Political Elites, Democratic Breakdown, and Presidential Instability in Latin America

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Until the 1990s, elected presidents in Latin America were often removed from office through military coups. Over the past two decades, impeachments and anticipated resignations have been more common, but coups have not disappeared completely. Are presidential impeachments and resignations functional equivalents of old-fashioned military coups? Do they originate in a different set of historical causes? In this paper we explore the causes of presidential instability in Latin America between 1945 and 2009. The paper integrates the literature on military interventions and recent works on “interrupted presidencies” to develop a unified theory of presidential instability. We argue that elites play a crucial role: radical policy preferences trigger political instability, either in the form of coups or constitutional removals. In order to test our theory, we employ a novel database that contains information on presidents and political parties in 19 countries. Using this information, we estimate a survival model to assess the competing risks of presidents facing a military coup or a constitutional removal during the past 65 years.

Historically, many Latin American countries have fallen prey to regime breakdown, specifically in the form of military coups. However, since the 1980s military coups have grown rarer while constitutional forms of presidential removal have increased. That is, whereas the earlier type of instability often resulted in the breakdown of the democratic regime, this “new” pattern of political instability threatens only the president. Between 1978 and 2012, 17 constitutional presidents were removed from office through civilian mechanisms such as impeachments, declarations of presidential incapacity, or the call for an early resignation, without a military intervention (Pérez-Liñán 2007).

Are contemporary forms of presidential instability manifestations of the old regional pattern of regime breakdown, or are they a new political phenomenon driven by different explanations? The literature has not offered a complete answer to this question, although recent works have hinted at possible similarities between military coups and civilian replacements. Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010) labeled the new phenomenon “presidential breakdowns” establishing a parallel with old-fashioned democratic breakdowns. Valenzuela (1994) claimed that similar problems in the design of presidential constitutions underpin the two historical processes. Most authors seem to implicitly accept that coups and presidential downfalls share some common causes, although the limited ability of military officers to intervene in politics in the post-Cold War has brought to the fore the use of constitutional mechanisms to remove incumbents (Pérez-Liñán 2007). Although we do not dismiss this argument, recent military intervention in Honduras (2009) and continued military involvement in civilian affairs in
Ecuador indicate that the “old” era of coups and regime breakdown may not be completely over.

In this paper we argue that a common historical mechanism has underpinned both military coups and the civilian removal of Latin American presidents. The radicalization of policy positions among opposition forces has consistently led to the destabilization of democratically elected administrations. However, domestic forces operate in the context of broader regional trends. In the past, when few countries in the region were democratic, military action against the president was an effective path to pursue radical policy goals. After 1978, the spread of democratization in the region reduced the viability of military adventures and forced radical opponents to find constitutional mechanisms to oust presidents from office.

In the first part of the paper we review historical patterns of political instability in Latin America and present our hypothesis about the impact of radical policy preferences. In the second section we revise alternative explanations for the ousting of Latin American presidents. An extensive literature has examined the institutional, structural, and economic determinants of military coups (Fitch 2005; Lehoucq and Pérez-Liñán 2009; O'Kane 1981; Collier and Hoeffler 2006; Belkin and Schofer 2003), and a smaller literature looks at the causes of the recent wave of presidential impeachments and presidential breakdown in the region (Pérez-Liñán 2007; Baumgartner and Kada 2003; Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010). In the following section we test the argument with data for 19 Latin American countries between 1945 and 2009. Our conclusions emphasize the consistent peril posed by radical oppositions for elected governments. With very few exceptions (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010), no one has offered a unified theory or
empirically tested the shared as well as divergent causes of these phenomena. We develop a theory linking coups, impeachments, and other irregular presidential exits, and then test the argument with a novel database.

**Radicalism and Presidential Instability in Latin America**

Before the third wave of democratization, presidential crises in Latin America usually led to some form of military intervention. Civilian rule was rare, and efforts to construct enduring democratic institutions were frustrated by high rates of instability. Fossum (1967) found that from 1907 to 1966, a period of only sixty years, the twenty republics of Latin America experienced a cumulative total of 105 military coups d’état which increased in each twenty year period\(^1\): 25 from 1907 to 1926, 34 from 1927 to 1946, and 41 from 1947 to 1966. Needler, writing in 1966, asserted that the coup d’état and the establishment of de facto military government is “the most characteristic feature of Latin American politics” (Needler 1966: 616), and Lowenthal noted that, “army officers rule in more than half the countries of Latin America; in most of the rest, they participate actively in politics without currently occupying the presidential chair” (Lowenthal 1974: 107). By 1977 only Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela could be classified as democracies. However, since the democratization of Ecuador in 1978, military intervention and coups d’état have dropped precipitously (Dix 1994).

