EXPLAINING DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY IN LATIN AMERICA:
Political Violence, Anti-regime Rebellion, and Other Instances of Democratic Rule Violation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to conceptualize, and propose a way to measure democratic fragility in Latin America. Specifically, I wish to identify unequivocal signs of antidemocratic behavior in the relatively “new” Latin American democracies, and underscore major instances of democratic rule violation. Understanding democratic fragility is fundamental to analyze key political processes taking place in the region today.

The term democratic fragility refers to the presence of certain conditions or actions that violate basic rules of the democratic game and thus, put the game as such into question. These conditions/actions include: i) the rejection of elections or limits to the electoral process, and violation of other political rights (government control on political participation); ii) violation of civil liberties (including human rights violations); iii) limited government responsiveness or lack of accountability of democratically elected governments and politicians; iv) veto power of nondemocratic actors over government policy; and v) threats to institutionalized authority patterns—the presence of anti-regime rebellion or violent internal conflict.

The present paper consists of three parts. In the first part of the document, I explain the concept of “democratic fragility,” and identify its component dimensions. In the second section, I describe patterns of democratic fragility in contemporary Latin America. In particular, I refer to “current” events of political instability, instances of antidemocratic behavior, and recent social struggles against neoliberalism in the region. Finally, I propose a way to measure the dimensions of the concept in question.
INTRODUCTION: Latin American Democracy in the Age of Neoliberalism

In the current era of globalization, neoliberal/structural economic reform, and world economic crisis, most Latin American democracies can be considered rather fragile. Actually, free-market reform has coincided with a period of political liberalization—or the adoption of electoral democratic values—in most part of the developing world. Initially, the public in general held high expectations about the beneficial effects of this simultaneous political and economic transformation. But after almost three decades of political and economic reform, most Latin American countries have experienced disappointing economic and social performance—persistent high inequality and poverty, lack of economic growth and slow social progress; this situation seems to reveal basic deficiencies and limitations of the new order. Dissatisfaction with the application of neoliberal reforms—and with the new economic model in general—has translated, in some cases, into rising political violence, a new resurgence of the left, the emergence of new forms of populism, the rise of new personalistic plebiscitariant leaders, and the appearance of new social and political movements across the region.

The current scheme of economic and political liberalization has been challenged in the recent decades by dynamic—and sometimes violent—political and social movements, such as Mexico's Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacin Nacional, EZLN) and the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO); the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC); the sem terra (the landless) and sem teto (the roofless) in Brazil; the Piquetero movement in Argentina; Bolivia's cocaleros (coca farmers); peasant-Indian movements in Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay; popular mobilizations against privatization in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, among others. What is more, not since the 1960s and early 1970s have there been so many “leftist” governments in Latin America. Consider, for example, the presidential victories of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of the Workers’ Party in Brazil, 1 Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Nestor Kirchner and Cecilia Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina, Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Mauricio Funes in El Salvador, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

At the same time, several countries of the region have been experiencing visible rises in crime and violence. 2 Increasing levels of crime (particularly violent crime), organized crime and corruption in these places have undermined trust in the rule of law and judicial systems. Overall, basic democratic institutions—political parties, legislatures, judiciaries, the police and the presidency—seem to be weak and discredited in many countries of the region. 3 Generalized popular perceptions that poverty has not visibly reduced and that democracy has

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1Lula da Silva and Hugo Chavez were reelected in 2006. Lula won reelection in run-off vote on October 29, 2006. On December 3, Chavez was reelected president for a third term with the support of more than 60% of voters.

2For more details and statistics on crime and violence in the Hemisphere, see De Mesquita Neto (2002).

3Certain groups of Latin American citizens have been losing faith in democracy. In the late 1990s, Latinoobarometro surveys showed that more than a half of those polled were unsatisfied with democracy (Hakim 2000, p. 107). These figures have not changed substantially in the last few years.
not significantly challenged the region's entrenched inequalities have influenced a growing disenchantment with elected political leaders who are not seen to be fulfilling their promises. In this context, in the past couple of decades, certain Latin American democracies have faced crises of legitimacy.\(^4\)

Latin America today can be characterized by its polarizing differences between the rich and the poor, and between ethnic and racial groups, high levels of poverty, growing levels of criminality, limits on citizenship rights (freedom of expression and association, human rights protection, etc.), the weakness of civil society, problems of representation, serious limitations of the rule of law, and the weakness of political parties, among other problems (Oxhorn 2001). At the same time, “the formation of stable governing electoral majorities and political stabilization in some Latin American countries have been undermined by the divisive effects of geographic localism, struggles over state patronage, and redistributive appeals from the populist left” (Haggard and Kaufman 1992, p. 295). One could then argue that in the present times democratic fragility is a common trait in Latin America.

