflation, stagnation, and a steady rise in poverty and inequality made civilian rule almost impossible. Stabilization plans, stop-and-go policies, and overnight economic shocks followed one after another, spreading a sense that democratic government is inefficacious and untrustworthy.

Authoritarianism lasted 12 years in Perú, 18 years in Chile, and 21 years in Brazil, thus imposing serious handicaps for the democratic leadership in terms of generational continuity and policy expertise. In Perú and Chile, this amounted to a freeze on political leadership. In Brazil, where the congress kept working under limitations, it brought about leadership discontinuity and the rise of a new political cadre too closely linked to military interests and policies. Similarly, dictatorships helped to accustom leaders and citizenry to a poorly checked executive rule. As a result, tensions between presidents and legislatures in the new democracies quickly became major conflicts, leading to authoritarian solutions such as the dissolution of the legislature in Perú in 1992, or to the continuous legislative deadlock experienced in Brazil since 1990.

Understanding Support for Democracy

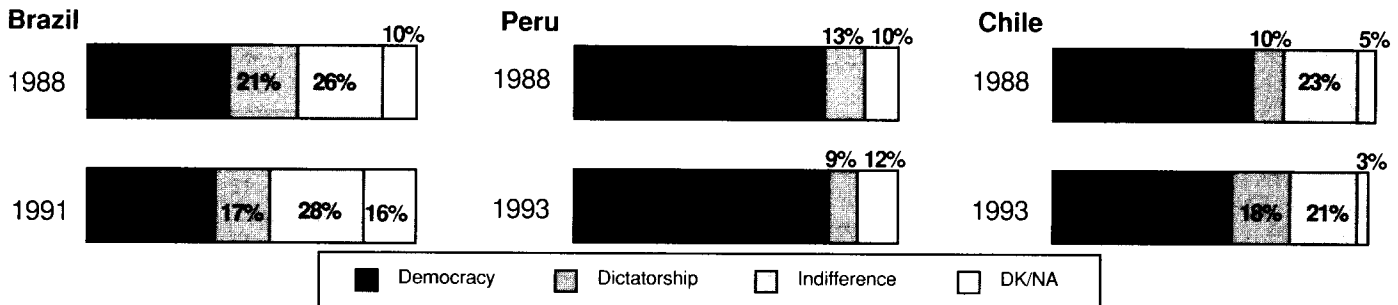
The implications of these constraints for public opinion have been clear. Institutional confidence has remained low, approval of governments and policies has become volatile, and support for democracy has not been as universal as one would like.

Still, endorsement of democratic institutions has exceeded that for non-democratic alternatives. Figure 1 shows that different experiences have built up varied feelings toward democracy, revealing stable opinions and sensitive publics across the board. Brazilians have been less enthusiastic about democracy. To be sure, the years of growth rates averaging 10% under military rule can explain the comparatively higher sympathy for dictatorship. On the other hand, with the previous “states of siege”, Peruvian majorities have consistently preferred democracy. Consistent with the mixed heritage of the Pinochet years (political repression with economic growth), a minority of Chileans are receptive to authoritarianism. As a rule, the balance of opinion clearly favors democracy over authoritarianism.

For Chileans and Brazilians, democracy is characterized by economic and political opportunities, thus feeding the expectation that it would lead to better outcomes. Yet, theirs has not been just a materialist notion of democracy. Democratic institutional forms and procedures have also been considered central, providing room for collective guarantees and individual expression. Such a balance can help save the new governments from demand-overload and to provide sources of legitimation other than economic success.

Figure 1 TWO CHEERS FOR DEMOCRACY

Question: (*Brazil and Chile*) With which of these phrases do you agree the most...a) Democracy is preferable to any other form of government; b) Sometimes an authoritarian government can be preferable to a non-democratic one; c) To people like me, it does not make any difference if a democratic or authoritarian regime is in power? (*Peru*) What system of government do you believe is the most indicated for Peru in these days...Constitutional democracy or revolutionary-Marxist?



Source: Survey data provided by IDESP (Brazil) for Consorcio POLIS—Southern Cone Project, 1988; IBOPE (Brazil), 1991; CERC (Chile) for Consorcio POLIS, latest that of 1993; and APOYO (Peru), latest that of 1993.

Confidence in Institutions

Interestingly, positive views of democracy did not apply uniformly to key political institutions and actors. Presidents, parliaments, courts, and parties have been viewed in various ways. In two of three countries, political parties have fared especially badly. Only 26% of those surveyed in Brazil (1991) and 11% of those in Perú (1993) expressed confidence in them. This has sharply eroded the position of traditional parties, opening the door to successful outsider candidates and overnight parties.

Parliaments have enjoyed a relatively higher popularity than parties. Confidence in their congress was expressed by 44% of Peruvians (1993), and 48% of Brazilians (1991). This can be interpreted as a measure of popular consent, considering that legislatures are a key democratic institution.

Regularizing democracy has also involved closing the gap between presidential and policy-approval ratings. In Chile and Perú, presidential job ratings remained in the mid-fifties and low sixties, respectively, from late 1991 to March of 1993. However, during the same time span, economic policy approval exceeded job rating in Chile (average rating of 73%), while the opposite happened in Perú (average rating of 43%).

To be sure, this disparity in economic policy approval reflects the differing ability of incumbents to handle the complex agendas of each country. The concerns of Peruvians, centered on economic issues such as unemployment, poverty, and inflation (44%, 27%, and 24%, respectively), were relatively peripheral to Chileans, who put crime (60%) and health (49%) at the top of their list. For Chile, a basic policy consensus on economics provided a well-rooted source of legitimation for the government. In Perú, policy disaffection needed to be balanced by a more popular Executive.

Transforming the Economy within the Context of Democracy

As a strategy to lessen economic threats to legitimacy, transformations of the economy have been included in the official agenda of the different administrations. The aim has been to shrink state paternalism and to pluralize the society through the promotion of private interests.

Privatization and deregulation policies trimmed out the clientele-oriented base of the state and modified traditional party politics. The reaction of the public was supportive. In Chile (1993) and Perú (1993), 59% approved state divestiture, and 58% of Peruvians also acknowledged that a market economy was better for the country. Support for reform paid off, and

the economies of both countries grew over 4% during 1993, improving the economic basis of democratic consensus. In Brazil, as of 1989, agreement on these policies was lower, although they were still favored on balance (41 to 29%). To a great extent, this smaller edge in favor of reform was reflected in the ambivalent policies followed during the early 1990s.

Though the political consequences of economic reform are still to be seen, one can posit that democratic consolidation would be helped by a more privatist and open economic system, and could gain in legitimacy from a public increasingly supportive of such democratic developments.

Overall, we note marked progress toward democratic legitimation. But much more remains to be done.

References:

Brazil: 1988 survey data provided by IDESP for Consorcio POLIS—Southern Cone Project; 1991 survey data provided by IBOPE. **Chile:** Excluding Figure 1, survey data provided by CEP-Adimark, latest that of March 1993. **Peru:** Survey data provided by APOYO, latest that of March 1993.

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