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Journal of Democracy, Volume 24, Number 2, April 2013, pp. 123-137  
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/jod.2013.0037](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0037)



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## Lessons from Latin America

# DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN AND SURVIVAL

*Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán*

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Why do democracies survive or break down? We return to this classic question with an empirical study of Latin America between 1945 and 2005 that employs a new research strategy. A rich body of qualitative studies of individual countries tells us that the survival or fall of democratic regimes depends on what political leaders, parties, militaries, social movements, and other key actors do. Their behavior is shaped, but not determined, by structural forces and cultural patterns. Scaling up from case studies is hard, however, and until now scholars' ability to test theories based on actors' preferences and behavior has been limited. Here we present an analysis that is mainly quantitative and aims at a preliminary assessment of how far certain key ideas from the qualitative literature can be generalized.

Our study does not use a demanding definition of democracy. We begin with a tripartite classification, developed with Daniel Brinks, that categorizes Latin American political regimes as democratic, semidemocratic, or authoritarian.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, we lump together democratic and semidemocratic regimes under the broader heading of "competitive regimes." Although we occasionally refer to these regimes simply as "democratic," the set of cases to which we are referring includes semidemocratic regimes as well. Between 1945 and 2005, the twenty countries of Latin America experienced a combined total of 644 years under competitive systems. Our analysis explores why (and when) competitive regimes broke down and, conversely, what factors favored their survival.

Our findings show that neither the level of development nor economic performance has directly shaped the prospects for democratic survival in Latin America. We focus instead on key actors' normative preference for democracy and their policy radicalism or moderation, as well as on the regional political environment. Democracies are more likely to survive when political actors have a strong normative preference for democracy and when they avoid radical policy positions. Moreover, democratic regimes are stronger when the regional environment facilitates the spread of democratic values and political moderation domestically.

Our study builds on three key insights from the work of the late Guillermo O'Donnell. The first appeared in O'Donnell's seminal book *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism* (1973),<sup>2</sup> which criticized modernization theory for positing too linear a relationship between development level and regime type. Our study, which covers a longer time span and a broader set of Latin American countries, confirms O'Donnell's argument that the level of development has not had a direct impact on the survival of competitive regimes in the region. Second, in *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism* and in some of his other works from the 1970s and early 1980s, O'Donnell argued that the "threat" posed to dominant elites (especially capitalists) by popular-sector mobilization was an important trigger of democratic breakdowns in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, we argue that actors' policy moderation or radicalism affects the survival or breakdown of competitive regimes.

In his "Introduction to the Latin American Cases" in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (coedited with Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, 1986), O'Donnell first laid out some daunting obstacles to stable democracy in the region. But he then argued—and this is the third of O'Donnell's insights upon which we draw—that a shift had taken place in the bulk of the region's countries: "Most political and cultural forces of any weight now attribute high intrinsic value to the achievement and consolidation of political democracy. This is indeed a novelty."<sup>4</sup> Taking this a step further, we argue that a competitive regime's prospects for survival is affected by whether actors normatively (that is, intrinsically) value democracy as a political regime.

Although these three insights of O'Donnell's serve as the foundation for our study, we challenge one core idea in *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*, which viewed democratic breakdowns through a structural lens. O'Donnell argued that structural characteristics of capitalism in Latin America's more economically advanced countries explained why modernization theory did not hold for this region. We argue instead that modernization theory does not work in Latin America because the level of development in the region has had little impact on actors' policy radicalism or their normative preferences for democracy.

In most countries of the region, competitive regimes were brittle until 1978—when the "third wave" of democratization began in Latin

America—but then became much more resilient. Most Latin American countries experienced at least one period of democracy or semidemocracy before the 1970s, but many of these competitive regimes were short-lived. Starting in 1978, however, the newly established democracies survived important challenges, and the cumulative number of competitive regimes increased as new transitions took place. By 1991, eighteen of the region's twenty countries (all but Cuba and Haiti) enjoyed competitive politics, and there have been only minor oscillations since then. This transformation occurred primarily because the breakdown rate of competitive regimes (the number of breakdowns divided by the number of years of competitive politics) plummeted from 9.3 percent in 1945–77 to 0.8 percent in 1978–2005 (the third-wave period). In other words, the breakdown rate was more than ten times greater in the earlier period than in the latter.