I. WHAT IS “DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY”?

The term *democratic fragility* has to do with the core concept of *regime instability*. However, to make use of the concept *instability* “in general” is problematic since instability refers to different concepts, such as “regime instability, government instability, cabinet instability, and disturbances to the public order, which could be further subdivided into riots, strikes, crime, terrorism, and internal war” (Coppedge 1997, p. 5). The proposed study will focus on regime/democratic instability, and will only consider certain disturbances to the public order that could eventually threaten democracy. The concept of democratic fragility will not include considerations on crime, violence or alternative manifestations of sociopolitical unrest that are part of the normal life of every democratic nation.\(^5\) In particular, the present definition will focus on concrete rules, organizations, and collective and individual behavior that define various forms of democracy.

**Democracy and Violence**

This particular notion of democratic fragility includes some forms of political violence. However, it is important to point out that the concept itself does not incorporate every kind of


\(^5\) This is what Marshall and Jaggers (2009) refer to as “dormant” political factionalism; this term is closely related to political pluralism. Factionalism is a specific form of division within a democracy that occurs when certain identity groups harbor antagonistic relations. Actually, “[i]dentity diversity may be effectively integrated and managed within the polity (e.g., consociationalism or pluralism) or it may be “politicized and mobilized as exclusive identity cleavages and factions that are played out contentiously within the political participation and competitiveness arenas of the central polity.” For Marshall and Jaggers political factionalism, may be dormant (e.g., in pluralist polities), latent (e.g., in situations of regional autonomy within a polity), or active. And particularly when it is active, factionalism “challenges the coherence and cohesion of authority patterns” in a democracy (p. 2). Otherwise, democracy does not seem to be in danger.
violence, but only those incidents that put into risk the stability of democratic institutions. Regular manifestation of civil violence and some disturbances to the public order—such as strikes, peaceful demonstrations, and minor cultural conflicts (ethnic and religious)—apparently take place in every Latin American society and do not seem to pose major threats to democratic stability. When accounting for “democratic fragility” it does not seem appropriate to blend routine forms of democratic activity—such as alternations in office, strikes, peaceful demonstrations, etc.—with internal violent conflict, in the form of coups, guerrilla warfare, widespread riots, political assassinations, etc. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to consider only relevant instances of anti-regime rebellion, and those actions that involve politically significant actors whose strategic location turns their disloyal behavior into serious limitations to democracy.

Instances of politically motivated violence that will be considered part of the term democratic fragility are: “the assassination of political competitors; attacks against the liberty, physical integrity and property of political adversaries; the intimidation of voters and candidates; violent attempts to overthrow elected officials; and the expressive destruction of public property.” Additionally, this notion will take into account groups or individuals who “do not accept the outcomes of democratic elections but rather mobilize extra-institutional protest, boycott elected assemblies, or take up the arms to overthrow elected authorities by force” (Schedler 2001, p. 71). In fragile democracies, political life in general and “democratic elections are [often] held in [environments] of persistent and widespread civil unrest (rebellion, revolution, and/or ethnic conflict)” (Marshall and Jaggers 2009, p. 76).

**Democratic Fragility: A Catalog of Manifest Violations of Democratic Norms**

What I wish to analyze in the present study is not democracy, but democratic fragility. The focus is not on regime change or regime collapse; the present project will not deal “directly” with the possibility of open reversals of democratic rule. In other words, the analysis will be limited to current developments of democratic regimes in the region. The main purpose of the relevant work is not to make “specific” predictions on the future of democracy in Latin America, but merely to identify unequivocal signs of antidemocratic behavior in the relatively “new” Latin American democracies, and explain instances of democratic rule violation.