The “new” instability in Latin America is characterized by stable regimes but unstable presidents. Pérez-Liñán (2007) refers specifically to presidential impeachment

\(^1\) He defines a coup d’état to be “any successful deposition of incumbent head of state, civilian, or military, by the military forces, or parts of them, with, or without civilian participation” (Fossum 1967: 228).
as this mechanism of dispute resolution, but forced resignations and extra-constitutional legislative procedures have also been employed to remove the president but maintain constitutional order. This instability has been widespread. Between 1978 and 2012, six democratically elected presidents were impeached by Congress or left anticipating an impeachment: Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil, 1992), Carlos Andrés Pérez (Venezuela, 1993), Abdalá Bucaram (Ecuador, 1997), Raúl Cubas Grau (Paraguay, 1999), Lucio Gutiérrez (Ecuador, 2005), and Fernando Lugo (Paraguay, 2012). Five elected presidents also resigned in the midst of a crisis: Hernán Siles Zuazo (Bolivia, 1985), Raúl Alfonsín (Argentina, 1989), Alberto Fujimori (Peru, 2000), Fernando de la Rúa (Argentina, 2001), Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Bolivia, 2003). Five other interim presidents were unable to complete the terms for which they tried to fill in: Rosalía Arteaga (Ecuador, 1997), Alberto Rodríguez Saá (Argentina, 2002), Eduardo Duhalde (Argentina, 2003), Carlos Mesa (Bolivia, 2005), Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé (Bolivia, 2006). In turn, Joaquín Balaguer (República Dominicana, 1996) resigned after two years as part of an agreement to overcome an electoral conflict. Only three presidents during this period left as a result of military intervention: Jorge Serrano (Guatemala, 1993), Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador, 2000), and Manuel Zelaya (Honduras, 2009), and in the first case because the middle ranks refused to support Serranos’ coup against Congress. In no instance was a dictatorship established as a consequence of the overthrow.

Marsteintredet and Berntzen (2008) counted twenty interrupted presidencies (resignation, impeachment, declaration of incapacity) in Latin America since 1978, and several more failed attempts at presidential interruption. This phenomenon appears to be more acute in South America. Hochstetler finds that between 1978 and 2006, 40% of
elected presidents in South America were challenged by civilian actors trying to force them from office, and 23% actually fell, whether due to impeachment or forced resignations. Our study identified 19 coups and 15 constitutional removals affecting democratically elected presidents between 1945 and 2009, but only 4 coups and as many as 14 removals took place after 1977.

These facts pose a number of questions. Why are there coups under some circumstances and impeachments and other anti- or quasi-constitutional removals under others? What are the common causes, and which causes are unique to a single form of presidential instability? Is regime survival and presidential fall the result of changes in international factors, such as the end of the Cold War and an increased emphasis on democracy promotion in multilateral and regional organizations, such as the Organization for American States (OAS)? The ample literature on coups and the newer scholarship on presidential crisis in Latin America point to some answers.

We contend that the radicalization of opposition forces has been the main factor driving both military coups and constitutional overthrows in Latin America. By radicalization we mean, following Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2012) a particular pattern of policy preferences. Opposition actors are radical when they pursue policies that are located towards the left or the right of the policy spectrum and they have very intense preferences. This means that radical actors suffer steep losses when the policy proposed by an administration departs from their ideals. Radical forces are thus reluctant to bargain and intransigent in defense of their goals. They are likely to dismiss the right of democratically elected administrations to implement unacceptable policies and to question the legitimacy of incumbent presidents when they try to do so.
Irrespective of their ideology, radical actors may be recalcitrant (if they defend the status-quo) or transformative (if they seek to change it). Thus, elected presidents may confront challenges from the right and from the left, when they try to alter existing policies and when they try to preserve them. For example, right-wing opposition forces plotting military coups were recalcitrant when they sought to preserve the legacies of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic in 1963, and they were transformative when sough to dismantle the legacies of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. In turn, leftist forces calling for the downfall of elected presidents were recalcitrant when opposing the adoption of convertibility policies in Ecuador in 1997, and transformative when seeking to dismantle neoliberal policies in Bolivia in 2003. We summarize our first claim as

H1: Radical oppositions are likely to trigger military coups as well as constitutional overthrows of elected presidents.

