

DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA: New Debates and Research Frontiers

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■ **Abstract** This assessment of research on contemporary democratic politics in Latin America is organized around the distinction between institutional and alternative approaches. Initially it considers institutionalism on its own terms and, through an assessment of the debate about the institutional causes of gridlock, draws attention to key strengths of this literature. Thereafter, this article adopts a broader perspective that exposes some limitations but also other strengths of institutional analyses and considers the possibility of combining insights developed from institutional and alternative theoretical perspectives. The suggested terms of integration are as follows. With regard to causal theorizing, institutionalists need to borrow ideas from a broader literature on political regimes, especially regarding the causes of transitions to, and the breakdown of, democracy. With regard to descriptive theorizing, in contrast, students of the quality of democracy need to incorporate the contributions of institutionalists, especially regarding principal-agent relationships among citizens, policy makers, and policy administrators. Throughout this review, various pointed suggestions to advance research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Latin American politics has recently undergone a fundamental transformation. For many decades prior to the 1990s, most elected leaders could not discount the possibility of military coups, and most authoritarian rulers could not ignore the actions of antiauthoritarian movements. Now, in contrast, elections are held regularly, winners take office and make legally binding decisions, and losers and new players prepare for the next election. Latin America has made a clear break with its past.

This characterization of Latin American countries as functioning democracies has far-reaching implications. Most obviously, it means that the study of contemporary Latin American politics should focus squarely, though not necessarily exclusively, on the process whereby elected leaders, working through the institutions of democracy, make decisions. After all, among other things, politics is

about the making of legally binding decisions, and the power to make such decisions is held by democratically elected leaders who operate according to the rules of democratic institutions. Hence, it is sensible to focus attention on democratic actors and institutions.

This core insight has been at the center of work by institutionalists, understood here as scholars who employ a theory of institutions that holds that actors make choices in response to institutional incentives and who emphasize the causal import of institutions. Therefore, the institutional literature is a major source of knowledge on current Latin American politics. But an assessment of research on democratic politics in Latin America cannot overlook the limitations of the institutional literature and the contributions of scholars using other theoretical approaches.

Seeking to provide a pluralistic assessment of recent research on Latin American politics, this article focuses first on the debate about the impact of executive-legislative relations on the problem of indecisiveness, that is, the occurrence of gridlock or stalemate between the executive and legislative branches of government. This is probably the most developed debate in the institutional literature at present, and it demonstrates some of the key virtues of institutional research. It shows how institutionalists have exploited the opportunity to draw on models and theories from the rich literature on the democracies of the United States and Western Europe but have also gone further, using the experience of Latin American politics to question assumptions in the existing literature—especially concerning presidential democracies—and to underline the need for new theorizing. Moreover, it demonstrates how debates among institutionalists are sophisticated (relying on the intertwining of systematic theory building and data analysis) and progressive (leading to new findings and questions). In short, this debate illustrates some of the contributions and strengths of an institutional approach.

After focusing on the institutional literature on its own terms, this article adopts a broader perspective that exposes some limitations but also other strengths of institutional analyses and considers the possibility of combining insights developed from institutional and alternative theoretical perspectives. The suggested terms of integration are as follows. With regard to causal theorizing, institutionalists need to borrow ideas from a broader literature on political regimes, especially regarding the causes of transitions to, and the breakdown of, democracy. With regard to descriptive theorizing, in contrast, students of the quality of democracy need to incorporate the contributions of institutionalists, especially regarding principal-agent relationships among citizens, policy makers, and policy administrators. Thus, a core thesis of this article is that advances in causal and descriptive theorizing are increasingly likely to hinge on the willingness and ability of scholars to incorporate insights from institutional and alternative theoretical perspectives. A bridging of theoretical perspectives, to be sure, still leaves a range of methodological problems to be resolved. But, as various pointed suggestions made in this article seek to show, such theoretical advances have important methodological consequences, helping to pinpoint where the problems lie and to guide the search for solutions.

INSTITUTIONALISM ON ITS OWN TERMS: THE DEBATE ON THE INSTITUTIONAL CAUSES OF GRIDLOCK

Institutional theories of Latin American democracies focused initially on two shared features of these democracies: national executive officers who (a) are popularly elected and (b) serve for a fixed term.¹ These features, which distinguish Latin American democracies from parliamentary democracies, were used to define them as presidential democracies.² And they were cast, in the work by Linz (1990; 1994, pp. 5–10; Linz & Stepan 1996, p. 181), as a source of multiple problems, including a tendency toward gridlock or stalemate between the executive and legislative branches of government.³ This statement did much to frame the debate, and its seminal value should be recognized. However, from this starting point, the literature has evolved considerably, first introducing a number of concepts that added greater nuance to the concept of presidential democracy, and subsequently amending and ultimately challenging the association posited by Linz.

Varieties of Presidentialism

The first development in the literature shifted attention beyond the two distinctive features of presidential democracies. One strand of the literature looked beyond the fact that the heads of the national executive in Latin America are elected for a fixed term and focused on the presidents' constitutional powers and the effects of these powers on executive-legislative relations. This research distinguished between nonlegislative powers, which refer to the formation and dismissal of the cabinet and the dissolution of the assembly, and legislative powers, which include the powers of veto, decree, and exclusive initiation of bills (Carey & Shugart 1998; Payne et al. 2002, ch. 8; Shugart & Carey 1992, chs. 6–8; Shugart & Mainwaring 1997, pp. 40–52). This literature also introduced the useful distinctions between reactive legislative powers, which help a president maintain the status quo, and

¹Currently, the only partial exception to this general statement is Bolivia, where a 1994 constitutional amendment calls for Congress to select the president from between the two candidates who received the highest percentage of the popular vote.

²These two features are used by Lijphart (1984, pp. 68–71) to construct a typology of democracies centered on executive-legislative relations. See also Shugart & Mainwaring (1997, pp. 14–18).

³To avoid misunderstandings, two points should be stressed. First, although the current discussion focuses on the issue of gridlock, Linz's work on presidentialism and parliamentarism, going back to his first significant reference to the issue (Linz 1978, pp. 71–74), has always been concerned with the broader question of democratic stability. Second, although some authors appear to use the terms indecisiveness and governability interchangeably (Cox & McCubbins 2001, p. 46), it is important to note that the concept of indecisiveness (that is, gridlock) is linked with the ability to change the legislative status quo, regardless of what this status quo is. Therefore, "indecisiveness" is more precise but also much thinner than the often-used concept of democratic governability.

proactive legislative powers, which help a president change the status quo (Shugart & Mainwaring 1997, p. 41).

