DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN LATIN AMERICA
A Work in Progress
by Michael Shifter

Michael Shifter is president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington, DC–based policy forum on Western hemisphere affairs. Shifter previously served as the organization’s vice president for policy and managed its programs on the Andean region and democratic governance. Since 1993, he has been adjunct professor of Latin American politics at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. Before joining the Inter-American Dialogue, Shifter directed the Latin American and Caribbean program at the National Endowment for Democracy and the Ford Foundation’s governance and human rights program in the Andean region and the Southern Cone, where he was based in Lima, Peru, and then Santiago de Chile. Prior to that, he served as a representative at the Inter-American Foundation for the Brazil program. Shifter writes and comments widely on U.S.-Latin American relations and hemispheric affairs and has frequently testified before the U.S. Congress. He is coeditor, along with Jorge Dominguez, of Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America. He is contributing editor to Current History and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Shifter graduated summa cum laude from Oberlin College and received a master’s degree in sociology from Harvard University.

Abstract

Democracy is deepening across much of Latin America, especially in Mexico and Brazil, the two major countries. In a region once plagued by bloody coups and military interventionism, free and fair elections are now the norm. Significant economic and social advances, including a sharp decline in poverty levels and even in inequality in some countries, have contributed to improved governance. At the same time, in a number of countries, political parties are weak and there has been erosion of checks on executive authority. The spread of violent crime poses a risk to the rule of law in some nations.

Democratic governance in an increasingly diverse Latin America is moving in many different directions at the same time. It is therefore wise to resist the temptation to pick a specific issue or country—say, press freedom in Argentina—to draw a categorical conclusion about democracy for the region as a whole. Sharply contrasting governance models and leadership styles make any sweeping generalization impossible. A further complication is the notable absence of the consensus that existed immediately following the Cold War period regarding what constitutes democracy in the region—and the will to defend it when threatened.

Making Strides in Key Areas

Nonetheless, it is credible to argue that, on balance, the state of democratic governance is making important strides. For starters, free and fair elections—long the sole metric by which democracies were evaluated—function far better in the vast majority of countries than they did in the past. This is not to say that observers should take them for granted; there have been unfortunate gains, though hardly irreversible, should be recognized as at least fulfilling what Samuel P. Huntington called “the modest meaning of democracy” (Huntington 1989).

If the region has made progress in organizing freer and fairer elections, it has also, for the most part, performed well in economic and social terms. To be sure, the gains are far from uniform, but the data is impressive and not unrelated to a critical element of democracy in Latin America today: social well-being, or, to use the increasingly fashionable term, “social inclusion.”

Since 2003, Latin America has registered the best economic growth in a generation. Experts who made dire predictions about the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on the region were proven wrong (Foxley 2009). With the exception of Mexico—chiefly because of its deep economic connections to the United States, where the crisis emerged—the region weathered the recession remarkably well. To be sure, much success can be attributed to China’s strong appetite for the abundant commodities in several South American countries, but sound macroeconomic policy making and management were also critical to the region’s solid performance.

Experts who made dire predictions about the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on the region were proven wrong...

cases of electoral fraud in countries such as Nicaragua, for instance. Still, the overall shift toward stronger electoral democracy is clear and salutary.

A recent example of this trend, which is of great importance for the United States and the region, is Mexico. Despite some backsliding and the controversy surrounding the 1 July 2012 election of Enrique Peña Nieto as president, the country had made progress since the 1990s in the independence and professionalism of its electoral authority. Mexico’s press is also notably more independent and vibrant than it had been. These

Even in 2013, in the context of the Euro zone crisis, China’s slowdown, and sluggish growth in the United States, Latin America is expected to grow more than 4 percent according to the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (Associated Press 2012). Over the past decade, such a relatively benign environment has spurred a number of Latin American governments to undertake innovative social policies such as conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs. These programs got off the ground in Mexico but have spread to other countries in the region. CCTs have helped reduce poverty quite
dramatically in some countries and have even contributed to a decline in levels of inequality—long Latin America’s Achilles heel (López-Calva and Lustig 2010).