In addition, we argue that the different patterns of presidential overthrow observed after 1978 do not reflect changes in the implications of radicalism for presidential survival. Rather, region-wide changes in ideational trends and in the orientation of international organizations led to a transformation of the feasible set of strategies available to radical actors. As more countries democratized and military rule met with greater resistance from regional organizations and from US policymakers, radical opponents abandoned the military option and looked for constitutional mechanisms to remove undesirable presidents from office. This part of our argument is not novel, and follows on a long tradition of arguments about coup diffusion. For example, using a data set of Latin America coups from 1907 to 1966, Fossum (1967) showed that a “neighbor effect” exists between “top dog” neighboring countries—that is,
economically and militarily important countries in the regional context. Pitcher, Hamblin, and Miller (1978) found support for the diffusion of violence in general, but less so when applied specifically to their data set of coups. However, Brinks and Coppedge (2006) noted that countries tend to change their regimes to match the average degree of democracy or non-democracy found among their contiguous neighbors. They also confirmed that countries tend to follow the direction in which the majority of other countries in the world are moving. Thus, H2: A greater number of democracies in the region will make military coups less likely and constitutional overthrows more likely.

**Alternative Causes of Coups D’état and Removals**

Coups and constitutional removals, however, are not only explained by radical opponents or a benevolent environment. There is a broad literature examining the causes of coups and presidential crises in Latin America, although it generally focuses on one phenomenon or the other. In a rare exception, Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) searched for common explanations, and concluded that economic performance and civil society mobilization have an important impact on the likelihood of both presidential and democratic breakdown. However, there are many additional explanations in the coup and impeachment literature that have been shown to be empirically significant. These explanations, summarized in Table 1, invoke economic predictors, political and institutional factors, and social variables. While some of them, such as the role of economic development and economic growth, overlap, others suggest a distinctive causal mechanism for each outcome.
### Table 1: Summary of Explanations for Coups and Constitutional Removals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military Coups</strong></td>
<td><strong>Constitutional Removals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of development (Londregan and Poole 1990; Przeworski et al. 2000; O'Kane 1981; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003)</td>
<td>Level of development (<em>inter-branch crisis</em>) (Helmke 2010; Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010)</td>
<td>Civil society mobilization (i.e. strikes) (Fossum 1967; Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010; Putnam 1967)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional design (Huntington 1968)</td>
<td>Institutional design (<em>presidential crisis</em>) (Mainwaring 1993; Linz 1990; Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion effects (Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Pitcher et al. 1978; Fossum 1967)</td>
<td>Executive Scandal (Pérez-Liñán 2007)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Common determinants.** The theoretical links between some variables and political instability is almost uniformly strong. As Table 1 shows, level of economic development and economic growth are shared causes of coups and impeachments (although the non-coup literature broadly links these factors to inter-branch crisis rather than impeachment in particular). As early as the 1960s, Finer (1962), Needler (1967), and Luttwak (1969) found economic underdevelopment to be a near necessary condition.
for coups, and Londregan and Poole (1990) note that poverty is the common denominator in almost all cases in their extensive data set. O’Kane (1981), meanwhile, finds that coups tend to be the drastic response to an unstable and hopeless economic situation. For these authors, poverty is not only a sign of broader policy failure and institutional weakness, but is a direct cause of social and political discontent (Needler 1966). More recent scholarship agrees (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003; Przeworski et al. 2000, 1996). Przeworski, Alvarez et al. (2000) highlight the importance of reaching a threshold of economic development in order to avoid instability, while Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2003) show that economic performance variables such as economic growth rate have high predictive capabilities in terms of presidential crisis.

In contrast to this extensive literature, there is little beyond Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) that tests for economic determinants of impeachment. In a sample of Latin America, Helmke (2010) finds that the higher the per capita GDP, the lower the chance of an interbranch crisis, although she does not find statistical evidence to support the theory that higher economic growth inhibits the same type of crisis. Meanwhile, Pérez-Liñán (2007) does not find such things as inflation and unemployment to have a statistically significant effect on the probability of an impeachment crises in Latin America. It appears that evidence of economic determinants of impeachment crises is at best mixed.