Another strand of the literature focused on executive-legislative relations primarily in terms of the party system. This research approached the party system in different ways, but much of it followed the lead of Sartori's (1976) classic *Parties and Party Systems* and focused on two key dimensions: the number of parties and the degree of ideological polarization among parties (Alcántara & Freidenberg 2001; Coppedge 1998, 2001, 2003; Mainwaring 1999; Mainwaring & Scully 1995). A growing and shared emphasis was also put on the ability of party leaders to deliver votes, especially as a function of party discipline (Carey 2002, 2003; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997b, pp. 421–29; Morgenstern 2003; Shugart & Carey 1992, pp. 175–76, 1995). To a large extent, this literature's concerns were captured in the phrase “presidential partisan powers,” understood to refer to the number of legislators a president can rely on to get legislation approved (Coppedge 2003, pp. 7–10; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997b, pp. 400–1, 429–30).

This research had important consequences for the way presidential democracies were described. It undermined the common contrast between presidential and parliamentary democracies built on the contrast between the United States, which has a weak president, and Britain, which has a powerful prime minister. Indeed, the data showed that democratic presidents do not necessarily face strong congresses. Rather, Latin American presidents were shown to vary considerably in terms of their constitutional powers and have, on average, considerably greater legislative powers than the president of the United States (Payne et al. 2002, p. 202; Shugart & Carey 1992, p. 155).

In addition, some interesting patterns were revealed when the data on presidential legislative powers were considered alongside the data on presidential partisan powers (see Figure 1). Not only did this analysis highlight the rarity of the United States' model of a presidential democracy with a relatively weak president and a two-party system. In addition, it uncovered an intriguing finding: that there is a positive relationship between, on the one hand, presidents' constitutional powers and, on the other hand, party fragmentation in the legislature, presidents' electoral coalitions (Mainwaring & Shugart 1997b, pp. 429–34, 400–3), and a range of electoral arrangements that affect the degree of separation of purpose—due to differences in preferences—between the executive and legislative branches (Cox & McCubbins 2001, Samuels & Shugart 2003, Shugart & Haggard 2001).⁴ In a nutshell, by moving beyond a focus on the distinctive features of presidential democracies—the election process and tenure of the chief executive—and by considering the powers and preferences of decision makers, this literature replaced the picture of presidential democracies as a homogenous type of democracy with one that highlighted significant differences within the set of presidential democracies.

⁴This is a robust finding (Shugart & Haggard 2001, p. 99), that is, it has been confirmed with a number of different measures.

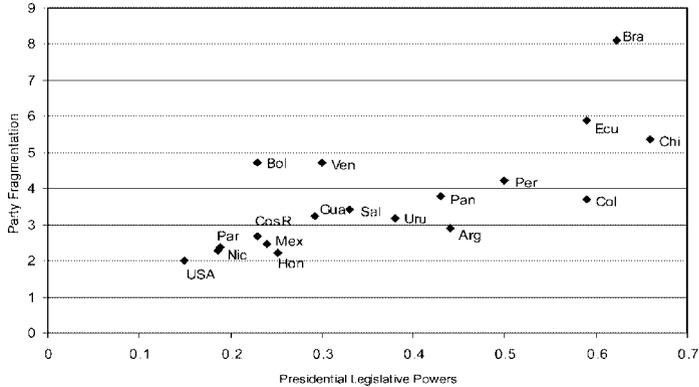


Figure 1 Presidential legislative powers and party fragmentation Latin America and the United States. The index of presidential legislative powers is for 2002. It goes from 0 to 1 and draws on data on the following powers: package and partial vetoes, decree, budget, exclusive introduction of legislation, and plebiscite. The measure of party fragmentation is an average for the 1990–2002 period and is the Laasko and Taagapera index on effective number of parties calculated on the basis of seats. Source: UNDP (2004 statistical compendium).

Revisiting Linz's Hypothesis About Gridlock

This research on varieties of presidentialism also contributed to new theorizing about the impact of executive-legislative relations on the problem of gridlock. Linz's arguments were dissected in detail and specific disagreements were noted (Mainwaring & Shugart 1997c; Shugart & Carey 1992, ch. 3; Shugart & Mainwaring 1997, pp. 29–40). But this new research did not lead to a full-blown rejection of Linz's concern about the negative impact of presidentialism. Rather, the scholars who focused on the varieties of presidentialism contributed to a partial revision of Linz's early critique.

The clearest line of continuity with Linz took the form of research that emphasized the dispersal of preferences of decision makers. The specifics of the arguments varied. One strand of this literature insisted that gridlock is likely when presidential partisan powers are low; in particular, it underlined the problematic status of the combination of presidentialism and fragmented, multiparty systems (Jones 1996; Mainwaring 1993; 1999, pp. 285–86, 288–89; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997b, p. 396, Shugart & Mainwaring 1997, p. 31). Another strand of the literature argued that gridlock (or what several authors called the problem of indecisiveness) is likely in the context of extreme separation of purpose, as determined not only by party preferences but also by institutional incentives associated especially with the electoral system (Cox & McCubbins 2001, Shugart & Haggard 2001, pp. 95–97). But these associations, which were probed empirically—above all in a number of case studies, including various ones on Brazil (Ames 2001; Mainwaring 1993, 1999)—were seen as sharing a common theoretical foundation. Indeed,

inasmuch as a theoretical basis for these associations was spelled out, it was done, if somewhat loosely, in terms of Tsebelis's (1995, 2002) theory of veto players. The core argument, captured nicely in the pithy summary by Cox & McCubbins (2001, p. 27, italics in original removed), was that "as the effective number of vetoes increases, the polity becomes. . .less decisive."

Thus, this new research on varieties of presidentialism ended up supporting Linz's generic idea about the problematic nature of presidential democracies but also introduced two important amendments. On the one hand, the broad contrast between presidential and parliamentary democracies was de-emphasized, and the problem with presidential democracies was not seen as linked to presidentialism per se, that is, to the distinctive election process and tenure of the chief executive (Shugart & Haggard 2001, p. 96). Indeed, in the view of Haggard et al. (2001, p. 321), "many of the disabilities attributed to presidentialism are in fact due to peculiarities of the party system, and in turn how parties are shaped by electoral rules." On the other hand, the new research found that the problem with presidential democracies was linked with certain values of the variables that were emphasized—extreme party fractionalization, for example—and was thus limited to a subset of presidential democracies.