### Policy Radicalism and Preference for Democracy

Two proximate factors affect whether competitive regimes remain in power or fall: First, do key social and political actors have radical policy preferences? And second, do they have a normative preference for democracy? Policy preferences may range from moderate to radical. Some actors also develop what we call a normative preference for democracy. Policy radicalism and normative preferences regarding the regime are reasonably specific and measurable components of actors' political identities. Actors form policy preferences (as well as normative preferences concerning the regime) in an interactive historical context. These preferences are not historically fixed, but they tend to be fairly stable. Actors support or oppose the existing regime based on some combination of their policy preferences and their normative preferences regarding the political regime.

Actors are *radical* when their policy goals are located toward one pole of the policy spectrum (toward the left or right if the policy space is one-dimensional) and they express either an urgency to achieve those goals (where those goals do not represent the status quo) or an intransigent defense of those positions (where they do represent the status quo). Radical policy preferences need not be on the extreme left or right, but they must be far enough from the preferences of other relevant actors to create polarization. They are intense preferences; radical actors are unwilling to bargain or to wait in order to achieve their policy goals.

Does the presence of powerful radical actors make it harder to sustain a competitive regime? We believe the answer is yes. The more extreme and more powerful the radical players become, the more threatened by democratic politics some other actors will feel. In order to protect their interests in cases of considerable radicalization—on the part either of

the government and its allies or of opposition actors—some powerful actors may try to subvert a competitive regime.

This argument also applies to the government itself. When some actors fear that the continuation of a competitive regime will lead to their destruction or to major losses because the government has a radical agenda—whether this agenda is transformative or reactionary—the costs of tolerating the existing regime increase. The willingness of such actors to abide by the democratic rules of the game is likely to shrink, as will the regime's survival prospects.

Having a *normative preference for democracy* means that an actor values democracy intrinsically—in other words, above any specific policy outcomes. Such an actor is ideologically committed to democracy as the best kind of political regime. This commitment is expressed in his or her willingness to incur policy costs in order to defend the competitive regime. A normative preference for democracy is different from situational or opportunistic behavior in which an actor's support for the regime is contingent on policy results—in other words, on instrumental rationality. Of course, actors' instrumental rationality in pursuit of their policy preferences is also a key determinant of why democracies survive or break down.

There are many ways for actors to show their commitment to democratic principles. When candidates acknowledge their defeat in an election instead of challenging the results, they signal their commitment to the democratic regime. When government leaders accept a congressional defeat on an important issue rather than manipulating procedural rules to impose their preferred legislation, they signal their commitment to democratic procedures. These signals are credible to others precisely because they are costly.

We hypothesize that a strong normative preference for democracy among political forces will make competitive regimes more resilient. Such a preference limits how far actors will go in pursuit of their policy goals. When democracy holds intrinsic value for the actors, they are more willing to endure policies that hurt their interests because they perceive such policies as based upon legitimate, binding decisions. For the same reason, actors may be willing to reject beneficial policies if those policies have not been adopted by a legitimate regime.

Although previous works have noted the importance of actors' normative regime preferences,<sup>5</sup> it is difficult to demonstrate this point empirically for a large set of countries over a long period of time. Owing to difficulties of conceptualization, measurement, data gathering, and endogeneity, no previous quantitative analysis has undertaken such an endeavor. Among our basic assumptions is the notion that structural variables—a country's level of development or degree of socioeconomic inequality, for instance—do little to explain actors' normative preferences or policy radicalism until a high level of development, at which

point most actors are nonradical and intrinsically prefer democracy. Our empirical analysis verifies this assumption.

