In many ways, Latin America is a democratization success story. After most of the countries in the region gained their independence from colonial powers in the early nineteenth century, many countries experienced bouts of democracy followed by authoritarianism followed by transitions back to democracy... followed by renewed repression... In short, what many refer to as a “pendulum effect”, dramatic shifts back and forth between democracy and authoritarianism, has characterized much of Latin America’s history. In the 1970s and 1980s, most countries in the region were not democratic; rather they were ruled by dictators and military juntas that practiced widespread abuse of their citizens’ rights. Across the region, the military seized power to stamp out Communist threats and impose order. Yet by the 1990s, they had largely given up power and new democracies were taking root. The pressing question was whether this was just another swing of the pendulum, meaning that these new democracies would soon be replaced by authoritarian regimes again, or whether Latin America was consolidating democracy at long last.

In 2016, there is much to celebrate. Latin America is the most democratic region in the world outside Western Europe and the US. The only clear-cut case of authoritarianism in the hemisphere is Cuba, discussed later in this paper. Chile, a country ruled by the dictator Augusto Pinochet less than 30 years ago, now gets better scores than the United States does for Political

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Rights and Civil Liberties from the respected democracy-tracking NGO Freedom House. Armed conflict, a factor that has often contributed to the breakdown of democracy in the region in the past, is now virtually non-existent in the region, though the work of undoing the damage of those conflicts is ongoing (Arnson 2012). There are currently no inter-state wars in the hemisphere, and the last of the Cold War civil wars (Colombia’s) seems likely to end in a negotiated settlement finalized this year. Militaries across the region have been reformed and retrained to respect civilian authority and to largely stay out of politics. Societies mired in pervasive poverty, economic stagnation in the 1980s, and some of the highest levels of socio-economic inequality in the world saw real progress over the last decade or two, with countries like Brazil and Peru leading the way to a more prosperous future while also tackling poverty and expanding the middle class through more competent and innovative policy responses. Scholars are much more likely to write about the lack of quality in the region’s democracies than to worry about the existence of democracy there in the future.

Yet threats to democracy remain and scholars generally agree that, while the overall picture is dramatically better than it was 30 year ago, democracy remains fragile in many countries in the region (Colburn 2002), risks deconsolidation or erosion, and is often of poor quality (Mainwaring and Perez-Linan 2015). Over the last decade, democracy seems to be in danger or backsliding in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia, but stronger than ever in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, though only the last three are full, liberalized, consolidated democracies, while the others exhibit real and serious flaws (Mainwaring and Perez-Linan 2015). Below, I will highlight some challenging regional trends and explore a few problematic cases.
1. High levels of corruption threaten the legitimacy of democratic governments across the region, but also give democratic institutions a chance to prove themselves.

Though Latin America is the most democratic region of the developing world, the public in these countries view their governments as corrupt at nearly the same rates as the public in most African and Asian countries, according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2015). This has contributed to low levels of public trust in political parties, individual political leaders, and the political establishment as a whole, as Latino Barometro polls show year after year. This can create conditions threatening to democracy.

Consider the chaos in Brazilian politics this year, where President Dilma Rousseff was impeached. The charges upon which the Senate based their vote to impeach relate to misrepresenting the size of the budget deficit to the public. Experts and commentators generally agree that those are not grave enough charges to have provoked the impeachment alone, and point instead to two other factors. First, the Brazilian economy has suffered enormously in the last few years. After a long period of economic growth fueled by Chinese demand for Brazil’s primary commodities, unemployment is soaring and the economy is shrinking. Second, there is mounting evidence of the president’s party (the PT, or Workers’ Party) in a massive corruption scheme involving Petrobras, the state-owned oil company. This is in fact the second president forced out of office since the return to democracy in the 1980s: in 1992, President Fernando Collor was impeached for corruption. To some, these peaceful removals of presidents through constitutional means signal that the Brazilian state is capable of and committed to upholding the rule of law. A rigorous judicial and political system is holding those in power to account without
triggering a collapse of democracy. To supporters of ousted President Rousseff, this year’s impeachment was a “coup” – not in the old literal sense, but in the sense of the opposition using the legal proceedings of impeachment in an opportunistic way to get rid of their competition when she loses popularity. Since opposition parties in Brazil appear to be every bit as corrupt as the Workers’ Party, which has dominated the presidency for the last 13 years, it is not hard to make sense of their glee at Rousseff’s downfall, but it makes it harder to see it as an unqualified triumph of democracy. (For competing interpretations, see Economist “Brazil’s Terrible Politics” April 18, 2016 vs. Economist “The Impeachment Country” Sept 10, 2016. A similarly controversial case of presidential impeachment was that of President Lugo in Paraguay in 2012.)