A somewhat different perspective on the issue has begun to emerge, however, as the dispersal of preferences of decision makers has been considered as a factor that influences policy decisiveness not in isolation but through its interaction with other factors. In this regard, Cox & Morgenstern's (2002) informal game theoretical analysis, which models the relationship between presidents and legislatures as an asymmetric bilateral veto game, is particularly instructive.⁵ Indeed, their introduction of a strategic perspective moves the debate forward in two critical ways. First, it highlights the limitations of the conventional view that an increase in the number of players increases the probability of policy indecisiveness. Indeed, as Cox & Morgenstern's typology of presidents and assemblies shows, presidents may be effective in enacting policies by using different strategies according to the type of legislature they face (Cox & Morgenstern 2002, pp. 453–55). Second, it emphasizes the drawback of treating the key variable of legislative support for presidential initiatives as an exogenous variable. Even though Cox & Morgenstern follow the standard practice of considering the number of seats held by supporters of the president as both a key factor and one that is exogenous to their game, they do draw attention to what they label presidential integrative powers, such as the appointment of ministers, which a president can use to become directly involved in the legislative process. Therefore, they offer at least some leads for moving beyond the standard approach by endogenizing legislative support for presidential initiatives (Cox & Morgenstern 2002, pp. 452, 458–62).

⁵The break with a Linzian perspective begins with the pioneering research on the impact of executive-legislative relations on legislative performance in Brazil by Figueiredo & Limongi (2000a, originally published in Portuguese in 1995) and the work on coalitions by Deheza (1997), Amorim Neto (1998), and Altman (2000, 2001).

These are fundamental points, and this analysis represents an important departure in the debate initiated by Linz. Yet it is the research of Cheibub, Przeworski, and Saiegh that introduces the most significant alternative perspective to date in this debate (Cheibub 2002; Cheibub et al. 2002, 2004; Saiegh 2002). These authors combine formal theorizing with a heavy dose of systematic analysis of new data, on both presidential and parliamentary democracies, aimed at establishing some basic facts about the formation and legislative success of majority and minority governments. And their analysis offers a strong challenge to the alleged link between presidentialism and gridlock, as formulated in both the original and the amended version of Linz's thesis.

With regard to the formation of governments, these authors find that majority governments are less rare than might be expected in light of the data on party fractionalization. Of 218 situations (defined by a constant distribution of legislative seats) in almost all presidential democracies during the 1946–1999 period, the president's party held a majority of seats in 98 instances, whereas presidents faced an opposition majority in only 23 instances. Moreover, divided government occurred more frequently in the context of the United States's two-party system (12 times) than in all of Latin America (five times). In addition, in the remaining 97 situations (which, because of shifts in government or portfolio coalitions in the context of a constant distribution of seats, added six more alternatives), the president was the head of a majority coalition in 31 of a total of 103 instances, the head of a minority coalition in 23 of 103 instances, and the head of a single-party minority in the remaining 49 of 103 instances. Finally, when Cheibub et al. (2002, 2004) compare nearly all presidential democracies to parliamentary democracies during 1946–1999, they find that presidents led majority governments in 59% of all situations, whereas the corresponding figure for prime ministers was 78%, and that the effect of increased party fractionalization on the likelihood of minority presidents is indeterminate. These findings, it bears emphasizing, are bolstered by the formal model of coalition formation under presidentialism the authors propose (Cheibub et al. 2004).

In turn, with regard to the legislative success of governments, these authors question the supposed efficacy of majority governments, a basic presupposition of pessimistic readings of presidential democracies. Thus, analyzing data on 35 democracies over the 1946–2000 period (Saiegh 2002), they show that even though presidents who lead single-party majority governments have the highest legislative success rate (72%), presidents who lead single-party minority governments perform only slightly worse (61%) and actually do better than when they lead coalition minority governments (53%) or even coalition majority governments (51%). The ability of minority governments to form majority legislative coalitions, well established in the context of parliamentary democracies (Strom 1990), seems to not be altogether foreign to presidential democracies. Moreover, the rate of legislative success of all presidential democracies is 62% as opposed to 80% for all parliamentary democracies (Cheibub et al. 2004). Even in Brazil, a "most likely case" of legislative paralysis according to many theories, the data show high rates of legislative success (Cheibub & Limongi 2002, pp. 172–74, Figueiredo & Limongi

2000b). In short, the worries about gridlock in presidential democracies appear to be unsupported by the data.

New Findings and Questions

The debate on the impact of executive-legislative relations on policy indecisiveness is certainly not closed (Samuels & Eaton 2002). Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some valuable findings that have emerged from it. Some of the findings contradict views that were widespread not long ago, undermining the depiction of presidential democracies based on the United States and the contrast between presidential and parliamentary democracies that relied heavily on the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom. The United States, it turns out, is an extreme case, characterized by a weak president (Shugart & Carey 1992). In addition, a set of other assumptions, which are central to research on the United States and are used (more or less unconsciously) as constants in the analysis of institutions, do not hold in Latin America (Morgenstern 2002a, pp. 15–18; 2002b). And transforming these constants into variables opens up new questions, for example, about the use of cabinet appointments as an instrument in building legislative coalitions (Amorim Neto 1998; Cox & Morgenstern 2002, pp. 458–59, 464; Cheibub et al. 2004). Furthermore, certain features generally seen as typical of parliamentary democracies, such as the call for elections in the case of the dissolution of a government—a factor regarded as a key determinant of party discipline in parliamentary systems—are not so typical after all (Cheibub & Limongi 2002, p. 160).

Other findings paint a new picture of Latin American presidential democracies. It is noteworthy that Latin American presidential systems, though displaying great variation, occupy an intermediate position between pure presidential and pure parliamentary systems, with proactive presidents and reactive legislatures that are not as passive as some have feared (Cox & Morgenstern 2002). Moreover, Latin American presidents neither lack support in the legislature nor are hobbled by gridlock. Indeed, presidents rarely face a majority opposition in the legislature, and frequently they are from the party that holds a majority in the legislature or head a majority coalition. But even presidents who lead minority governments are not especially prone to the use of decree powers. Finally, presidential democracies are linked with governments that are only slightly less effective at legislating than are parliamentary democracies (Cheibub et al. 2004; Cheibub & Limongi 2002, p. 171). Thus, the difference between presidential and parliamentary democracies, understood as hinging strictly on the fact that in presidential democracies both the chief executive and members of the legislature are popularly elected and serve for a fixed term, does not appear to determine the ability of the government to legislate (Shugart & Haggard 2001, p. 96; Cheibub & Limongi 2002; Cheibub et al. 2004).⁶

⁶It bears repeating that the dependent variable at stake is policy decisiveness. Thus, these conclusions should not be understood as implying anything about other dependent variables, such as the stability of democracy or the content of policies, which are sometimes considered as effects of the same causal factors.