The other broad category of shared causes is that of institutional design. In terms of quality, Huntington (1968) argues that weak political institutions are insufficient for channeling citizen participation, so the weaker the institutions the higher the probability of a coup. Beyond questions of quality, others argue that presidentialism possesses
inherent characteristics propitious for regime instability, or presidential instability at the very least. Many scholars argue that presidentialism combined with a proportional representation electoral system (which generate multi-party systems and minority governments) promote intractable legislative-executive conflict due to the fixed terms of office for each power and dual and competing sources of legitimacy (Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Linz 1990; Valenzuela 2004; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Mainwaring 1993).

While many agreed with the Linz’s claims about the “perils of presidentialism”, others are less certain (Shugart and Carey 1992; Marsteintredet and Berntzen 2008). The empirical results are also inconclusive. Cheibub (2002), for example, does not find a significant statistical relationship between divided government and presidential instability in Latin America, and Helmke (2010)—who operationalizes divided government as the president’s share of lower house—finds no impact on provoking interbranch crisis. Nonetheless, the literature shows a clear theoretical link between a number of institutional factors, such as divided government, greater party fragmentation in congress, and lower presidential support, and regime as well as presidential crisis.

**Determinants of Coups.** The remaining possibilities, as listed in Table 1, have been linked to either coups or impeachment crises, but not both. Some theories of coups d’état include diffusion effects, the coup trap, and in the social realm, mobilization of civil society through strikes. We have already discussed the idea of regional diffusion of military coups. A similar argument, operating inter-temporally rather than cross-nationally, is the idea of the coup trap. Finer (1962) and Putnam (1967) hypothesized that a single coup could cause erosion of a society’s political culture and lead to the
greater possibility of a future coup, and O'Kane (1981) and Londregan and Poole (1990) found that coups are more likely to occur in countries where there had been a previous coup.

The last major coup-specific theory is that of civil society mobilization in terms of general strikes. In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, social mobilization increased in many countries, mainly on the Left but also on the Right (i.e. right-wing women in Chile under the Allende government). The coups that brought bureaucratic-authoritarian governments to power, especially in the Southern Cone, were supported by the bourgeoisie specifically to “stop the chaos” of social mobilization (O'Donnell 1988). Given this link, it is logical that Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) find that general strike activity in the previous year has a positive impact on the chances of democratic breakdown. This finding seems consistent with our more general argument about radical oppositions.

Determinants of Constitutional Overthrows. Theories of impeachment, by contrast, have emphasized the presence or absence of executive scandals, the level and size of popular protest, and whether or not the president controls a “legislative shield”. The first of these elements is political scandals, which Pérez-Liñán (2007) shows to be a common factor linking all cases of impeachment (but not other forms of constitutional removal). Often accompanying presidential scandal is popular protest. Hochstetler (2006) finds that the presence or absence of large street protests demanding the resignation of the president is crucial in determining their fates, and Pérez-Liñán (2007) argues that the escalation of public discontent fuels mass protests that encourage impeachment proceedings against the president. Like scandals, civil society mobilization
in the form of popular protest has grown in number and size as civil liberties have increased across the region. Furthermore, unlike the executive scandal, mobilization of civil society has a stronger link to regime breakdown in the literature. As previously noted, Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) find that general strike activity in the previous year has a positive impact on the chances of democratic breakdown. This has some basis in theory. According to Putnam’s (1967) study of Latin America, a stronger civil society tends to lower the risk of coup by deterring the military. Putnam also argues that regime legitimacy deters the military from attempting to launch a coup. Indirectly, a lack of legitimacy could be (though not necessarily) manifested via social discontent and protest and lend greater authority to the military to intervene. It makes sense to test the effects of civil society factors on both impeachment and regime breakdown.

Even in the presence of executive scandals and popular protest, a president may survive with a “legislative shield” that protects him or her against the formal impeachment process (Pérez-Liñán 2007; Negretto 2006; Hochstetler 2006; Hinojosa and Pérez-Liñán 2003). Negretto (2006) shows that minority government, particularly one without the median voter in congress, is particularly susceptible to collapse. This is made even clearer by Pérez-Liñán (2007), who uses a pivotal player model to show how successful and unsuccessful impeachments in Latin America hinge on whether or not the president controlled the veto-playing legislator. For example, Colombian President Ernesto Samper survived accusations of financial links to narcotraffickers and the subsequent impeachment process in 1996 by relying on the loyalty of his legislative majority (Hinojosa and Pérez-Liñán 2003). It is straightforward to assume that possessing the quorum to avoid a successful impeachment depends not only on the size of
the president’s party in congress, but the size and discipline of the president’s coalition. Of all three impeachment-specific theories, this seems the least likely to apply to coups, since the military is able to overthrow the president regardless of the nature of legislative support.

