

form of a punctilious insistence on constitutions and constitutionalism. At the same time, these charters gave presidents extraordinary powers to meet emergencies, assure internal security, and respond to external threats. Under what came to be known as “regimes of exception,” executives and designated officials could suspend civil liberties and rights, declare states of siege, confiscate property, and establish authoritarian rule. Such provisions thus established a tradition of “constitutional dictatorship.” Predictably enough, they also fostered widespread contempt for the rule of law. Constitutions were extremely fragile documents. From independence to the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, the sixteen nations of Spanish America produced 103 constitutions—for an average of more than six per country!³

Portuguese America—that is, Brazil—traced a less tumultuous path. In 1808 the Portuguese court fled to Brazil to evade the armies of Napoleon. Years later the king resumed the throne in Portugal; his son stayed behind and in 1822 became the first emperor of an independent Brazil. Under the enlightened leadership of Pedro II, the monarchy remained intact until 1889, when it was replaced by oligarchic rule. There were struggles, to be sure, but Brazil did not face extensive economic disorder or social upheaval in the decades after independence.

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 one another 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 Portales in Chile and 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.

The third variation, as mentioned in the introduction, 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 nonviolent means for settling disputes among contending factions of dominant elites. It was also a means of wresting power away from caudillos and military

³ Brian Loveman, *The Constitution of Tyranny: Regimes of Exception in Spanish America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993); Paul W. Drake, *Between Tyranny and Anarchy: A History of Democracy in Latin America, 1800–2006*

dictators. Although 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.⁴ This kind of regime typically flourished in societies with expansive gaps between elites and popular masses.

CYCLES AND TRENDS

What has been the incidence of electoral democracy in Latin America, and how has it changed over time? The response to these questions involves a systematic survey of nineteen countries from 1900 through 2000. As a group, these countries constitute 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 Suriname, Guyana, French Guiana, and Belize.⁵ Also omitted is Cuba, not for cultural or geographical reasons, but because it has had no meaningful experience with electoral democracy (see Box 1.2). By the year 2000, the total population of these nineteen 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
- “semidemocratic,” under leaders who came to power through elections that were free but not fair—when only one candidate had any reasonable prospect of winning, or when elected leaders were obliged to share effective power with or cede it to nonelected groups (such as landowners or the military)
- “oligarchic,” when electoral competition was essentially fair but not free—with candidates from dominant elites and suffrage restricted to a very small percentage of the adult population
- “nondemocratic,” or autocratic, at all other times, or during years of military coups.

⁴ Terminology here is not felicitous. This kind of regime could be referred to as “oligarchic constitutionalism,” “oligarchic contestation,” “oligarchic electoralism,” or even—stretching categories—“oligarchic democracy.”

⁵ Additional reasons for exclusion are size, because most of these countries are very small; colonial legacy, because British and other traditions differed markedly from those of Spain and Portugal; and political experience, because many

BOX 1.2

THE MISSING COUNTRY

Cuba is conspicuous by its absence from this book. It is, of course, a very significant country. Independent and proud, Cuba has undergone a major social revolution, endured decades of hostility from the United States, and become a complex symbol (positive and negative) in the changing world arena. Why the omission?

The answer is simple: because Cuba has virtually no democratic history. This is not to denigrate the social accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution, sometimes described as a "participatory democracy." Nor is it to say that Cuba has not given rise to eloquent appeals for democratic politics.

It is just to acknowledge the facts. Upon independence from Spain, Cuba was governed through U.S. military occupation (1898–1902). And from then until 1934 the island was an American protectorate, as the Platt Amendment to the Cuban Constitution entitled the United States to intervene in the island's domestic politics at will (it exercised this option with military expeditions in 1906–1909, 1912, and 1917–1922). Elections during this era were intermittent and could be considered "semidemocratic" at best.