Beyond these findings, recent studies further advance this line of inquiry by focusing either on new questions that have been brought to light in the course of the debate or on new institutions that have not been considered in this debate. The research on new questions addresses, among other things, aspects of the behavior of parties in the legislature that are seen as critical to understanding executive-legislative relations. More specifically, growing attention has been given to the challenge of unraveling how presidential powers and various institutional rules—from electoral and party laws to the procedural rules that govern decision making in the legislature and the structure of its committees—affect party unity and the formation of coalitions (Amorim Neto 1998; Amorim Neto & Santos 2001; Altman 2000, 2001; Carey 2002, 2003; Deheza 1997; Figueiredo & Limongi 2000b; Morgenstern 2003; Morgenstern & Nacif 2002). Meanwhile, work intended to extend the discussion about the impact of government actors and institutional arrangements on policy making beyond executive-legislative relations has focused on state governors and federalism (Samuels 2003) and on judges and the judicial branch of government (Helmke 2002).

In summary, as this debate on the institutional determinants of policy indecisiveness shows, this institutional research has had substantial payoffs. It has generated some significant findings that offer a solid basis for a depiction of the policy-making process. It has raised new questions, triggered by puzzles that emerged in the course of research, and focused on new institutions, included in the analysis in an effort to encompass the complete set of relevant government actors. Moreover, this research has been cumulative in the sense that it relies on a shared set of theoretical assumptions, that is, the assumptions that are characteristic of an institutional approach to the study of democratic politics. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the contributions made by this body of research and to recognize the value of institutionalists' ongoing efforts to further our knowledge about democratic politics in Latin America. However, it is also critical to move beyond an assessment of institutionalism on its own terms. Adopting a broader perspective exposes some limitations of institutional analyses and raises the possibility of combining insights developed from institutional and alternative theoretical perspectives. But it also highlights some further contributions made by institutionalists. Indeed, as I suggest, with regard to causal theorizing, which addresses cause-effect relationships, institutionalists need to borrow ideas from a broader literature on political regimes. Yet, with regard to descriptive theorizing, which addresses part-whole relationships, students of the quality of democracy need to incorporate the contributions of institutionalists.

CAUSAL THEORIZING: INSTITUTIONS IN CONTEXT

The need for a research agenda on democratic politics in Latin America that avoids the limitations of institutionalism is not hard to establish. Most obviously, some of the causal assumptions made by institutionalists are refuted by well-established facts. But the tendency of critiques to overshoot the mark and in the process to discard valuable contributions—generically about the way in which institutions

serve as markers of political power and more specifically about the decision-making process of democratic leaders—is quite common. Thus, the following discussion proceeds cautiously, addressing the limitations of institutionalism head-on yet suggesting that institutions should not be disregarded but rather put in context. Only in this way is it possible to offer a proper evaluation of the core assumption of institutionalism: that institutions matter.

The Reform of Democratic Institutions

The most immediate limitation of an institutional approach is its treatment of the institutions of functioning democracies as exogenous to the decision-making process of democratic authorities. Institutionalism rests on a theory of institutions that holds that actors make choices in response to institutional incentives. These incentives may be indeterminate, so that courses of action do not follow strictly, in a one-to-one fashion, from specific institutions. But actors are seen as making choices *within* institutions. Indeed, it is this assumption that justifies the proposal of causal models that treat institutions as independent variables. Yet this defining feature of an institutional approach rests on shaky grounds (see Table 1).

There is much evidence that the actors who are supposed to make choices within institutions also make choices about institutions. Examples of this are the frequent institutional reforms made in Latin America in recent times. Indeed, one of the important facts about democratic politics in Latin America is that institutional reforms, whether involving the constitution or electoral and party laws, are quite common. Considering just the period since 1990, new constitutions have been approved in Colombia (1991), the Dominican Republic (1994), Ecuador (1998),

TABLE 1 Causal assumptions of an institutional approach

Choice	Assumption	Problem: Remedy
Independent variables: government actors and democratic institutions	Democratic institutions are exogenous variables	Unjustified bracketing of the reform of democratic institutions: Account for the reproduction or change of democratic institutions
Case selection: stable democracies	The selection of cases into the set of stable democracies is unrelated to the configuration of government actors and institutions, and a government's policy decisions	Unjustified bracketing of the regime question: Account for the entry of cases into the set of stable democracies (i.e., democratic transitions) and the exit of cases from the set of stable democracies (i.e., democratic breakdowns).
	The level of democracy and stability of democracy are constants	Unjustified bracketing of the regime question: Turn the democraticness and stability of the regime into variables in the causal model

Paraguay (1992), Peru (1993), and Venezuela (1999); and significant constitutional amendments have been made in all the other Latin American countries. These changes have affected, among other things, the possibility of reelection of the president, the use of a runoff or second round in presidential elections, the existence of an upper chamber, various aspects of the electoral system for the legislature, the rules regulating the formation and continued recognition of political parties, and the legislative powers of the president. In short, institutional reforms have been common and profound.

Thus, contrary to the assumption in the standard approach to institutions, the politics of Latin American democracies does not demonstrate a clear distinction between institution crafters and policy makers, between constitution framers and everyday politicians. There are no dignified founding fathers that stand above the fray of politics, and normal politicians frequently do not take institutions as fixed. Rather, these politicians appear to follow institutional rules as long as the rules allow them to advance their interests, and they seek to change the rules when they do not work for them.⁷ They may very well be unable to change these rules, but this is a different matter. The lack of institutional reform is not a consequence of the “stickiness” of institutions. Rather, institutional stasis is probably simply due to the power of actors who support the status quo institutional arrangement.