Notwithstanding clear signs of antidemocratic behavior in several Latin American countries, and taking into consideration various analyses suggesting the possibility of widespread authoritarian reversals in this region (Agüero and Stark 1998; Oxhorn and Starr 1999; Petras 1999; and Petras and Veltmeyer 2001), such an outcome seems quite unfeasible in the globalization era. Apparently, “a more simple destruction of democratic institutions” is unlikely due to the presence of crucial factors such as “the discredit of the military, the

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6The survival prospects of political regimes, as Andreas Schedler (2001) recognizes, “do not represent empirical facts we can see and touch, here and now. Rather, they represent intersubjective judgments on future developments, which we form drawing on certain factual evidence, past as well as present...[E]stablishing empirical degrees of democratic consolidation is not just a matter of observation, but of prospective reasoning (p. 67). Thus, “when trying to assess the survival prospects of democratic regimes, we need an additional set of rules. We need rules of predictive inference that tell us what present data tell us about the future” (p. 68). This kind of analysis will not be developed in the present work; it will just include brief comments on the survival prospects for political democracy in the region as a whole.
attachment of broad sectors of society to the democratic paradigm, and the international context” (Castañeda 1996, p. 61).

In fact, economic financial integration and continuing supervision of policy implementation and economic performance in Latin American countries by international financial institutions has made challenges to the established economic and political order much less feasible. As Kurt Weyland (2004b) recognizes, “neoliberalism seems to have boosted the sustainability of democracy in Latin America, both by exposing the region more to external pressures for maintaining competitive civilian rule and by forestalling internal challenges to its survival” (p. 143).

On the other hand, there seems to be a tension between free-markets, the adverse effects of neoliberal economic policies on income distribution, and democracy. However, the presence of certain irregularities in the current political process does not automatically disqualify a country from being designated an electoral democracy. The risks of democratic breakdown seem to be comparatively low in the globalization era. The main problem seems to be closely related to the quality of democracy. Due to the low democratic quality of several Latin American institutions, it could make more sense to conceptualize democratic fragility in terms that take us beyond the simple dichotomy between democracy and authoritarism. At the moment, to make any accurate prediction on regime change or collapse, and the future of the relatively “new” Latin American democracies is rather difficult.

Hence, the present study could start by introducing a catalog of manifest violations of democratic norms. Among the most common violations of democratic principles in contemporary Latin America are: discriminatory practices that persist despite gains in the electoral arena and diverse political rights violations (such as fraud, manipulation of elections, repression of political groups with distinctive electoral preferences, political discrimination against minorities, etc.); actions that undermine civil liberties (such as the prevention of free association, censorship against opposition media, human rights violations, among others); limited accountability of elected authorities, rampant corruption, weak rule of law and impunity; military influence on politics; and serious political turmoil (massive riots, demonstrations, and religious, ethnic, or other kinds of communal strife).

The present analysis is helpful to determine whether contemporary Latin American democracies effectively guarantee basic political, civil, and human rights, and also to evaluate to what extent the defining criteria for democracy are violated. More specifically then, democratic fragility implies major problems with the defining properties of modern representative democracy. In brief, the term democratic fragility refers to the presence of certain conditions or actions that violate basic rules of the democratic game and thus, put the game as such into question. These conditions/actions include: i) the rejection of elections or limits to the electoral process, and violation of political rights (government control on

According to this particular conception, modern representative democracy in Latin America has five basic properties/attributes, which taken together define democracy as a regime in which the majority of its citizens have an equal and effective chance to participate in the electoral process that determines the government. In such a regime, political rights, civil liberties and human rights are protected; the government is responsive to the preferences of the citizens; the elected really govern; and serious political crises and violent internal conflicts are, in general, avoided.
political participation); ii) violation of civil liberties—such as freedom of press, freedom of
speech, freedom to organize, personal autonomy, the rule of law, etc.—or human rights; iii)
limited government responsiveness or lack of accountability of democratically elected
governments and politicians; iv) veto power of nondemocratic actors over government
policy; and v) threats to institutionalized authority patterns—the presence of anti-regime
rebellion or violent internal conflict. As of the present definition, one could classify countries
as “more fragile” or “less fragile” by evaluating—either qualitatively or quantitatively—each
of these five dimensions, and then aggregating such assessments into one general
characterization or political indicator of democratic fragility.