Generalized protests in 1933 led to the ouster of longtime dictator Gerardo Machado and to the rise of a military sergeant named Fulgencio Batista. A relatively open election—the most nearly democratic in Cuban history—elevated an idealistic doctor-professor named Ramón Grau San Martín into the presidency. Only four months later he was ousted by Batista, who went on to dominate Cuban politics for the next quarter-century. With Cuba safely under control, U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt abrogated the Platt Amendment in 1934. Batista's tyranny lasted until he finally fled the island in early 1959.

Since then the Cuban Revolution under Fidel Castro has scored some notable achievements, especially in the areas of health care, education, and race relations. It has survived countless efforts at destabilization by U.S.-sponsored operatives. Frequently, too, Castro has provided an outspoken and articulate voice for peoples of the developing world. But there have not been free and fair elections of the topmost leadership.

In practice, the nondemocratic 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 nondemocratic, even if there might have been semidemocratic or democratic activity during other parts of the year. (See Appendix 1 for full explanation and details.)

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 nondemocratic

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.⁶

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 well beyond, as of this writing—Chile managed to restore its democratic traditions.

The semidemocratic 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 1915. Implementation of a major 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 to 1942 period could be unambiguously scored as semidemocratic. After another military coup in 1943, Juan Domingo Perón triumphed in the elections of 1946. His election to a second term was tightly controlled, however, so the 1951 to 1954 phase was coded as semidemocratic. 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 semidemocratic (except for 1962, when a nondemocratic 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 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

⁶ Accordingly, the basic criterion for electoral participation was effective extension of the suffrage to at least half of the adult male citizens. In many cases this required removal of literacy requirements.



Francisco Madero of Mexico casts ballot in Latin America's first democratic election. (Editorial Trillas)

same year, relatively free elections that gave the presidency to Francisco Madero (since remembered as “the apostle of Mexican democracy”).⁷ Madero was ousted (and murdered) in a military coup in 1913. Years of revolutionary fighting led to alternation of military domination with a semidemocratic 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 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 1.1 plots the incidence of democratic, semidemocratic, oligarchic, and nondemocratic regimes for Latin America from 1900 through 2000: The vertical axis

⁷ There appears to be a widespread belief that Mexico's 1911 election was so one-sided that it could not be considered fully democratic. My authority here is John Womack, Jr., who has reported that “the Madero-Pino Suárez slate won 53 percent of the vote; four other slates shared the remainder.” Womack, “The Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920,” in Leslie Bethell, ed., *Mexico since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 134. Essays in this volume first appeared in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*.