The implication of this picture of the way politicians make choices has yet to be incorporated in the analysis of institutions. The literature that uses an institutional approach does not tire of repeating that institutions matter and, inasmuch as it focuses solely on institutions, it appears to make the case that they do. But so far it has done little to address the conditions that enable the reproduction of institutions or lead to a change in institutions, and thus to distinguish the effects of these conditions from the effects of institutions themselves. Rather, this literature simply brackets this question and treats the reform of democratic institutions as though it were not connected to the democratic decision-making process. And, as a result of this theoretical choice, existing assessments of the effects of institutions are necessarily biased.

The solution to this problem hinges on the construction of causal models that are more complex than those proposed in conventional institutional analysis. Specifically, to test the alternative hypothesis concerning the reform of democratic institutions advanced from a noninstitutionalist perspective, empirical tests should be based on causal models that endogenize institutions by explicitly including choices about institutions among the menu of choices routinely made by politicians. That is, hypotheses about institutions should be tested using nonrecursive causal models that treat institutions as explanatory factors but also allow for the possibility of reverse causation by including a feedback loop to capture the potential impact of the policy outcomes of institutions on the propensity of politicians

⁷The broader issue—the politicization of political institutions—is far from a novel issue in Latin American politics (Chalmers 1977).

to strategize within institutions or about institutions. Testing such models would be a first step toward producing more valid estimates of the causal impact of institutions.

The Regime Question

A second, related limitation of the institutional literature on democratic politics concerns the criteria used in case selection (see Table 1). The problem is that the standard practice is to select cases not on the causal model's active variables—whether the independent or dependent variables—but on a background variable, usually defined as the existence of a democracy or stable democracy.⁸ Such a criterion of case selection requires scholars to address the complicated issue of what constitutes a democracy or a stable democracy, a matter different scholars resolve in different ways. The implications of multiple implicit and explicit definitions of democracy and stable democracy notwithstanding, the selection of cases that are stable democracies smuggles into the analysis two assumptions: (a) that democratic transitions and breakdowns are not related in a systematic manner to the variables in the causal model, and (b) that the democraticness and stability of regimes can be treated as constants. And these untested assumptions concerning core aspects of the regime question—the choice of procedures that regulate access to the decision-making centers within the state (Munck 2001, p. 213; Mazzuca 2002)—are problematic and have important methodological and substantive consequences.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AND BREAKDOWNS AS METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES The problem with the first assumption—that democratic transitions and breakdowns are unrelated to the variables in the causal model—is that much research has shown that the manner in which countries enter and exit the set of stable democracies is actually related to the variables of the general causal model used in the institutional literature. First, the institutions that constitute the initial conditions of the decision-making process by democratic authorities appear to be systematically linked to the process whereby transitions to democracy take place. More pointedly, research has posited that the choice of institutions is shaped by a range of factors, including the nature of the prior authoritarian regime (Haggard & Kaufman 1995, Linz & Stepan 1996, Shain & Linz 1995), the balance of power among political forces (Geddes 1995, 1996; Lijphart 1992; Przeworski 1991, pp. 79–88), and various societal factors, such as the cleavage structure (Lijphart 1977, ch. 3). Thus, counter to the common tendency to separate the study of the origins of institutions from the study of their consequences, this research suggests that factors affecting the choice of institutions constitute antecedent conditions, which should be considered as exogenous variables in the analysis of institutions. Proper

⁸The distinction between active and background variables is drawn from Valenzuela (1998, p. 253).

tests of the effects of institutions would thus have to endogenize institutions in this second way and treat factors seen as affecting the choice of democratic institutions as part of a causal chain.⁹

Second, the manner in which countries exit from the universe of democracies is also related in a nonrandom fashion to the variables in the general causal model that is used in institutional analysis. The most systematic evidence to this effect comes from research that points to the greater propensity to democratic breakdowns of presidential democracies (Przeworski et al. 2000, pp. 128–36). But a larger body of literature has linked both institutional arrangements and policy decisions to the breakdown of democracy (Collier & Collier 1991, Linz & Stepan 1978). Thus, so as to avoid selection bias, any effort to estimate the causal impact of institutions must address the effects of institutions and their outcomes on the likelihood that a country will remain a democracy. Again, this calls for complex causal models that address, via a feedback loop, the effect of democratic institutions and the decision making by democratic authorities on the likelihood that a country remains democratic—that is, models that endogenize democratic breakdowns.

THE DEMOCRATICNESS AND STABILITY OF THE REGIME AS SUBSTANTIVE CONCERNS

The second assumption made in selecting cases—that the democraticness and stability of regimes can be treated as constants—is also problematic, though in a different way. These criteria of case selection imply that these issues are for all practical purposes resolved, that is, that the regimes in Latin America are both fully democratic and stable, and that democraticness and stability can justifiably be treated as mere background factors. But a quick glance at recent political developments in Latin America shows that these issues remain pressing substantive concerns.

The stability of the democratic regime has obviously been in play in a number of cases, and several instances of democratic breakdowns, or at least serious losses in the democraticness of the regime, have been recorded. Clear candidates include Fujimori's 1992 *auto-golpe* (self-coup) in Peru, Serrano's failed attempt to emulate Fujimori in Guatemala in 1993, the blatant recourse to electoral fraud in the Dominican Republic in 1994 and Peru in 2000, the crises in Paraguay in 1996 and 1999, and the short-lived coup in Venezuela in 2002. In addition, Latin America has experienced many political crises that do not entail the classic coup scenarios so common in the region's recent past but that nonetheless put the democratic regime at risk and frequently lead to significant backsliding. Moreover, it is important to note that democratic regimes have not been fully achieved. An obvious example is Chile's inability to eliminate its designated senators, that is, the senators who are not elected through a popular vote. But inasmuch as a democratic regime is seen as encompassing more than the existence of procedural minimums, such as inclusive, clean, and contested elections to fill the main government offices, the lack of fully democratic regimes in many other Latin American countries becomes apparent.

⁹A study that takes a step in this direction, by considering the impact of the old regime on the choice of institutions, is Cheibub & Przeworski (2003).

It may very well be that Latin America will avoid the kind of authoritarian regressions that placed the issue of democratic transitions, commonly understood as the crossing of a threshold marked by contested elections (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, ch. 6), at the center of the political agenda. But it is important to avoid the undue narrowing of research questions that is implied by a strict institutionalist approach to democracy. The old question about the conditions of democratic stability (Diamond et al. 1999; Linz & Valenzuela 1994; Mainwaring 2000; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán 2003; Przeworski et al. 2000, ch. 2) has continued relevance, and research into processes that jeopardize the democratic regime—even if falling short of a classic coup (Kenney 2003, Pérez-Liñán 2003)—is central to the agenda of study of democratic politics. In turn, the democraticness of Latin American regimes is by no means a closed issue.