## The Coding Rules We Followed

Collecting and measuring data were major challenges. We needed to combine a quantitative assessment testing the generalizability of arguments for twenty countries over a long period of time with qualitative case studies probing the causal mechanisms in a deeper way. The greatest difficulty for the quantitative work lay in identifying the most important actors in the twenty countries and then coding their policy radicalism and normative regime preferences.

We engaged a team of nineteen research assistants to do this work. They undertook extensive research to prepare lengthy country reports that followed detailed coding rules. The reports described the main political actors during each presidential administration between 1944 and 2010. They identified a parsimonious set of actors (usually 3 to 7 per presidential term) that were most prominent in historical works about each period. Included on the list were presidents, organizations, and movements that exerted strong influence in the competition for power. Together, the reports discussed 1,460 political actors and more than 290 administrations. The president was almost always identified as a powerful actor. Political parties, labor unions, business associations, the military, guerrilla organizations, and social movements also commonly figured among the key actors.

The researchers followed detailed coding rules to detect instances of radicalism and normative preferences for democracy. They coded political actors as radical if they 1) expressed an uncompromising desire to achieve leftist or rightist policy positions in the short run or to preserve those positions where they were already in place; or 2) expressed a willingness to subvert the law in order to achieve certain policy goals. The government was coded as radical if it 3) implemented polarizing policies that deliberately imposed substantial costs upon other actors (for example, expropriations without compensation or labor-repressive regulations to increase labor supply). Nongovernmental actors were coded as radical if they 4) committed violent acts aimed at imposing or preventing significant policy change. If actors were divided or ambiguous about those positions, they were coded as *somewhat radical*; otherwise they were coded as *not radical*.

Many political actors pay lip service to democracy, so the research team primarily documented the *absence* of a normative preference for democracy. Political actors were coded as *lacking a preference for democracy* if they did at least one of the following: 1) expressed ambivalence or questioned “bourgeois,” “liberal,” or “formal” democracy; 2) expressed hostility toward democratic institutions [such as parties,

legislatures, courts, or electoral bodies] rather than simply challenging their decisions; 3) questioned the validity of democratic procedures when these produced unfavorable results; 4) claimed to be the sole representative of the people; 5) questioned the legitimacy of any opposition outside an encompassing national movement; or 6) frequently dismissed peaceful opponents as enemies of the people or the country.

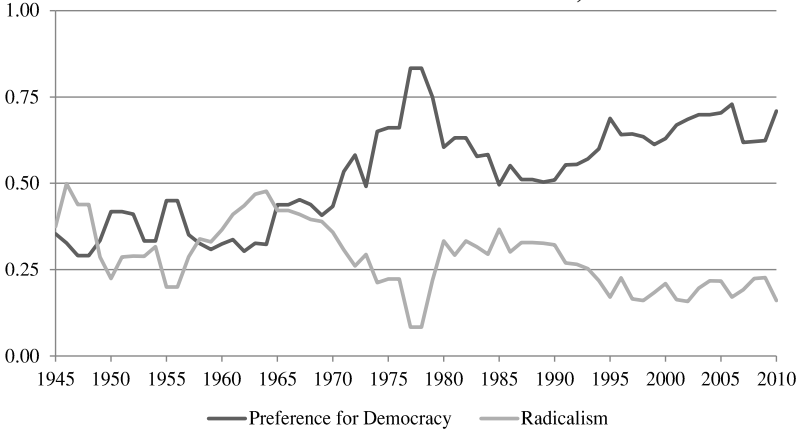
Government officials were also coded as lacking a normative preference for democracy if they 7) introduced programs of partisan indoctrination into the public school system or the military; or if they 8) manipulated institutional rules frequently in order to gain political advantage. Nongovernmental actors were considered as lacking a preference for democracy if they 9) expressed willingness to subvert the constitution; or 10) accepted the use of fraud, political exclusions, or violence for political purposes. Actors were coded as *having a strong normative preference for democracy* if they did not exhibit any of the ten hostile behaviors above, and as *fairly strong but not entirely consistent in their normative support* if they exhibited ambiguity with regard to any of these ten indicators.