Further Considerations about the Concept

It is worthwhile mentioning that the present definition of democratic fragility is based on a
non-minimal definition of democracy. This conception includes “procedural” dimensions of
democracy, and adds several other aspects that are relevant to the current process of
democratization in Latin America. These aspects are related to the degree of
institutionalization of the political system, where both “formal” and “informal” institutions
are taken into account. In fact, informal institutions such as corruption, clientelism, and
patrimonialism are crucial components of Latin American political systems in general.
Besides considering “institutionalized” authority patterns (formal or informal), the present
definition of democratic fragility incorporates non-institutional practices of political systems
—in particular, information about authority-mitigating factors such as anti-regime rebellion
and violent internal conflict. In fact, the use of violence is a “core symptom of failed

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8 The accountability/responsiveness dimension has to do with the functioning of government, and helps to
determine whether elected authorities operate with openness and transparency. Considerations about informal
institutions, such as corruption, clientelism, patrimonialism, etc., are thus included. This property also
incorporates the notion of “horizontal accountability,” or the degree of checks and balances between the various
parts of the government. Horizontal accountability implies the existence of institutional constraints on the
legislature, judiciary, and on the decision-making powers of the chief executive.

9 Each of these five dimensions represents a violation of one defining democratic principle. These principles are:
1) free and fair elections and protection of political rights; 2) protection of civil liberties and human rights; 3)
accountability of democratically elected governments and politicians—elected authorities must be “responsive”
to the preferences of the citizens; 4) effective governing power—that is, the agenda of issues that democratic
governments may decide without consulting unelected actors (such as the military, totalitarian parties, religious
hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group); and 5) a fair degree of coherence and cohesion
of institutionalized authority patterns and structures—this implies the absence of anti-regime rebellion, or actions
that reflect a clear tendency to political alienation and destabilizing political violence.

10 Procedural definitions of democracy are the ones that explicitly refer to elections.

11 There is a debate on whether to use minimal or non-minimal—thin or thick—definitions of democracy for
operationalization and measurement purposes. The choice depends on the kind of study one wishes to conduct
and the region of analysis. Since almost all Latin American countries now satisfy the rather minimalist
requirements for democracy (holding “free and fair” elections and including the great majority of the adult
population), and because the object of the present study is not democracy itself, but antidemocratic behavior or
instances of democratic rule violation, it seems appropriate to use a thick or non-minimal definition of
democracy. Hence, one could add to procedural definitions of democracy, a concern for other aspects that
characterize the political process in contemporary Latin America. A focus on civil liberties, human rights and
political violence seem to be particularly relevant. Equally important are those concerns about accountability or
responsiveness, and effective governing power.

In brief, the present interpretation of democratic fragility is based on “a definition of democracy that goes beyond the more formalist definition of civilian rule and political competition.” It takes democratization as a multi-dimensional process in which citizens can contest real power—sometimes through non-institutional channels—and “where the state through its institutions both encourages and protects this process and can be held accountable for its outcome” (Volk 1997, p. 6).

It is also important to highlight those components that are not considered in the present definition of democratic fragility. First, it leaves out considerations regarding (in)equality—(in)equality in socioeconomic terms. It might seem reasonable to include here every crucial element of citizenship—the possession of civil, political and social rights. However, the definition here leaves as an empirical question the relationship between democracy and equality. This seems particularly relevant for the purposes of certain kind of studies. Economic dimensions of democracy are excluded when economic factors (inequality, growth, economic financial integration, etc) are introduced into the analysis as explanations/causes of antidemocratic behavior. In sum, the present conceptualization of democratic fragility focuses both on formal and informal political institutions, and on some non-institutional practices of political systems (such as violence and civil conflict); economic considerations are considered part of the explanation. Likewise, the present definition says nothing about other significant aspects of the democratization process in the region, such as: the appropriate level of government, decentralization, national sovereignty, external conflict, and other external factors. As in the case of economic factors, the international context seems to play an essential role explaining the fragility of Latin American democracies.