CAUSAL ASSUMPTIONS: A RECAPITULATION The impact of democratic institutions must be assessed through causal models that address both institutions and their context. Thus, rather than focusing only on institutions, it is necessary to build and test models that go well beyond the actors, institutions, and outcomes that are the centerpiece of an institutional approach. These suggestions do not add up to an invitation to drop institutions from the analysis. Indeed, the challenge is to develop theory in such a way that the grounded and nuanced depiction of the policy-making process that institutionalists have provided is linked to a sense of the broader political processes and, in particular, to the causal theories developed to address the larger regime question (Munck 1994, 2001). But the limitations of assumptions that are standard in institutional analysis must be recognized, and two broad conclusions must be drawn. First, until the kind of research that places institutions in context is conducted, the standard assertion that institutions matter must be treated as an assumption but not as a finding (Przeworski 2003). Second, moving beyond methodological issues that affect estimations of the causal impact of institutions, it is critical to note that the analysis of democratic institutions frequently plays down the continued relevance of the democraticness and stability of Latin American regimes. The virtues of an institutional approach discussed in the first section of this article must be weighed against the significant shortcomings associated with institutionalism's causal assumptions.

DESCRIPTIVE THEORIZING: THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

This article's final task, an assessment of the contributions made by the institutional literature to descriptive theorizing, is just as complicated as an assessment of this literature's contribution to causal theorizing. In this regard, institutionalists might be seen as focusing on narrowly defined problems, avoiding lengthy debates about how to conceptualize outcomes, getting right down to the task of measuring variables and moving rapidly to the testing of alternative hypotheses. Indeed,

such a characterization holds some truth. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that institutionalists are not making important contributions to ongoing efforts to theorize about the big question facing students of Latin America: How can we describe the way current Latin American democracies function? Efforts to address this question have been pioneered to a large extent by noninstitutionalists, who have developed a new literature on the quality of democracy (Diamond 1999; Hartlyn 2002; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Linz 1997; O'Donnell 1999b:Part IV, 2001, 2004). But the institutional literature offers insights that should be incorporated into the debate about the quality of democracy. Much as institutionalists have tended to ignore the contributions of the broader literature on democratization and democracy and would benefit from borrowing ideas from this literature, so too have theorists of democratic quality failed to appreciate the value of insights in the institutional literature and should seek to make use of them.

The literature on the quality of democracy has still not produced a clearly conceptualized statement of its research problem, let alone data that would allow for an empirical analysis of the problem. Thus, the following discussion is somewhat open-ended and tentative. It uses as an organizing principle two distinct relationships—between citizens and their representatives, and between citizens' representatives and policy administrators—and considers multiple potential formulations of the quality of democracy question. It casts a wide net, considering the political process in broad terms, and proceeds with deliberate caution, avoiding the temptation to prematurely close potential avenues of research. Yet it offers some specific pointers. First, this review discusses various ways in which institutionalists contribute to the formulation of this research problem and suggests some connections among the works of scholars who draw on different theoretical traditions. Second, it identifies some thorny issues, such as the relationship between politicians' preferences and state capacity, and some apparently irrelevant issues, such as the democraticness of the regime, that deserve further attention in the context of this debate.

Citizens and Their Representatives

The relationship between citizens and their representatives has been a central concern of the research on representation and accountability carried out by institutionalists.¹⁰ One strand of research focuses on the impact of institutions on the universalistic versus particularistic nature of policies (Cox & McCubbins 2001, pp. 47–52). This research has elaborated, and found empirical support for, the hypothesis that the more elections are candidate-centered (as opposed to party-centered), the less likely policies are to be universalistic (Ames 2001; Carey & Shugart 1995; Cox & McCubbins 2001, p. 49; Haggard & McCubbins 2001;

¹⁰Whereas the debate on policy decisiveness considered in the first half of this article focuses on government actors and is framed explicitly in terms of a contentless status quo (one that says nothing about the link between policy choices and citizens' interests), institutionalists bring citizens back in in their research on representation and accountability.

Mainwaring 1999, ch. 6; Shugart & Haggard 2001, pp. 85–88). Relatedly, the work of economists such as Persson & Tabellini (2000, 2003), using both sophisticated formal theory and empirical methods, has generated interesting results about the link between institutions and, among other things, the nature of public policies. They show that proportional electoral rules are more conducive than majoritarian rules to universalistic policies, measured in terms of social security and welfare spending, and that the impact of parliamentary as opposed to presidential systems is likewise positive but not very stable (Persson & Tabellini 2003, ch. 2, pp. 50, 142–48). Thus, institutionalists have shown how certain institutions are associated with policies that are understood as more or less representative of citizen interests.

This literature makes another, less optimistic point about accountability. One approach to the issue emphasizes that the design of electoral rules in particular generates a trade-off between representation, understood as the making of policies that reflect the interests of voters at large, and accountability, understood as the possibility that voters can identify and punish officials who are responsible for policy decisions (Persson & Tabellini 2003, pp. 18, 217; Powell 2000; Shugart & Carey 1992). Another approach frames the issue of accountability as a principal-agent relationship, with the electorate defined as principals and elected representatives as agents, and presents an even more negative view. Emphasizing the informational advantages enjoyed by elected authorities over voters, it stresses the inherent limitations of the vote as a means to control and hold elected officials accountable (Przeworski et al. 1999, chs. 1, 4; see also Stokes 2001). In other words, this literature offers a sobering view of accountability that hinges on factors that are inherent to the way democracies work and are not attributable to its failings. In the process, this literature identifies a problem that gives a clear content to the much-discussed yet poorly defined concept of the quality of democracy.

The identification of solutions to the problem of accountability, interestingly, is gradually being shaped by the contributions of scholars working within different theoretical traditions. One important line of thought focuses on the system of checks and balances (Persson et al. 1997, 2000; Przeworski et al. 1999, Part II), explicitly framing the relationship among elected officials in some cases as a second principal-agent relationship in a chain of principal-agent relationships (Cox & McCubbins 2001, pp. 21–22; Shugart et al. 2003). This research shows that such institutional arrangements have a direct impact on accountability by setting up a system in which different government branches can monitor and sanction each other. But it also posits an indirect effect—via a backward linkage—whereby the separation of powers could increase the public flow of information and thus help to correct the informational imbalances that weaken voters' prospects of controlling elected authorities.