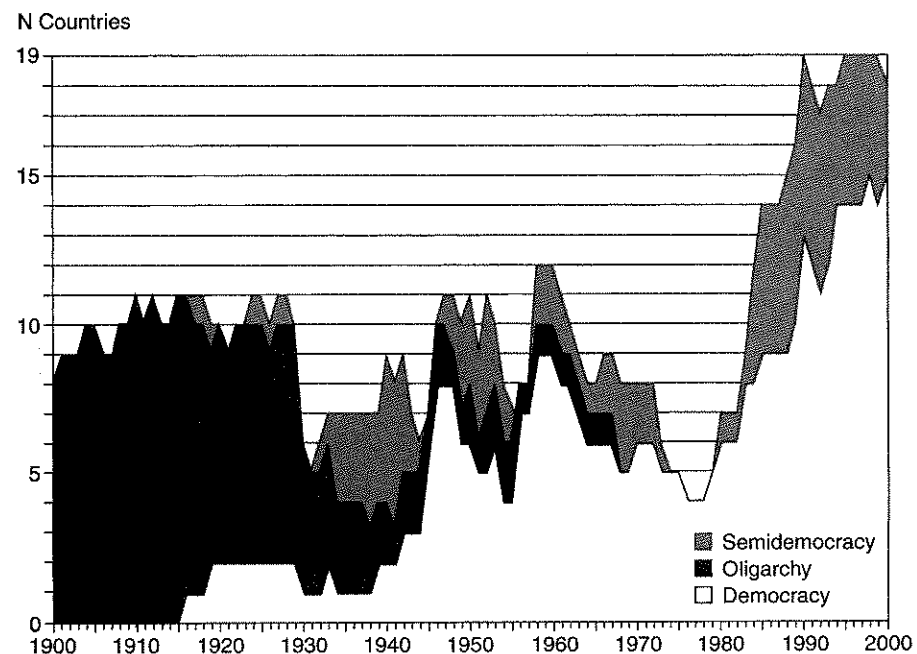


Figure 1.1 Cycles of political change in Latin America, 1900–2000

measures the number of countries with each regime type, and the horizontal axis represents year-by-year change over time.⁸

Over the span of the century, the data reveal a remarkable progression of electoral democracy in Latin America. Around 1900 there were no democracies anywhere in the region. But a process of democratization appeared early in the century, and by 2000 more than three quarters of the countries were holding free and fair elections. Democracy was on the rise. The tendency was not predetermined, inexorable, irreversible, unchangeable, or permanent. But it persisted over time, and it constitutes a fundamental fact.

Around this upward trend, the figure circumscribes three broad “cycles” of democratic change.⁹ This is a crucial discovery, and it will form the basis for historical comparison throughout the remainder of this book.

The first cycle stretches from 1900 approximately through 1939, and it was dominated by oligarchic competition. At its peak, around and after 1910, intraoligarchic 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

⁸ The same data weighted by population size appear in Chapter 12 (see Figure 12.1). As indicated there, differences in the curve are due largely to the influence of Brazil.
⁹ I use the term *cycle* in a colloquial, not a technical, sense.



Map 1.1 Latin America's changing political landscape: Electoral democracies in 1920, 1960, and 2000

emergent democracy—very briefly in Mexico (1911–1912) and more durably in Argentina (1916–1929) and Uruguay (1919–1933). 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 was a cycle between 1940 and 1977 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 preexisting 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 and three others were semidemocracies, 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 three democracies throughout the region—in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela.

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 semidemocracies, and no autocratic regimes. And by 2000, nearly 90 percent of the people of Latin America were enjoying electoral democracy.

Figure 1.1 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 Great 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 intraoligarchic competition remained only in Honduras and Panama. Throughout the rest of the region, socioeconomic 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 semidemocratic 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 nondemocratic or autocratic politics, represented by the unshaded upper portions of Figure 1.1. Of all the 1,919 country-years from 1900 through 2000, the nondemocratic