12Quoted in Schedler (2001), p. 70.
13See Marshall and Bottomore (1992). Evelyne Huber, et al (1997), for example, include social rights when defining social democracy and differentiating it from the formal and participatory types. Guillermo O’Donnell (1996) also considers this dimension when referring to “a citizenry that firmly approves democratic procedures and values, fair application of the law in all social and geographical locations, and low inequality” (p. 46).
14It has been widely discussed that parliamentary systems encourage higher levels of political participation than presidential ones (See Mainwaring and Shugart, eds. 1997; and Linz and Valenzuela, eds. 1994). Therefore, “Latin America’s presidential regimes make electoral inclusiveness more difficult to achieve than the typical Western European parliamentary regimes” (Colomer 2004, p. 54). However, to include considerations related to presidentialism and parliamentarism in order to analyze democratic fragility in Latin America does not seem particularly relevant since presidential democracies are prevalent throughout the region.
15The centralized/federal classification is an important property of political systems. In fact, political participation tends to be higher in federal systems, and “regional units of government potentially are more responsive to local inputs than are centralized governments” (Marshall and Jaggers 2009, p. 36).
16Neoliberalism has probably restricted the exercise of popular sovereignty, thus limiting the quality of democracy in Latin America. In fact, market reform seems to have tightened external constraints and diminished the range of feasible political options. This situation has apparently restricted effective political competitiveness in several countries, and contributed to the recent decline of electoral participation in the region (See Weyland 2004b, pp. 143-147).
II DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

This definition will be quite useful to evaluate the fragility of the relatively new Latin American democracies. In fact, Latin American countries in general now satisfy the requirements of fair competitive elections—that is, the minimalist requirements for democracy. However, political systems in most countries of the region show several characteristics that seem inconsistent with democracy (limits on participation, competition, civil liberties, political violence, etc.). It seems thus that most Latin American democracies are rather fragile.

Degrees of democratic fragility vary depending on the different political and economic conditions of each country. High levels of democratic fragility in Latin America are present, for example, in today’s Venezuela. Here, the relative absence of institutional constraints on executive power, political violence and a high degree of polity fragmentation seem, at times, to put into risk the Venezuelan democratic regime itself. The presence of the guerrilla in Colombia and drug trafficking-related problems in Mexico are also serious limitations for democratic development. Other instances of visibly fragile Latin American democracies in the recent times are Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Paraguay. In Ecuador, for example, instability toppled three presidents in a decade; in the period 1996-2006 no president served a full term in office due to the recurrent insurrections and social protests. Bolivia has also experienced critical political instability and strong social protests in the last few years.\(^{17}\)

As of the present definition of democratic fragility, one needs to adequately assess to what extent the five defining criteria for democracy are violated. Typifying possible violations of the five democratic principles already identified is crucial for any study of democratization in Latin America, especially since these particular principles seem to effectively characterize the current political process in the region. And this is important because there are specific forms of democratic fragility in contemporary Latin America that distinguish this region from other areas of the world. One could definitely identify common patterns of antidemocratic behavior that are prevalent throughout this part of the Hemisphere in the so-called “neoliberal era.”

According to some, neoliberalism has contributed to erode and limit the quality of democracy in Latin America. In this view, drastic market reform has apparently strengthened elite sectors, and weakened important sectors of civil society and diverse political organizations, including political parties. Such organizations have been “crucial for stimulating meaningful popular participation and for holding governments accountable.” Recent economic crises in the region have further contributed to weaken civil society—especially labor and other social movements—and political parties. Additional violations of democratic norms in contemporary Latin America take place in the area of accountability or responsiveness. High and pervasive levels of corruption, impunity and abuses of the legal

\(^{17}\)Bolivia’s recent history of political instability registers two presidents resigning in a three-year period (2003-2005). Threats to social stability and the country’s unity continue during Evo Morales administration. Deep divisions characterize Bolivia today, including clashes between groups supporting the government and those opposed. The main underlying issue behind these recent conflicts has been a debate over regional autonomy.
system by elites, have seriously undermined trust in legal and democratic institutions in general, and have thus contributed to a recent increase in electoral abstention (Weyland 2004b, pp. 144-149).