Another line of thought converges with this one but takes an extra step. This parallel research focuses also on the prospects of controlling politicians through various institutions of what O'Donnell (1999a) labels "horizontal" accountability, in contrast to the standard "vertical" form of accountability exercised through the electoral process (Mainwaring & Welna 2003, Schedler et al. 1999). But, while it

emphasizes the potential gains that might be associated with institutions of horizontal accountability, it draws attention to the limits of these institutions and reaches back to the citizenry in a more encompassing way. This literature sees the function of checks and balances as hinging on a question of institutional design aimed at providing the appropriate degree of independence and overlapping powers of the various branches of government. But it also emphasizes that a key requirement for the exercise of horizontal accountability is the counterposition of political wills and hence the exclusion of the possibility of collusion among branches that are supposed to check each other (Przeworski 1999, p. 44; Przeworski et al. 1999, p. 19). And it considers various ways in which citizens might exercise control over politicians between elections. Thus, in this literature, the possibility of overcoming of the limitations of electoral accountability is seen as depending in part on institutions of horizontal accountability but also in part on the exercise of “societal” accountability, a concept that includes many types of activities and that therefore greatly expands the scope of analysis (Smulovitz & Peruzzotti 2000). Indeed, societal accountability is usually seen as entailing the continual monitoring and occasional sanctioning of politicians by citizens through a variety of channels other than the election of representatives—from street demonstrations to the exposure of public officials’ illegal behavior by journalists, the lodging of citizen complaints with the media or institutions such as ombudsman’s offices, and various mechanisms of direct democracy (Altman 2002; Smulovitz & Peruzzotti 2000, 2002).

The upshot of this rich debate deserves to be stated starkly. It is not clear whether the expansion of the notion of accountability resolves the trade-off between representation and accountability identified in the literature. Nonetheless, in pinpointing the limits of mechanisms of accountability centered exclusively on the electoral process, this debate has provided the theoretical foundation for an expansion of the notion of citizen’s political rights—an indisputable core of democratic theory—beyond those identified in the classic work of Marshall (1965) and enshrined in conventional definitions of a democratic political regime (Dahl 1971, pp. 3–7; 1989, chs. 8, 9). More specifically, it suggests that, so as to reflect current theories of accountability, political citizenship should be reconceptualized to include rights regarding the policy-making process that directly impinge on the relationships between citizens and their representatives, along with the traditional rights associated with the process through which governments are constituted, that is, those that are invoked in most definitions of the democratic regime.

Citizens’ Representatives and Administrators

Another relationship that is central to current debates about the quality of democracy is the one between elected representatives and policy administrators. Indeed, a full understanding of the question of the quality of democracy requires moving beyond policy making to policy implementation. Only then is it possible to assess whether the government rules for the people, as democratic theory argues it should, and to close the circle that starts with citizen preferences.

Two complementary perspectives on this issue offer some valuable leads. One view, advanced single-handedly by O'Donnell (1999b, ch. 7; 2001, 2004), draws attention to the fact that Latin American states do not uphold the rule of law but instead enforce the law in a truncated and biased manner. This work offers, among other things, a gripping description of the limitations of Latin American states in guaranteeing citizens' civil rights that helps to anchor the discussion and clarify the normative stakes. It also makes a strong case for seeing existing states as a major source of the problem and reformed states as a major part of the solution.

Another perspective, offered by authors such as Przeworski (1999, p. 32) and Cox & McCubbins (2001, pp. 21–22, 58–61), considers the challenge faced by elected representatives who seek to control the administrators in charge of implementing policies using a principal-agent framework (see also Shugart et al. 2003). Little empirical research has been done on Latin America using this framework (see, however, Huber & McCarthy 2003 and Eaton 2003). Moreover, even some of the most advanced research on the bureaucracy using a principal-agent framework in other regions can be seen as still focusing largely on policy making, considering the way in which legislation is written rather than the implementation of policies (see, e.g., Huber & Shipan 2002).¹¹ Nonetheless, by drawing attention to the fact that policy implementation hinges on yet one more principal-agent relationship and that citizens are not even a part of this link in the chain—indeed, the citizens stand at least two steps removed from the ultimate agent of state policy—this theoretical framework strongly hints at the difficulty of meeting the criterion of citizen control of the state that is called for by democratic theory.

These leads notwithstanding, this research agenda faces some daunting challenges. An attempt to understand the relationship between representatives and administrators must grapple with the complex interplay between politicians' preferences and their capacity to implement policy. Yet it is notoriously difficult to distinguish between two possible accounts of shortcomings related to the outcomes of decision making: (a) that politicians' preferences are in line with citizen interests but that politicians cannot guarantee citizens' civil rights owing to a lack of state capacity; or (b) that politicians actually do not intend to uphold the rule of law and invoke a lack of state capacity as a convenient cover to divert citizen attention away from their real preferences. Indeed, both interpretations are supported by evidence.

On the one hand, there is much support for the unflattering view of politicians as part of the problem and not part of the solution. Politicians depend on voters, for obvious electoral reasons. But they actually depend more on powerful actors, either private or ensconced in the state, that control economic resources and heavily affect politicians' ability to gain access to elected office and to pursue alternative careers. The standard line "*no se puede*" (it cannot be done)—justified on grounds of technical imperatives in some cases and of political limits imposed by the

¹¹Richard Snyder brought this limitation to my attention.

so called *poderes fácticos* (the powers that be) in other cases—could thus be an excuse aimed at papering over a conflict of interest between politicians and citizens. On the other hand, it would be irresponsible to disregard evidence that, when politicians have acted as agents of the citizenry and aggressively sought to implement certain policies, they have run into stiff resistance. Indeed, the specter of top-down ungovernability is quite real. And the lessons from Latin America's experience in the 1960s and 1970s, when attempts at reform unleashed a complex dynamic that eventually led to the breakdown of democracy in many countries, remain a critical point of reference. Further theorizing about this dimension of the quality of democracy is unlikely to make much progress until this thorny challenge of conceptualization and measurement is resolved.