Against this backdrop, two questions stand out. First, can the region’s social and economic progress, fueled by a burgeoning demand for commodities, be sustained at the pace of recent years? And second, will the region’s governments take advantage of today’s favorable circumstances (which may be short-lived) to pursue long-pending institutional reforms in such areas as taxation, education, infrastructure, justice, and security?

The increasing contributions of women to Latin America’s economy and politics are similarly indisputable and have further enriched democracy in much of the region."

The basis for a reasonably favorable assessment of democracy in the region is strengthened by reference to positive developments in Latin America’s two largest and most influential countries—Mexico and Brazil (Dominguez and Shifter 2013). In Mexico, though the wave of criminal violence dominates media accounts—and represents the principal risk to the rule of law—democratic progress on other critical dimensions is clear. The political party system is competitive, and the media is more open and diverse than it was during the prolonged period of one-party rule.

In Brazil, the region’s biggest country and the world’s sixth-largest economy, the democratic advances have also been impressive by historical measures. The country has benefited from effective political leadership, reflected in a succession of democratically elected presidents, beginning with Fernando Henrique Cardoso, followed by Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, and currently with Dilma Rousseff. Democracy enjoys broad public support, and the political system’s credibility has been considerably enhanced by Brazil’s economic and social progress. Through prudent macroeconomic management and the Bolsa Família cash transfer program, some 20 million were lifted out of poverty during the Lula years (2003-2010) (Forero 2011).

**Problem Areas**

Although the region’s democratic gains are clear, other areas remain more problematic. Two distinct but related challenges stand out. The first is the effectiveness and coherence of the region’s political parties; the second has to do with adherence to the rule of law and weak checks on executive authority. On the second point, governance models and leadership styles depart markedly from the democratic norm and have echoes of more traditional forms of populism and authoritarianism.

Political parties are the least trusted institution in Latin America and are in disarray across much of the region. For instance, though it is one of Latin America’s fastest-growing economies, Peru is virtually devoid of political parties. The parties imploded at the end of the 1980s and have yet to recover and rebuild. According to the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative survey, in Peru, trust in political institutions and politicians is among the lowest in the region. Argentina, too, has profound institutional weaknesses. There is rampant factionalism and infighting within the dominant Peronist Party. Political parties are also in considerable disarray in such countries as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

In those countries as well there is a serious problem with powerful executives running roughshod over ostensibly independent institutions such as the judiciary. In Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, for instance, there has been a tendency to overhaul constitutional checks and balances and move toward greater concentration of powers in the executive branch. Under such governance systems, butressing the rule of law or fostering a genuine balance of powers have been, at best, subordinate goals.

As many rights groups and the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have reported, there has also been a troubling erosion of basic press freedoms in some countries.
Hence, while these nations may have regular and fair elections—and in some cases advances in social progress—they largely lack the governance systems that reflect the tenets of representative democracy expressed in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, approved in 2001.

Today, coups and threats of military intervention are rare (though they haven’t disappeared, as evidenced by Honduras in 2009), but presidents are getting more skilled at craftily obscuring authoritarian and autocratic tendencies under the guise of democracy. And the consensus that once existed about what constitutes violations of democratic principles and how best to respond to them has broken down.

Indeed, although the Inter-American Democratic Charter is quite explicit in calling for collective action to prevent and repair transgressions to representative democracy, the test cases have in fact been met with relative silence. This is mainly a product of profound political changes in the Americas and transformations in hemispheric relations. Political fragmentation has notably increased, and the notion of “Latin America” as a coherent category is more dubious in light of such divergent paths.