Horizontal accountability has also been undermined in the current era. A basic violation of this principle occurs when chief executives exercise power with few institutional constraints. Such a situation has taken place quite frequently in contemporary Latin America. Consider, for example: Mexico under the PRI rule, Peru with Alberto Fujimori, and Argentina during the administrations of Carlos Menem. In more recent times, a clear situation of limited restraints to the executive is present in Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela. Meanwhile, presidents Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Evo Morales of Bolivia are also making good progress in this respect. These personalistic, plebiscitarian leaders—so-called "neopopulist" presidents—tend to concentrate power, and make important efforts “to strengthen the institutional apex of the state and to skew the separation of powers so as to privilege the executive branch over congress and the judiciary and thus to attenuate checks and balances to their own authority” (Weyland 2003, p. 1107). “Neopopulism” then also seems to reduce the quality of democracy in Latin America.

A distinctive form of regime fragility in Latin America entails manifestations of internal violent conflict. Over the past few decades, several countries in the region have experienced important political crises—in the form of guerrilla violence, military unrest, widespread riots, inter-branch conflict, etc. Consider, for example, the Chiapas uprising in Mexico; the 2006 insurrection in Oaxaca, Mexico; urban riots in Argentina; military insubordination in Paraguay; mass protest, inter-branch conflicts, and military arbitrage in Ecuador; governmental or paramilitary campaigns against guerrillas and drug trafficking in Colombia; and the current political situation in Venezuela.

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18Correa and Morales have recently made serious attempts to control the processes of constitutional reform in their respective countries. According to many, Rafael Correa wants to bypass the legislature and consolidate presidential authority with a special assembly on constitutional reforms as Hugo Chavez did after his 1998 election. In March 2007, 57 legislators—more than half of Ecuador’s congressmen—were dismissed by the Electoral Tribunal after they tried to reverse Correa’s plan to rewrite the Constitution. Finally, Correa scored an overwhelming victory in the referendum held on April 15, 2007, in which more than 80% of the electorate voted in favor of his proposal to convene a constituent assembly. In Bolivia, a constituent assembly was elected in July 2006 with the task of redrafting the country's constitution within a year. The main problems here have been the disagreements between the government and the opposition regarding the mechanism for voting constitutional changes. In the opposition’s view, Evo Morales and his party—the Movement toward Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS)—have been trying to control over the whole redrafting process.

19Oaxaca has lived an extremely difficult political situation in the past few years, and recently experienced an unprecedented wave of protest and political violence. This wave of protest began as a reaction to the violent repression against Oaxaca’s striking teachers. Section 22 of the National Teachers’ Union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE), the so-called Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APP), and several other social groups formed an important movement to demand the resignation of Oaxaca’s Governor, Ulises Ruiz. Through massive demonstrations, civil disobedience acts, occupation of radio stations, road blockades, among other actions, this movement was able to paralyze main activities in the capital city of Oaxaca for several months. In a political field polarized by the 2006 post-electoral conflict, the Oaxacan situation turned into a problem of national character, involving the federal government, the federal riot police, the Congress, main political parties, and even guerrilla movements and paramilitary groups.
It is also worthwhile mentioning the substantial rise in crime and daily violence throughout the continent, and the fights of new dynamic social and political groups and movements such as the Landless Workers in Brazil, the Zapatistas and the APPO in Mexico, the Argentinean Piqueteros, and other peasant or indigenous movements in South and Central America. These events undermine, in some way, economic and social development, and could make the process of democratic consolidation even more difficult. However, certain levels of crime and essential social movements do not necessarily contribute to further democratic fragility, and could be considered parts of the normal social and political processes of any plural society. It would be interesting to keep track of the progress of such events in order to make a more accurate assessment of their role in democratic consolidation in specific countries.

III MEASURING DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY

Since the notion of democratic fragility refers to concrete violations of the democratic game that put the game as such into question, in order to create an indicator of this variable I will first choose appropriate measures of democracy and its component dimensions. Subsequently, I will construct a democratic fragility index by combining already existing measures of undemocratic behavior, with inverted scores of certain attributes of democracy—frequently used for the purposes of regime classification. These indicators should match the five dimensions of democratic fragility already identified.\(^{20}\)