This research agenda must also address the potential importance of a question that has generally been considered irrelevant to the debate about the quality of democracy: the democraticness of the regime. Much like the rest of the literature on democratic politics in Latin America, most research on the quality of democracy has taken as its point of departure the idea that problems regarding the political regime have been essentially solved and that the quality of democracy refers to a new set of political challenges, to postdemocratic transition issues. Yet such an assumption is questionable. Actors can and do oppose the rule of law by seeking to ensure that laws are not applied equally. Bribing bureaucrats, judges, or the police is an effective, and in many countries relatively cheap, way of doing so. But these are last-ditch efforts and, when the stakes are high, risky. Thus, it is quite reasonable to suspect that these actors will take precautionary steps and seek the issuance of discriminatory, or at least decidedly biased, legislation by shaping who gets elected to public office and/or how legislation is approved, through formal and/or informal procedures. Indeed, ample evidence exists that these strategies are common in present-day Latin America and that powerful actors who see the rule of law as hurting their interests seek to buy legislators and otherwise sever the relationship between citizens and their representatives, and even threaten and act against the most basic, electoral aspects of a democratic regime. In other words, there are good reasons to posit a negative backward linkage, whereby actors whose interests clash with the rule of law attempt to block the actions they oppose by going back in the chain of principal-agent relations linking citizens to representatives to policy administrators.¹²

¹²Relevant research on Latin America includes the work on formal electoral rules that skew the value of the vote and introduce a disjuncture between electoral preferences and governing coalitions (Snyder & Samuels 2001). On the role of money in electoral politics, see Payne et al. (2002, ch. 7) and Zovatto (2003). On informal procedures, see O'Donnell (1999b, ch. 9) and Helmke & Levitsky (2003). Overall, however, we lack good studies that go beyond the means whereby the election of representatives is distorted and that get inside the policy-making process, as is done in the U.S. literature on the formation of iron triangles, which shows how legislative committee members, executive agencies, and interest groups working in concert can override the interest of the citizenry and legislators.

In tackling these challenges and seeking to advance this research agenda, as is suggested, it is useful to think in terms of a multilink chain that goes from citizens to policy makers to policy administrators, and to consider how powerful actors who have an interest in rupturing this chain might act. This perspective offers a way to frame the question of the quality of democracy as hinging, broadly speaking, on the issue of citizen control of the state, yet to break down the research agenda into distinct, though connected, parts. Thus, it avoids a somewhat awkward separation between the analysis of the democratic regime, understood as focusing on the procedures for gaining access to the government and hence a critical aspect of the relationship between citizens and their representatives, and the rule of law, understood as entailing both the enactment and implementation of laws that treat all citizens as equals. Instead, it invites a rethinking of the political regime, aimed at revising the commonly used minimalist conception of a democratic regime, and focuses attention on the link between the democratic regime and the rule of law.¹³ Moreover, it opens the door to new theorizing about the conditions of equilibrium, and the possibilities of change, of this more broadly conceived system. The questions this analysis suggests are whether the citizens of Latin America might be able to use their vote as an instrument to make badly needed gains with regard to accountability and the rule of law, or whether deficiencies in the areas of accountability and the rule of law are actually matched and reinforced by deficiencies regarding the democratic regime and, thus, that the system is currently in equilibrium and not prone to change. These, however, are empirical questions, and as yet they have not been researched in a systematic manner.¹⁴

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has offered an overview of new debates and research frontiers in the study of democratic politics in Latin America. It began by discussing an important debate in the institutional literature, about the impact of executive-legislative relations on the problem of indecisiveness. Taking the institutional literature on its own terms, this discussion highlighted the notable strengths of this literature. Subsequently, I adopted a broader perspective that exposed some limitations but also other strengths of institutional analyses, and I considered the possibility of combining insights developed from institutional and alternative theoretical perspectives. The discussion was organized around the two core elements of theory building—causal and descriptive theorizing—and yielded some conclusions that

¹³O'Donnell (2001, 2004) suggests that the link between the democratic regime and the rule of law is such that it provides the theoretical justification for an expanded concept of democracy that goes beyond the regime and encompasses the rule of law.

¹⁴Munck (2003, pp. 575–83) offers some admittedly sketchy and speculative thoughts along these lines.

have wide-ranging implications for the manner in which Latin American politics should be studied.

With regard to causal theorizing, I considered some important limitations of institutional analysis associated with the way institutions are theorized and cases are selected. These shortcomings are remediable through the construction of more complex causal models that include variables that go well beyond the actors, institutions, and outcomes that are the centerpiece of an institutional approach. Yet the consequences of these shortcomings for existing research cannot be disregarded. Indeed, it is crucial to take the standard assertion that "institutions matter" as little more than a metatheoretical statement, not a conclusion of empirical testing. To test this proposition, it is essential not to focus exclusively on institutions and to consider the possibility that actors engaged in conflicts are, at the very least, unlikely to place a respect for formal institutions ahead of a defense of their own interests. In addition, it is important to recognize that the common delinking of the analysis of democratic institutions from the regime question is problematic not only for methodological reasons but also for substantive ones. In this regard, and especially in the context of Latin America, it is imperative that researchers not become desensitized to the manner in which the democraticness and stability of regimes are still in play.

With regard to descriptive theorizing, the assessment was more positive. Much institutional research is narrowly focused on the policy-making process from the perspective of decision makers. But institutionalists have also focused on the political process in broader terms and have made some significant and undervalued contributions to theorizing about the quality of democracy, a critical substantive concern in the field of Latin American politics. Thus, breaking with current divisions in the field, I suggested ways in which the question of democratic quality might be framed by explicitly connecting the complementary perspectives offered by scholars working in different theoretical traditions. The possible gains associated with this strategy notwithstanding, I also suggested that this agenda of research faces some major challenges. One concerns the thorny relationship between politicians' preferences and state capacity. Another relates to the relationship between the democraticness of the regime and the rule of law.

Research on democratic politics in Latin America has advanced considerably in the years since this region moved away from authoritarian rule in the late 1970s. As this article has sought to show, this research has also opened up vast frontiers, which offer important opportunities for new scholarship. The issues at stake are not only of academic interest. Indeed, questions such as the quality of democracy are increasingly moving to the center of political attention in the region. Thus, it is a matter of some urgency that scholars turn their attention to these questions and, drawing on all their theoretical and methodological skills, produce knowledge that is accessible and readily translatable into political advice. This is a big challenge. It is also the reason why the study of Latin American democratic politics is exciting and rewarding.

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