The Guatemalan case also stands out. After civil war, military repression, and genocide devastated the country in the 1980s, Guatemala has attempted to rebuild democracy. But organized crime is so extensive in the country that it has led to the arrest and imprisonment of more than 200 political leaders, including ex-President Otto Perez Molina, who was forced to resign in 2015 and is now in jail. Guatemalan attorney generals and the UN International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala have launched an all-out assault on corruption. As in Brazil, this may be evidence that the system is working, but if Guatemala cannot root out the endemic corruption and organized crime that dominate its political system, the public may give up on democracy altogether (Isaacs 2016).

2. Governments’ failures to control violent crime and build the rule of law have also challenged government legitimacy, as well as led to a populist politics that weakens democracy.
Just as democratization has not meant a noticeable decline in corruption, it has also not brought improvements in citizen security. Dammert goes so far as to argue that “The main challenge for democracy in Latin America is to enhance security by reforming political structures, strengthening the means to limit corruption, and increasing effective crime prevention and control” (2013, p. 78). Latin America has the highest homicide rate compared to any other region of the world. El Salvador, Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia all crowd the top of the list of countries for national homicide rates in recent years (see, for example, UNODC 2014). Beyond homicide, many Latin Americans are the victims of crime. The public is deeply frustrated with police ineptitude, corruption, and brutality; the weakness of the judicial system; and their democratic governments’ failure to respond to crime in an effective way. This has several effects on democracy: First, it contributes to the broad and deep disenchantment with government than Latin American publics register in polls, protests, and a willingness to abandon traditional political parties. Second, it has sometimes contributed to the rise of political leaders who engage in populism and promises to bring a “mano dura”, or tough-on-crime zero-tolerance response, even if those leaders have dubious democratic credentials and brush off the danger such policies might pose to human rights. (For example, President Ollanta Humala, whose term in office in Peru ended earlier this year, participated in an attempted coup as a military officer in 2000. President Molina of Guatemala, discussed in the section above, also rode to power on promises to tackle crime with a ‘mano dura’ despite questions related to his own history of military service under dictator Ríos Montt during a genocidal military campaign in the 1980s.)

Dammert argues persuasively that the state’s failure to respond effectively to citizen insecurity is leading to a crisis of trust in institutions, a crisis that “negatively impacts the
possibility to consolidate and develop the rule of law and democratic institutions” (94-5). (See also Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000). In some recent polls, large numbers of Latin Americans indicate they would welcome military intervention in government to respond to the crime epidemic (Latino Barometro 2008, 2010). Given the long history of military authoritarianism in the region, it is worrying that for as much as 40% of the public in some countries this prospect retains appeal. Strong evidence of government complicity in organized crime, as has surfaced in Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and beyond, may persuade the public that impunity still reigns. In a region that has waged path-breaking battles to hold human rights abusers from the recent authoritarian past accountable for their crimes, the question of how much justice their governments are capable of deliver is very much on people’s minds.

3. Democratic institutions are often under-developed. In particular, legislatures and political parties remain weak compared to executive branches. Strong courts are essential to check executive branch dominance.

Across the region, parties have long been problematic. In the 21st century, there are indications that in much of the region, parties are at last delivering voters some reliability: increasingly, it is clear to voters what a party stands for and what its leaders will do if elected (Domínguez 2013). However, in Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, political parties remain a problem. There, parties tend to have short lives and function as vehicles for individual politicians’ careers or to dominate against weak opposition (De La Torre and Arnson 2013, Levitsky 2013). As elsewhere in the world, where political parties are weak and distrusted, populist politicians with weak commitment to democracy are able to flourish.
Venezuela has witnessed a dramatic weakening of its democratic institutions in recent years and many scholars doubt it deserves to be called a democracy any longer. After grave economic difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s weakened public support for the old political party system and elites, President Hugo Chavez came into office in 1999 promising to completely transform the economy and government of Venezuela. Constitutional changes, approved by public referendum, have had the effect of concentrating overwhelming power in the executive branch, eliminating the upper house of the legislature and weakening the new unicameral legislature, removing power from regional and local government, and limiting the independence and authority of the judiciary. After members of the media favored an attempted coup against Chavez in 2002, freedom of the press has been severely curtailed and much of private media closed. President Chavez made meaningful political opposition virtually impossible and used a variety of means to ensure the continuation of his presidency and “revolution” at the cost of democratic institutions (Alvarez 2013). As one scholar wrote in 2008, “liberal democracy is all but dead in Venezuela. The delegative democracy of the Bolivarian period (1999-2006) is giving way to populist electoral autocracy that only grudgingly concedes political space to its opponents” (Myers 2008). President Chavez retained office until 2013, when he died of cancer; he had been president for 14 years.