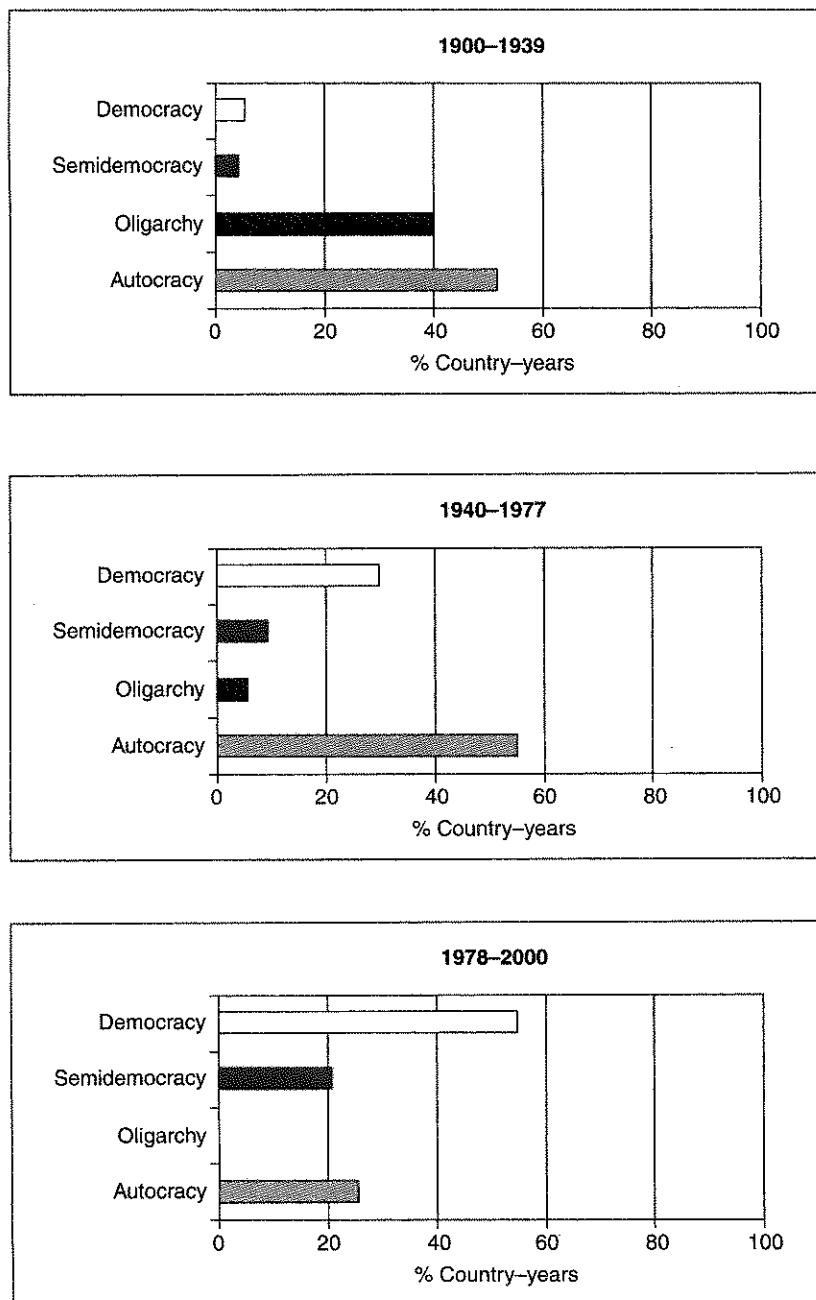


Figure 1.2 Changing incidence of political regimes, 1900–2000

category accounts for 47 percent—nearly half the total. This compares with 26 percent for electoral democracy, 10 percent for semidemocracy, and 18 percent for competitive oligarchy. 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 1.2 presents changing distributions of country-years in three summary periods: 1900–1939, 1940–1977, and 1978–2000. Nondemocratic 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 dropped to 24 percent throughout the final phase. Oligarchic regimes were widely prevalent in 1900–1939, about 40 percent of the time, and then dropped almost out of sight, falling to 6 percent in 1940–1977 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. Semidemocracy followed a similar path, but to a lesser degree, increasing from 4 percent to 9 percent to 20 percent.

Taken together, Figures 1.1 and 1.2 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 (because democracy cannot 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. As shown in Chapter 4, the U.S.–Soviet rivalry exerted a powerful negative influence on prospects for democracy from the 1940s through the 1980s. The 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.

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?

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
- 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.¹⁰

Does this scheme apply to Latin America? This question merits close scrutiny. The first, long wave described by Huntington began in the United States (in 1828) and spread mostly throughout nineteenth-century Europe to Switzerland, France, and Great Britain and later Italy and Spain. Early in the twentieth century it embraced four countries of Latin America: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay.¹¹ The second wave took shape in the shadow of World War II. It began with the democratization of defeated Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Japan), gained strength through the process of decolonization (as in India), and affected Latin America with the addition of Costa Rica, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador to democratic ranks. The third wave began with the overthrow of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 and moved first through southern Europe to Greece and then Spain after the death of Francisco Franco. As suggested by Figures 1.1 and 1.2 earlier, it spread to Latin America from the late 1970s through the 1990s to include Central America and parts of the Caribbean.¹² (This led Huntington to observe, with evident surprise, that the third wave was “overwhelmingly a Catholic wave.”)¹³ It also spread to India, the Philippines, and (once again) 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 earlier experience with pluralist politics, and to portions of the former Soviet Union, where most nations had very little democratic history.