The new configuration of regional organizations illustrates how dramatically the landscape has changed in recent years. The Organization of American States, which for a long time has tried to reestablish its relevance and credibility, is increasingly troubled and challenged by regional groupings like ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas), UNASUR (Union of South American Nations), and CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States). It is still too soon to tell, however, whether these new organizations will take hold or be effective. UNASUR’s suspension of Paraguay following the ouster of its president, Fernando Lugo, in June 2012, for example, was seen as too hasty—just as the imprisonment of Lugo was precipitous and lacked adequate due process. In 2013, the key question is whether the various multilateral bodies, old and new, can perform effectively and enjoy broad credibility.

The fluid and uncertain outlook in the Americas is not only a product of the region’s striking political, social, and economic transformation but also the result of fundamental changes in the United States. In many respects, the trends in the United States are worrying, including widening inequality, an increasingly precarious middle class, and rock-bottom levels of trust in basic political institutions like Congress. Washington, DC, has become less engaged and influential in the region, especially in South America, where Brazil has taken a more dominant role. The United States’ economic predicament has led to drastic budget cuts and, coupled with distractions by other, more urgent policy priorities, has hampered its ability to shape developments in the Americas.

To be sure, U.S. relations with the region during the first Obama administration were largely cordial. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s multiple visits to the region, including her last one to Peru in the fall of 2012, highlighted a marked concern with the empowerment of women and social inclusion, which resonates with the region’s priorities. Most Latin Americans also welcomed Washington’s less ideological and more restrained posture toward Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, especially compared with that of the previous Bush administration. Still, the relationship was characterized by a noticeable distancing, as the region pursued its own separate course while viewing Washington as preoccupied with its own agenda.

The November 2012 election results in the United States and the onset of President Barack Obama’s second term have once again raised expectations about a possibly more productive and robust relationship with Latin America. The sense of optimism is mainly the product of the decisive “Latino vote” in the elections and the sudden, apparently bipartisan support, for immigration reform. Such an achievement would be motivated by the demographic changes and political interests in the United States rather than by Latin American interests, however. Nonetheless, if there were a meaningful reform to U.S. immigration policy, such an action would send a powerful, positive message that would be greeted enthusiastically throughout the region, especially in Mexico, the source of the bulk of unauthorized migrants in the United States.

The United States’ greater engagement with Cuba would similarly be applauded in Latin America. Reducing travel and trade restrictions—possibly lifting the fifty-plus-year embargo—would be symbolically important for U.S.-Latin American relations. No other issue has so sharply separated Washington from the rest of the region. In November, Obama obtained roughly half of the Cuban American vote in Florida, suggesting a generational shift in that community and more political space to pursue policy changes. But any serious moves will still be politically difficult, and there is no sign that the Cuban issue has been a high priority for Obama, as he has signaled with immigration.

Finally, following the votes in Colorado and Washington that legalized the recreational use of marijuana, there has been increasing discussion about possible changes in Washington’s anti-drug policy. Although public opinion in the United States may be changing on this issue, dramatic policy reforms are improbable in the short term.

The drug issue is closely linked to perhaps the greatest risk to the rule of law and democratic governance in a number of Latin American countries: crime and insecurity. Reliable surveys consistently reveal that citizen insecurity is today the public’s principal concern. To be sure, drugs are a separate issue, but studies have found that it is a significant risk factor connected to criminal violence (Costa 2012). The situation in some countries, such as the “northern triangle” of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, as well as Venezuela in South America, is particularly dire. And since 2006, some 60,000 deaths have resulted from drug-fueled violence in Mexico (Shifer 2012). Effectively tackling crime as well as other major challenges to sound, effective democracies calls for a major effort in institutional reform and renewal. The region’s regular elections, and notably, the impressive social and economic strides seen in recent years, are surely encouraging developments. These advances are, however, by no means irreversible. And institutions like political parties and others that are essential to fostering the rule of law, such as justice systems, are lagging behind in a number of countries. Achieving a strong sense of democracy throughout the Americas remains a work in progress.

References
Associated Press. 2012. OECD report says smaller companies could be key to consolidating Latin American growth, November 16.
Fukuyama, Francis. 2012. The politics of Latin America’s new middle class. Forum remarks at Inter-American Dialogue, June, Washington, DC.