These rules gave us a common basis on which to compare our twenty countries over a long period. The coding of radicalism and preference for democracy is conceptually independent of the coding for the political regime. Actors' positions on policy radicalism and normative preference for democracy do not intrinsically affect a regime's classification. The coding rules are based on behaviors and discourse that are observable and documentable and are intended to screen out instrumental, insincere deployment of democratic discourse. The indicators for coding radicalism and normative preferences for democracy do not eliminate the need for historical judgments about actors' preferences, but they do put the judgments on firmer ground.

We aggregated the information in a simple way. Actors were given a score of 1 (radical), 0.5 (somewhat radical), and 0 (not radical); and of 1 (a consistent and strong normative preference for democracy), 0.5 (a fairly strong but not entirely consistent preference), and 0 (inconsistent, ambivalent, or hostile views about liberal democracy on intrinsic grounds). We then estimated the average value of both variables in every country-year. Thus our variable *radicalism* can be roughly interpreted as the share of powerful actors with radical policy preferences, and our variable *normative preference for democracy* can be roughly interpreted as the proportion of actors with a normative commitment to democracy in each country between 1944 and 2010.

The Figure on page 129 depicts the historical evolution of the means for the two variables in Latin America. Among competitive regimes, radicalism showed a sustained—though uneven—decline during the second half of the twentieth century. By contrast, normative support for democracy tended to increase over time. The gap between the two series stabilized by the mid-2000s.<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE—EVOLUTION OF RADICALISM AND NORMATIVE SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN COMPETITIVE REGIMES, 1945–2010**



In 1977, seventeen of the twenty countries in Latin America had dictatorships; only Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela enjoyed competitive regimes. Around this time, the three competitive regimes displayed the lowest levels of radicalism and highest levels of normative democratic commitment for the entire period. This pattern suggests that in a hostile international environment, competitive regimes survived only in countries where political actors were moderate and wedded to a democratic ideal.

Earlier studies have found a variety of alternative explanations for democratic stability and breakdown. Accordingly, we considered, in addition to our main independent variables, three theoretical clusters of explanatory variables: 1) structural factors [the level of economic development, the size of the working class, and the degree of dependence on primary exports] and economic performance; 2) institutional design [party-system fragmentation and presidential powers]; and 3) international conditions [the level of democracy in the rest of the region, and U.S. policies toward Latin America].

We measured the level of development using per capita GDP (in 2000 U.S. dollars, based on World Development Indicators and Penn World Tables) and employed a quadratic specification to capture nonlinear effects. We used the percentage of the labor force in manufacturing as a gross indicator of the leverage of the working class; the size of the working class is relevant to testing theories which hold that a large working class is favorable to democracy. Because many scholars have argued that dependence on natural resources such as oil is detrimental to democracy, we included a dichotomous measure of natural-resource dependence, coded as 1 if exports of oil and minerals typically represented more than 10 percent of the gross national income (according to World Development Indicators). We used change in per capita income (the rate



of economic growth, based on our per capita GDP figures) to assess economic performance. Weak economic performance might make competitive regimes more vulnerable to breakdown.

Some scholars have argued that presidential democracies with fragmented party systems are more prone to breakdown. We therefore created a dichotomous variable coded as 1 if the effective number of parties in the lower (or only) chamber was equal to or greater than 3.0 in a given year. Matthew Shugart and John Carey maintain that presidentialism functions more effectively when weaker presidential powers are written into the constitution.<sup>7</sup> To assess this argument, we used their measure of presidential powers.