¹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), esp. Ch. 1.

¹¹ As shown in Appendix 1, I do not consider Colombia to be a full-fledged electoral democracy until the early 1940s.

¹² At the time that Huntington was writing, Mexico did not qualify for inclusion in the third wave.

¹³ Huntington, *Third Wave*, 76.

This periodization seems appropriate for Latin America, but only with substantial caveats. One exception 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 protodemocratic—with 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 practices in late nineteenth-century continental Europe. In this perspective—and with a considerable dose of poetic license—the 1900–1939 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 1970s. 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.¹⁴ 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 more 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.¹⁵ Another nettlesome problem relates to causality. Huntington’s oceanographic metaphor suggests that political transitions around the world were connected to one another, or to a common cause, in some observable fashion. Thus, Latin America was simply taking part in

¹⁴ See Larry Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” *Journal of Democracy* 7, 3 (1996): 20–37.

¹⁵ Paradoxically, my focus on a stable set of cases (nineteen 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.

global processes—later than the leading countries, and to a lesser degree—but it was nonetheless part of the overall pattern.¹⁶

Democratic Dominoes?

On inspection, Figure 1.1 suggests the possible existence of a regional, or “domino,” effect, a process of accumulation that suggests the possible presence of common causal factors and mutual influences. 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 connections.

A more persuasive interpretation is that there might 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 awareness of regional phenomena. Thus, opposition groups in Country Y could draw moral and material sustenance from the downfall of a dictatorship in Country X. 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 nearby El Salvador.

Similarly, military rulers could draw lessons from developments in nearby countries. They were especially mindful of the terms under which military governments left office in other countries: If they could find ways to protect themselves and their interests once they were back in the barracks, it might be entirely acceptable to take leave of presidential palaces. As shown in Chapter 3, military leaders around the hemisphere became acutely conscious of human rights trials in Argentina in the mid-1980s. 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.”¹⁷

¹⁶ This raises additional issues of cause and effect. If Latin America represented a small percentage 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.

¹⁷ 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, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 85–86.

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.

Subregional Variations and the Colossus of the North

Extending the analysis, Figures 1.3 and 1.4 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 1.3, 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