Analysis

We use an event history approach to model the competing risks of different types of presidential exit in Latin America. Our units of analysis are administration-years (n = 712) for all democratic regimes in nineteen Latin American countries between 1945 and 2009. We excluded authoritarian cases because theories about constitutional removals were not conceived for authoritarian incumbents.

The dependent variable, presidential exit, comes from an original dataset covering every recognized political leader in Latin America since 1944. It measures yearly outcomes for each president: no exit (coded as 0), or exit via military coup (coded as 1), or exit via constitutional removal, including cases of impeachments, declaration of incapacity, and early (involuntary) resignations (coded as 2). All other forms of exit, including the normal completion of the president’s term, death in office, or resignation for health reasons, were treated as censored cases. Our sample includes 15 coups and one constitutional exit (the resignation of Alfonso López in Colombia in 1945) before 1978.

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2 Presidents were observed at January 1st of each year, and selected only if the political regime was coded by Mainwaring et al. (2007) as a democracy or semi-democracy. The countries covered by the study are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Independent Variables

Our main independent variable, opposition radicalism, is not easy to measure. We relied on data collected by Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2012). The authors worked with a team of nineteen researchers who prepared country reports that following specific coding rules. All reports relied on multiple historical sources to identify the most important set of political actors described by the historiography of each period. The actors identified were individuals (the president, other prominent leaders) or organizations (parties, social movements, trade unions, military factions) that played an important role in the competition for power. The reports discussed 1,459 political actors for 290 administrations in 20 countries between 1944 and 2010. We selected 750 actors who were in opposition to the president, and computed their average level of radicalism for each administration-year.

Using historical sources, researchers coded political actors as “radical” when they met any of the following conditions: (a) expressed uncompromising goals to achieve leftist or rightist policies in the short run, or to preserve extreme positions where they were already in place; (b) expressed willingness to subvert the law in order to achieve some policy goals; or (c) opposition actors undertook violent acts aimed at imposing or preventing significant policy change. Radical actors were given a score of 1. If they were divided or ambiguous about those positions, they were coded by researchers as

³ Venezuela 2002 was treated as an event because another administration took office, even though President Chávez returned to power within two days.
“somewhat” radical and given a score of 0.5; otherwise they were coded as not radical and given a score of 0 (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2012). The average opposition actor in the typical democratic administration-year included in our sample had a score of 0.30, but this score declined from 0.40 in 1945-77 to 0.24 in 1978-2009 (see Table 2 for summary statistics of all independent variables).

Our second independent variable, measuring the diffusion of democratic regimes in Latin America, captures the proportion of democratic regimes in the region (excluding the country in question) during the previous year. We employed the Mainwaring et al. (2007) classification of political regimes, counting semi-democratic regimes as one-half. The scores for this variable changed considerably over time, from an average of 0.33 in 1945-77 to 0.67 in 1978-2009 (with an overall historical minimum of .13 and a maximum of .83, as shown in Table 2).

In order to control for the effects of economic growth and total level of development on presidential exits, we included per capita GDP (measured in thousands of 2005 US dollars), and the economic growth rate, measured as the proportion of change in per capita GDP. Figures for 1960-2009 were taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) database. To impute GDP figures for previous years, we used growth rates from Penn World Tables, Angus Maddison’s Economic Development index, and the Oxford Latin American Economic History Database (OXLAD). Both variables were lagged one year to avoid endogeneity problems.

Two institutional variables were computed using multiple historical sources. To assess the perils confronted by multiparty presidential democracies, we computed the effective number of parties in the lower house, using the Laakso and Taagepera (1979)
index. This measure weights the size of political parties according to the proportion of seats they control. Scores above 2.5 indicate multipartism, but values in our sample ranged from 1 (Guatemala in 1946) to 9.4 (Brazil 2004-5). Because coalition governments may moderate the problems of multipartism, we also included a dichotomous variable capturing multi-party cabinets. Information was gathered from multiple sources (Altman 2000, 2001; Database on Political Institutions; Deheza 1997; Political Handbook of the World).