In order to investigate whether or not a favorable international environment might enhance chances for democracy, we used the proportion of democratic countries in the region each year (excluding the country in question) as an indicator of the regional political environment. Finally, since the United States, as a hegemonic power in the Americas, can influence the likelihood of transitions to competitive regimes and of regime breakdowns, we created a continuous scale to assess the orientation of U.S. administrations toward democracy in Latin America. The scores range between 0 and 1, with 1 indicating solid U.S. support for fostering and protecting democracy in Latin America.

## The Risk of Democratic Breakdown

We estimated the risk of democratic breakdown using a discrete-time survival model. The dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator coded as 1 for years in which the competitive regime broke down and was replaced by an authoritarian system, or as 0 if it survived that year. In addition to our main independent variables, *radicalism* and *preference for democracy*, the equation includes the eight control variables described in the previous section, plus a statistical transformation of time to capture any changes in the risk of breakdown during the life cycle of the regime and a random parameter to reflect latent regime frailties due to unobserved country characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

Five statistical findings are particularly notable. First, actors' policy radicalism increases the risk of breakdown considerably. This effect is significant at a 99 percent level of confidence (in other words, a result of this strength would only be found by chance less than 1 percent of the time). If radical actors win state power, they can impose very high costs on other actors, making it tempting for the losers to resort to coups as a way of preventing major and extremely difficult-to-reverse costs. For example, the radical policies of Salvador Allende's leftist government in Chile (1970–73) pushed the dominant faction of the Christian Democrats, the conservatives, and the military toward supporting the 1973 coup. They feared that allowing the Popular Unity government to stay

in power would have disastrous consequences. Although in this example the breakdown was caused by fear of leftist radicalism at the height of the Cold War, the same logic applies to rightist radicalism. Conversely, the Chilean Socialist Party's moderation after the reestablishment of democracy in 1990 made it easier for the democratic regime to survive. This finding is consistent with O'Donnell's work on the level of threat as an impetus to democratic breakdowns.<sup>9</sup>

Second, if actors have a normative preference for democracy, competitive regimes are far less likely to break down. Here, the result is significant at a 95 percent level of confidence. Although this finding is hardly surprising, it shows O'Donnell's prescience in arguing that actors' normative preferences could offset many liabilities, including a high level of inequality, the lack of democratic experience in most Latin American countries, and severe economic challenges.<sup>10</sup>

Argentina's history shows how actors' normative preference for democracy can have positive implications for regime survival. From the late 1920s until 1976, few actors in Argentina valued democracy on normative grounds. In 1930, the Conservatives, the Socialists, the military, and even parts of President Hipólito Yrigoyen's own United Radical Party conspired against him. From 1946 to 1973, both of the main political parties (the Radicals and Peronists) and the powerful labor unions were quick to defect from the democratic coalition. In 1955, the Radicals supported a successful coup against the populist dictatorship of General Juan Perón. In 1962, the Peronists and one faction of the Radicals supported a coup against a Radical president. In 1966, the Peronists and labor unions supported a coup against another Radical president. During those decades, powerful actors tolerated competitive politics only if their desired policies resulted.

In response to the devastation unleashed by the 1976 military coup, the key actors accepted democratic competition as the legitimate route to winning political office with the return of democracy in 1983. This reorientation toward a normative preference for democracy allowed the regime to survive despite severe economic depressions in the 1980s and in 2001–2002; hyperinflation in 1989–91; and a steep rise in poverty and inequality.<sup>11</sup> When there were serious threats to democracy in the late 1980s, the unions and the main parties mobilized to protect it. Labor endured extremely negative economic conditions but never mobilized on behalf of a coup. Instrumental or strategic logic could explain why many actors defected from a destructive military regime (1976–83), but it is the change in actors' normative regime preference that explains why they adhered to a poorly performing democracy for two decades.