Specifically, I will create continuous annual ratings of democratic fragility. This task requires the access to reliable sources of regime classification covering most Latin American countries during a considerable period of time.\(^{21}\) Actually, there are quite acceptable ratings of the quality of democracy and its attributes that seem to fit the purposes of the present study. My democratic fragility scores will be mostly based on the most popular continuous scales of democracy and its dimensions.\(^{22}\) The Freedom House survey and the Polity IV project seem to provide the most appropriate data sources.\(^{23}\) However, they exclude some components that are crucial in my definition of democratic fragility—particularly the ones related to anti-regime rebellion and political violence. Therefore, I will try to add the missing dimensions, collecting

\(^{20}\)None of these scores will rest on original fieldwork; they will be based on popular sources focusing on classifying political regimes. I plan to use more than one source, since no single current one comprises every chosen dimension. Different sources score distinct attributes of democratic regimes, depending on whether the chosen definition of democracy is subminimal, minimal or non-minimal. In general, the most popular measures of democracy and its component dimensions are highly correlated. However, this does not imply that “the choice of one measure over the others has no substantive implications” (Mainwaring, et al 2001, p. 53).

\(^{21}\)Among the most popular ratings of democracy that cover several Latin American countries over a long period of time are: Polity IV data on democracy and autocracy, Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties, Mainwaring, et al 2001 classification of political regimes in Latin America, and Przeworski, et al (2000) data.

\(^{22}\)Despite the attractiveness of the most popular continuous measures of democracy, for Latin America the available indicators pose important validity and reliability problems (see Mainwaring, et al 2001).

\(^{23}\)For more information on these projects see Gastil (1991), and Marshall and Jaggers (2009).
relevant data from alternative sources. I recognize that using different sources to construct a
democratic fragility index could produce certain distortions; however, this procedure is
needed and would provide a more comprehensive measure of what I refer to as democratic
fragility.24

**Assessing Political Rights Violations, and Limited Responsiveness / Accountability:**
**The Polity IV Autocracy Index**

For Latin America in particular, Polity data appear to have fewer systematic problems than
Freedom House ratings (Mainwaring, et al 2001, p. 55).25 Thus, I will start by using the Polity
database to measure the component dimensions of democratic fragility. Since the Polity
project does not offer ratings for all five dimensions, in the missing cases I will use alternative
sources that provide acceptable ratings of the quality of democracy and are highly correlated
with Polity’s scores.

To begin with, I will use the Polity IV autocracy index. This indicator reflects the
degree of competitiveness or restrictions in the “executive recruitment process,”26 the extent
to which political participation is suppressed or regulated, and the absence of checks and
balances to executive powers. Thus, the index implicitly incorporates at least two of my five
dimensions of democratic fragility, namely: 1) problems with elections to determine who
governs and violation of political liberties; and 2) the relative absence of horizontal
accountability. Overall then, the Polity IV autocracy index reflects the degree of restriction or
suppression of competitive political participation.

**Determining the Absence of Civil Liberties and Human Rights Violations**

In the Polity IV Dataset Users’ Manual, Marshall and Jaggers (2009) conceive
institutionalized democracy as three essential, interdependent elements: 1) the presence of
institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about
alternative policies and leaders; 2) the existence of institutionalized constraints on the
decision-making powers of chief executives; and 3) the guarantee of civil liberties to all
citizens in their daily lives and in acts of political participation (p. 13). However, Polity does
not include coded data on civil liberties. My definition of democratic fragility does not only
refer to the suppression of civil liberties but also to human rights violations. I need then an
alternative source that accounts for these considerations and provides reliable measures of
such characteristics.

24 It is important to acknowledge further problems with the creation of an index of democratic fragility. In fact,
some of the component dimensions of this variable operate at a high level of abstraction. For example, it is hard
to infer violations of human rights or the presence of reserved domains from broader concepts such as
“constraints on the chief executive” or the “veto power of nondemocratic actors over government policy.”

25 Despite its merits, the Polity scale has some disadvantages. On Polity’s limitations see Mainwaring, et al

26 In my definition of democratic fragility I refer to the mechanisms for selecting political leaders in a more
general sense, that is, I consider elections of both the chief executive and the legislature. The Polity project
focuses exclusively on the executive recruitment process and does not account for legislative selection in its
coding rules. However, I will not add this consideration to my measure of this dimension.
In particular, I will utilize *Freedom in the World 2009: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties* (Freedom House country ratings). Freedom House scores implicitly incorporate three relevant dimensions of democracy: free and fair competition, broad participation, and civil liberties and human rights (Gastil 1991). Specifically, I will make use of its civil liberties ratings, which incorporate considerations on human rights. I will invert these scores in order to determine the extent to which civil liberties and human rights have been violated in each chosen country during the last couple of decades.