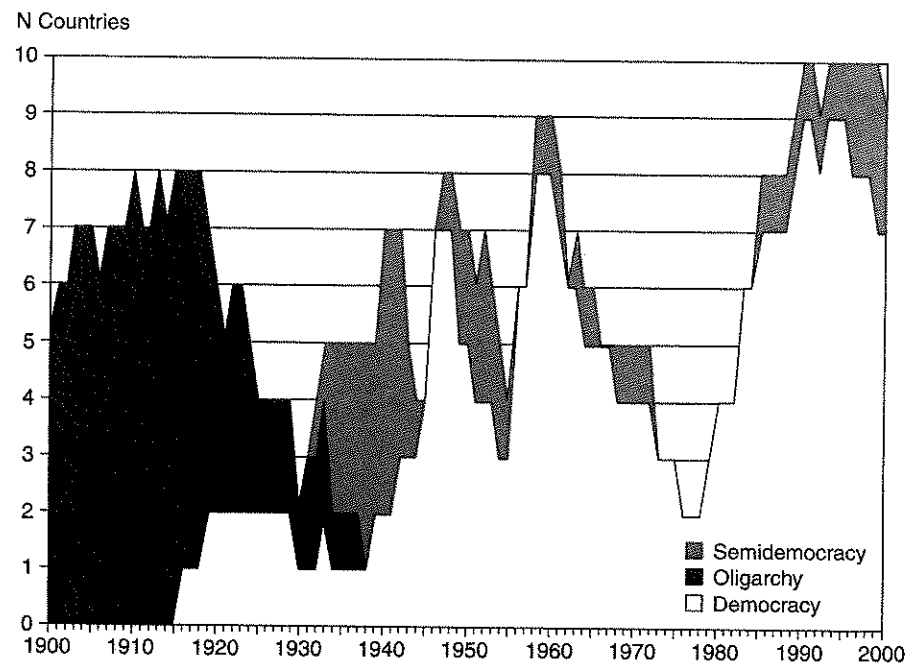


Figure 1.3 Cycles of political change by region: South America, 1900–2000

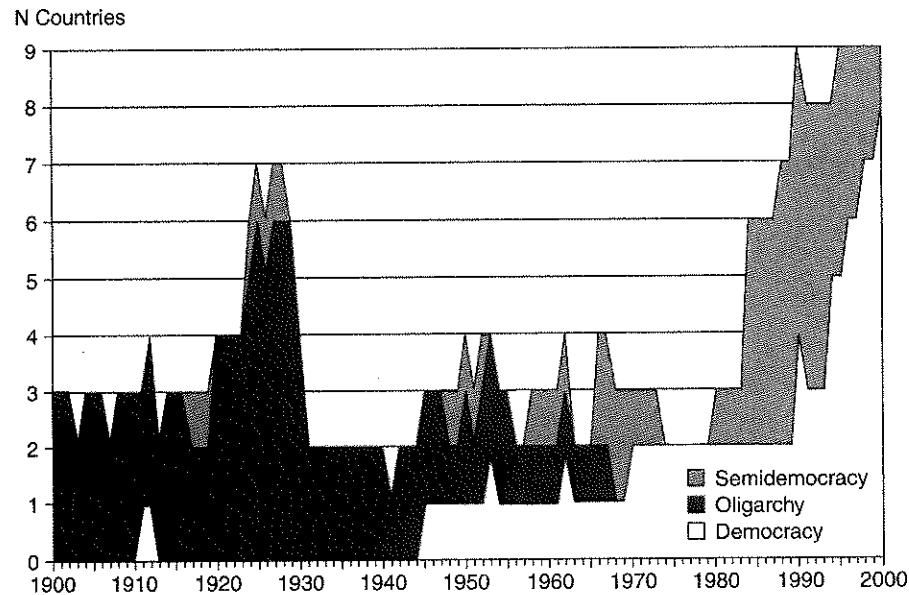


Figure 1.4 Cycles of political change by region: Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, 1900–2000

democratic experiment during the 1940 to 1977 period; they also had earlier experience with oligarchic competition after the turn of the century. The only newcomer to the process was Paraguay.

As shown by Figure 1.4, 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 anytime between the 1940s and the 1980s. Then began a sharp rise in the incidence of democracy and semidemocracy, culminating in Mexico's free and fair election in 2000, by which time eight of the nine countries were electoral democracies.¹⁸

Simple inspection reveals that these two subregions might 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. As argued in Chapter 4, 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

¹⁸ Countries included in this grouping are Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.



1979: Campaign poster for Jaime Roldós of Ecuador heralds a new cycle of electoral democracy. The slogan reads: "against oppression and poverty—the force of change." (Latin America Bureau/Research and Action)

pressure, power, and influence around the Caribbean basin, including Mexico and Central America, than in South America.¹⁹ It is plainly apparent from Figures 1.3 and 1.4 that electoral democracy started sooner and spread more widely in South America than in the Caribbean. In fact, it flourished initially in countries farthest 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 emergence of political democracy in some countries of Latin America. Alternatively, and with more assurance, one could conclude that U.S. influence failed to guarantee the occurrence of free and fair elections. As shown in Chapter 4, such patterns thus suggest a broader point: The greater the level of U.S. involvement, the later (and

¹⁹ See my *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).