In order to grasp the huge effect that policy moderation and a normative preference for democracy have on regime survival, consider the following estimates. According to our results, if no political actor in Latin

America had made a normative commitment to democracy and if all actors had been radical during the period between 1978 and 2005 (holding all other country characteristics constant), the average competitive regime would have confronted a 17 percent risk of breakdown each year. The typical democracy would have lasted roughly six years, and the third wave of democratization never would have begun. By contrast, if after 1978 all actors had embraced a normative commitment to democracy *and* had been moderate, the expected risk of breakdown would have dropped to .04 percent per year, and competitive regimes would have been virtually impregnable.

### Actors' Preferences and Regime Outcomes

Actors' normative regime preferences track closely with regime outcomes (in other words, consulting the state of preferences tells a lot about whether a competitive regime is likely to survive). By contrast, the factors that other approaches stress—including class, modernization, and culture—do not track as closely with regime outcomes. We argue that 1) “causally distant” explanations such as structural theories and most mass-cultural theories fail to explain regime outcomes in Latin America; 2) these explanations actually tell us little that can help to account for actors' policy or regime preferences; 3) explanations of regime outcomes *must* work through actors' behavior; and 4) normative preferences strongly inform some actors' behavior. If all four of these points are correct, then to understand regime change and survival, we *must* consider actors' normative preferences. Far from being too close in the chain of causality to be a useful explanation, then, they are a necessary though not sufficient part of the explanation.

Our third key finding is that a more democratic regional environment makes it considerably less likely that competitive regimes will break down. This result meshes with the large literature that has emerged over the last 25 years on the importance of international influences on democratization. A more democratic regional political environment fosters the diffusion of ideals about what is possible and desirable in politics, and it led the Organization of American States to establish legal norms intended to safeguard competitive regimes. Likewise, the end of El Salvador's twelve-year civil war in 1992 and the country's subsequent establishment of a competitive political regime helped to inspire similar developments in Guatemala a few years later. Conversely, before the third wave, some authoritarian regimes provided inspiration for coups and authoritarian leaders elsewhere in the region. For example, the Cuban revolution encouraged the formation of revolutionary leftist movements throughout most of Latin America, in turn prompting a right-wing counterreaction. In the 1960s and 1970s, the national-security doctrine that justified military coups and authoritarian rule as a way of thwarting

leftist threats spread throughout the hemisphere. The establishment in 1964 of a “successful” Brazilian military dictatorship—it boosted economic growth and thwarted the left—made Southern Cone militaries more prone to believe that they too might govern successfully.

The fourth notable finding is that structural factors (the level of development and the percentage of the labor force engaged in manufacturing) had no direct consequences for democratic stability in Latin America from 1945 to 2005. Structural predictors do not affect the probability of democratic breakdowns, even if we exclude the more proximate causes of breakdown tapped by our variables for policy radicalism and normative preferences for democracy. Modernization theory claims that the most economically developed countries are also the most likely to be democratic.<sup>12</sup> Yet the seemingly robust association between income and democracy does not hold for Latin America during our six-decade period of study.

O’Donnell was right to be skeptical about the impact of modernization on the survival of competitive regimes in this region.<sup>13</sup> Countries with high per capita GDPs (Argentina in 1951, 1962, 1966, and 1973; Chile in 1973; Uruguay in 1973) experienced democratic breakdowns, while countries with much lower per capita GDPs (such as Costa Rica from 1949 onward) had democracies that survived for generations. Argentina’s per capita GDP in 1976, the year of its last democratic breakdown, was US\$6,857; Costa Rica’s per capita GDP in 1949, when it inaugurated a competitive regime, was only \$1,836. In short, the finding for a broader sample of countries that higher per capita income lowers the likelihood of democratic breakdown does not hold for Latin America. Likewise, the size of the labor force engaged in manufacturing did not influence democratic survival.