The situation has not improved under Chavez’s hand-picked successor, Nicolas Maduro, who is deeply unpopular, is presiding over a devastating economic crisis, and appears to be relying increasingly on the military to maintain his hold on power. In a good sign for democracy, a coalition of opposition parties won control of the legislature in 2015. Massive public protests are a regular occurrence now. Yet it remains unclear whether the current regime will collapse and whether anything more democratic will replace it. The public only truly turned against the
regime when its economic policies resulted in disaster, suggesting the public is not fully committed to liberal democratic institutions.

Mainwaring and Linan (2015) note that Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua have some things in common with Venezuela, though democratic erosion is less extreme in these three countries. Here as in Venezuela, the popularity of current Leftist governments and their success in elections seem to be supporting the rise of popular authoritarianism, in which opposition is largely shut out of political competition and cannot check the power of the president and his party. These presidents have shown a worrying tendency to demonize opposition parties, use new constitutions to expand presidential power further, and to undermine freedom of the press. Fear that President Manuel Zelaya would follow a similar path is the best explanation for why the Honduran military staged Latin America’s most recent coup in 2009; ironically, this coup was ordered by the Honduran Supreme Court, acting against Zelaya when he ignored their ruling that his attempt to create a new constitution was unconstitutional. Though democracy broke down in Honduras in 2009, courts there and in Colombia have attempted to defend the constitution in the face of dominant presidents who wish to extend their time in office or erode democratic institutions.

4. The biggest challenge for democratization in the region is, of course, Cuba.

Cuba remains an authoritarian regime, despite half a century of diplomatic isolation and an economic embargo imposed by the United States. The regime remains under the leadership of the Castros, political dissent is punished by imprisonment, and civil liberties remain elusive. In the last two years, President Obama has restored diplomatic relations with Cuba; eased
restrictions on travel, remittances, and banking; and visited the island, giving a speech calling for the US Congress to drop the embargo. Congress seems disinclined to abandon the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which stated that the embargo would be lifted only if and when Cuba becomes a democracy. Critics of President Obama’s détente with Cuba note that, other than economic reforms implemented since Raul Castro took power in 2008, the Cuban government has failed thus far to enact any meaningful political reform or improve human rights. Raul Castro has said he will step down in 2018, so all eyes will be on the country to watch for a democratic opening (Sweig 2016). If Cuba does transition to democracy, it will have even more work to do to build the institutions needed to fully liberalize and consolidate, from a free press to political parties, than other democratizing states in the region have generally faced.

**Conclusions**

Despite the challenges, most democracies across the region have proven surprisingly resilient, withstanding changes of control of government from one party to another more than once, as well as real economic challenges, such as genuine economic depression in Argentina, short term financial crises in Mexico, and the recent contraction of the Brazilian economy. Yet the region defies scholars and commentators who tend toward complacency, as new challenges emerge with frequency and old challenges resurface. As I wrote this, Colombians went to the polls to vote in a referendum on the peace deal negotiated between FARC and the Colombian government. After five years of pain-staking work by those parties to reach a deal, the Colombian voters rejected it in an upset some are comparing to Brexit. There were many legitimate reasons for concern about the peace deal and the quality of democracy it would give Colombia: the deal offered members of the FARC impunity for human rights violations,
legitimated them as a political party, and guaranteed them seats in the legislature, despite the public’s hatred for the group. But the vote has thrown the peace process into chaos. Like so much else in the region, democratic exercises like this referendum underscore the representative, participatory ethos that increasingly governs the region, but also raises questions about what a restive, dissatisfied electorate will do with the power they now enjoy.

Most recent Latin American transitions to democracy came about peacefully and then benefited enormously from having an engaged civil society that has become more inclusive and organized in the years since. It has also been helpful that these transitions did not involve large-scale external intervention, but were truly home grown regime changes. When other regions look for hope that the instability and authoritarianism of the past can be overcome, they should look to Latin America for lessons as well as warnings about the challenges that will take decades to address. They should see in Latin America proof that governments can be taught to respect the rights of citizens, but that democracy is no panacea for insecurity, whether from violence or poverty. And when the developed democracies of the world look to other countries to see how others grapple with the issues they confront at home, increasingly they will look beyond Europe to Latin America for comparable cases and shared issues.

Works Cited


Latino Barometro polls are available here: www.LapopSurveys.org