**Assessing the Constraints to Effective Governing Power**  
(*Veto power of nondemocratic actors over government policy*)

So as to determine the degree of influence of nondemocratic actors over government policy, I will probably use the Freedom House annual survey as well. In particular, I will try to obtain the numerical ratings of a specific category included in Freedom House's "political rights checklist" This category corresponds to Question 3, Section B (Political Pluralism and Participation) in the checklist: “Are the people’s political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group?”

**Indicators of Anti-regime Rebellion and Extreme Political Violence**

It is difficult to provide adequate measures of this dimension, and especially of the kind of political violence that seriously challenges democracy. The Polity IV project “collected information regarding only the authority patterns of the state regime” without special consideration of authority mitigating factors, such as political violence (Marshall and Jaggers 2009, p. 1). To distinguish between these two elements makes sense for the purposes of the Polity project. However, in the present case, efforts to explain democratic fragility must definitely take into account the use of organized, anti-regime armed force, and the presence of serious political violence that affects the coherence and cohesion of institutionalized authority patterns.

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27Freedom House’s civil liberties checklist is divided into four groups: a) freedom of expression and belief; b) association and organizational rights; c) rule of law; and d) personal autonomy and individual rights.

28Even though the Freedom House survey seems to be the most adequate source for the present purposes, one should consider its actual limitations. As Mainwaring, et al (2001) recognize, “one must exercise caution in using Freedom House scores, especially to compare over time.” According to them, “some conclusions based on Freedom House scores might be misleading because of its systematic biases.” Similarly, “the reliability and validity of its scores are subject to question because of the lack of explicit coding rules” (p. 55).

29It is important to acknowledge one major problem of using Freedom House ratings that has to do with their lack of explicit coding rules. In fact, one does not know the specific criteria Freedom House uses in assessing regimes and assigning numerical ratings to each category— included in the political rights and civil liberties checklists. This leads to potentially serious problems of reliability and validity.


31In general, the most frequently used indices of political instability blend routine forms of sociopolitical unrest (crime, strikes, peaceful anti-government demonstrations, etc.) with actions that reflect a clear tendency to political alienation and destabilizing violence (coups, riots, guerrilla warfare, civil wars, etc.). See, for example, Feierabend and Feierabend (1966), Cukierman, et al (1992), and Alesina and Perotti (1996).
Thus, in an attempt to measure this dimension—and trying to capture the relationships among governance, violence and group integration—I will use two basic sources: a) the *Minorities at Risk* (MAR) database,\(^{32}\) and b) *Arthur S. Bank Cross National Time Series Data Archive, 1815-2007*. Specifically, I will try to combine into one index—which I will call the “political violence index”: indicators of anti-regime rebellion from the MAR database,\(^{33}\) with Banks Cross National Time Series data on i) guerrilla warfare, ii) major government crises, and iii) revolutions.\(^{34}\) By ‘guerrilla warfare’ Banks refers to any armed activity, sabotage, or bombings carried on by independent bands of citizens or irregular forces and aimed at the overthrow of the present regime. In case of ‘major government crises’ he reports the number of any rapidly developing situation that threatens to bring the downfall of the present regime—excluding situations of revolt aimed at such overthrow. Finally, data on ‘revolutions’ account for the number of any illegal or forced change in the top governmental elite, any attempt at such a change, or any successful or unsuccessful armed rebellion whose aim is independence from the central government.

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\(^{32}\)The MAR project is “an independent, university-based research project that monitors and analyzes the status and conflicts of politically-active communal groups in all countries in the world with a current population of at least 500,000.” A "Minority at Risk" is conceived in this project as “an ethnopolitical group (non-state communal group) that: a) collectively suffers, or benefits from, systematic discriminatory treatment vis-à-vis other groups in a society; and/or b) collectively mobilizes in defense or promotion of its self-defined interests” (*MAR Data Set Users’ Manual*, p. 5).


BIBLIOGRAPHY