If we accept the premise that political actors determine whether regimes survive or fall, then it necessarily follows that structural factors, including the level of development, do not *directly* affect the stability of competitive regimes. Structural factors instead may influence the organization of political actors as well as their preferences and strategic choices. Finally, counterintuitively and contrary to some findings about a broader range of countries, economic performance as measured by per capita GDP growth had no impact on the likelihood of democratic survival or breakdown in Latin America from 1945 to 2005. Competitive regimes survived in Latin America despite grinding recessions, increasing inequalities, and hyperinflation in the 1980s and 1990s. Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Nicaragua all had four- or five-digit inflation rates in the 1980s, with no breakdown of their competitive regimes. The region endured two decades of anemic average growth rates (1982 to 2002) even as the incidence of democratic breakdowns fell sharply. Between 1945 and 1977, the probability of breakdowns was far higher even though average economic performance was much better. If most actors believe in the intrinsic desirability of democracy and if the re-

gional political environment is largely favorable to democracy, competitive regimes can withstand poor performance for an extended time.

In sum, the combination of three key factors has enabled democracies to survive in Latin America—a favorable regional political context (reflected in the presence of other democratic countries in the region), along with a strong normative preference for democracy and a *lack* of radical policy preferences among key actors. These findings largely explain Latin America's stunning transformation from a region where dictatorships had prevailed for most of the twentieth century to a region where only a single openly authoritarian regime (Cuba) exists today. During the third wave of democratization, the regional political environment became much more supportive of democracy. Radicalism declined as revolutionary socialism and right-wing authoritarianism gradually became discredited. More actors became convinced of the intrinsic desirability of democracy. These changes have not ensured high-quality democracy or good governance, nor have they permanently inoculated the region against the possibility of backsliding. But they have made it difficult for new openly authoritarian regimes to emerge and stabilize, and they enabled most competitive regimes to survive withering economic crises in the 1980s and 1990s.

The statistical results are open to an obvious concern about endogeneity: If a competitive regime is in crisis, that crisis could push some actors to adopt more radical policy positions or to suppress their normative preference for democracy. Although we lack space for a full treatment of this problem here, there are numerous historical cases in which actors' policy radicalism and normative preferences help to explain regime outcomes and in which those outcomes clearly postdate the actors' adoption of their positions, meaning that the outcomes cannot explain the positions. The effect of normative regime preferences and policy radicalism does not stem only from reverse causation.

### **An Actor-Based Approach**

In this essay, we have introduced a new strategy for the study of regime breakdown and survival—namely, the use of an actor-based approach on a scale that is large enough to allow for quantitative analysis. Previous quantitative studies of democratic survival neither identified key actors nor tested propositions about regime survival and breakdown using the observed behaviors and orientations of real political players. Most variants of modernization theory, for example, fail to explicitly specify actors or causal mechanisms, thereby leaving the reasons for the linkage between a higher level of development and a greater probability of democracy unclear. Recent class-based theories about political regimes postulate that class conflicts over income redistribution determine the nature of political regimes. Yet these theories fail to prove that the poor, middle, and upper

classes are all in fact able to overcome collective-action problems and become coherent political actors. Because battles about political regimes involve specific actors whose preferences regarding the regime are not easily predictable on the basis of structural or cultural variables, we advocate historically grounded, actor-based approaches to studying regimes.

Alongside the “actorless” approaches to the study of political regimes, there is an alternative tradition that focuses on concrete historical actors. This includes Juan J. Linz’s iconic work on democratic breakdowns<sup>14</sup> and O’Donnell and Schmitter’s groundbreaking study of transitions from authoritarian rule,<sup>15</sup> as well as many rich qualitative case studies. The best of these works have greatly enriched our understanding of why democracies emerge and stabilize or break down. Our core hypotheses flow from this latter qualitative tradition. Yet the generalizability of its findings has been uncertain because of the limited number of observations. Our approach builds on insights gained from these qualitative studies and, for the first time, applies an actor-based approach to a broad range of countries over a long period of time.

We emphasize three substantive findings that expand on O’Donnell’s seminal contributions. First, the level of development neither raised nor lowered the likelihood of competitive regimes breaking down in Latin America between 1945 and 2005. This generally confirms O’Donnell’s analysis in *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*. Second, policy radicalism makes it more difficult to sustain competitive political regimes. When strong radical forces compete for political power, the chance grows that some actors will find the cost of tolerating democratic politics too high. Radical threats encourage defection from competitive regimes. Conversely, pervasive policy moderation lowers the stakes of democratic politics. Third, actors’ normative attitudes about the political regime have a significant impact on whether competitive regimes endure or break down. Some actors intrinsically value democracy far more than others. Democracy can withstand severe crises and protracted bad performance if most actors are normatively committed to democracy as a regime. Conversely, competitive regimes are highly vulnerable to breakdown if the most powerful actors are indifferent to liberal democracy’s intrinsic value. These normative preferences about the regime are not reducible to structural factors or to broad sociocultural patterns.

Measuring actors’ policy radicalism and normative preferences concerning the political regime is a huge challenge, and we do not claim to have solved all the difficulties. If policy radicalism and actors’ normative preferences are important variables that are not reducible to structural factors or to broad sociocultural patterns, however, social scientists should strive to incorporate them in their analyses. Earlier scholars did so in a qualitative way; we believe that it is now time to study these issues with quantitative tools as well.

## NOTES

We are grateful to Alfred Stepan for comments and to María Victoria De Negri for assistance in preparing this article.

1. Scott Mainwaring, Daniel Brinks, and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, "Classifying Political Regimes in Latin America, 1945–2004," in Gerardo L. Munck, ed., *Regimes and Democracy in Latin America: Theories and Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Our classification of political regimes begins with a definition of democracy that revolves around four dimensions. First, the head of government and the legislature must be chosen through open and fair competitive elections. Elections must offer the possibility of alternation in power. Second, for today's regimes the franchise must include the great majority of the adult population. Third, democracies must protect political and civil rights such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom to organize, the right to *habeas corpus*, and the like. Fourth, the elected authorities must exercise real governing power, as opposed to a situation in which elected officials are overshadowed by the military or by a nonelected shadow figure. Based on these four dimensions, we classify governments as competitive (democratic or semidemocratic) or authoritarian. When governments commit no significant violations of any of the four criteria, we code them as democratic. If they commit partial but not flagrant violations of any of these principles, we treat them as semidemocratic. They are authoritarian if they flagrantly violate one or more of these principles.

2. Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973).

3. Guillermo O'Donnell, "States and Alliances in Argentina, 1956–1976" *Journal of Development Studies* 15 (October 1978): 3–33.

4. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Introduction to the Latin American Cases," in Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, vol. 2, *Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 15.

5. Juan J. Linz's arguments about legitimacy are similar to our claims about actors' normative preferences. "Legitimacy is the belief that in spite of shortcomings and failures, the existing political institutions are better than any others that might be established." Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 16. Individuals and organizations that see democracy as legitimate do not judge it exclusively on performance grounds; they value it on normative grounds. See also Ignacio Walker, *Socialismo y democracia: Chile y Europa en perspectiva comparada* (Santiago, Chile: CIEPLAN/Hachette, 1990).

6. Space constraints prevent us from addressing selection effects and related endogeneity problems here; we explore these issues in *The Emergence and Fall of Democracies and Dictatorships: Latin America Since 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

7. Matthew S. Shugart and John M. Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8. Readers interested in the details of the estimation can obtain more information in our online appendix at [www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/supplemental-material](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/supplemental-material).

9. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*.

10. O'Donnell, "Introduction to the Latin American Cases," 15–18.

11. The urban poverty rate almost tripled, from 16.1 percent of the population in 1994 to 45.4 percent in 2002. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2005* (Santiago, Chile: CEPAL, 2006), 317, available at [www.eclac.cl](http://www.eclac.cl).

12. Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69–105.

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