The social protest and mobilization variables were taken from Arthur Banks’ Cross-National Time-Series Data Archives. We employed the number of violent riots per administration-year and the number of peaceful anti-government demonstrations per administration-year (data is coded based on The New York Times). The number of riots per administration-year ranges from zero to 12—in Venezuela in 1960—with a mean of 0.56. The number of anti-government demonstrations ranges from zero to 9, with a mean of 0.78. The information in the dataset covers much of the time period under study, although it is unavailable after 2005. Given the structure of the competing risks model and the limited number of events of each type, we have not included in the analysis variables that were only relevant for a particular type of outcome (e.g., the coup trap or executive scandal).
Table 2. Summary Statistics for Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radical opposition</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENP House</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>9.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita GDP (t-1)</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>9.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita GDP growth (t-1)</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in office</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riots</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-government demonstrations</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Estimation

Because we are modeling the survival of presidents in office using administration-years as units of analysis, we employ a discrete-time event-history model (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004: 70). To the extent that we wish to examine the possibility of two feasible and independent events rather than a single hazard, we estimated a competing risks model using a multinomial logit (MNL) estimator with robust standard errors clustered by country. Alternatives to modeling competing risks include the latent survivor time model and the Stratified Cox approach, but neither is well-suited to the data; the former applies to continuous dependent variables while the latter is better suited to instances in which the “individuals” in the model are able to experience multiple events over the course of observations (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004: 166-182). The MNL model for competing risks is appropriate here since it is best applied to discrete-time data whose individuals (administrations) experience only a single hazard in the course of their lifetimes. The only major assumption in this modeling choice is that of independent competing risks, that is, that the hazard associated with each of the
different risks is independent from that of the other risks, conditional upon the effects of the independent variables.

The most general way to account for duration dependence in discrete time event history models is to incorporate time dummies (Beck et al. 1998). However, there are drawbacks to this approach, principally because the temporal dummies quickly consume degrees of freedom as the number of time points increases, but also because substantive interpretation may be difficult. Instead, it may be advantageous to transform the value of duration time through the natural log or polynomials in order to generate a more parsimonious characterization of time dependency (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004: 75). We follow Carter and Signorino (2010), including the years in office elapsed for any given administration, $t$, its squared value, $t^2$, and its cubed value, $t^3$ in the regression. As the authors show, this cubic polynomial approximation is trivial to implement and avoids problems such as quasi-complete separation in the data.

**Results**

Unlike other types of event history models, competing risks MNL parameters are interpretable as a logit model. The log-odds coefficient is not directly interpretable, but the sign of the coefficient shows the direction of the impact on the dependent variable. Table 3 presents the results of the analysis. The results in model 3.1 lend support to our main hypotheses: higher levels of radicalism among opposition forces have destabilized presidential administrations, irrespective of the particular form of resolution. However, regional conditions shaped the distribution of feasible strategies: coups were likely when
few countries in the region were democratic, while constitutional overthrows became more likely once the region was populated by democratic regimes.

The evidence also suggests that presidentialism and multipartism remains a “difficult combination” for incumbent presidents: presidents are more likely to be ousted (by coup or impeachment) when the party system in congress is fragmented, and the available data does not indicate that cabinet coalitions are sufficient to preclude this risk. Growth and per capita income have insignificant effects, which suggest the need to rethink some insights in the literature (O'Donnell 1988; Finer 1962; Needler 1966; Luttwak 1969; O'Kane 1981).

In Model 3.2 we include available indicators of social mobilization for 1945-2005. The results of the social variables are aligned with the literature and theory. The number of riots in an administration-year has a positive and statistically significant effect on both coups and constitutional removals, consistent with the theoretical links shown by Fossum (1967), Putnam (1967), and Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010). By contrast, the number of peaceful anti-government demonstrations has a positive and statistically significant effect on constitutional removals but not on coups. The relationship is consistent with Hochstetler (2006) and Pérez-Liñán’s (2007) findings for impeachment causes. Moreover, the inclusion of these variables depresses the effect of radicalism on constitutional ousters, which suggests that social mobilization has been one of the main causal mechanisms through which radical oppositions have destabilized incumbent administrations.
### Table 3. Competing Risks Models of Coups and Constitutional Removals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3.1: 1945-2009</th>
<th>3.2: 1945-2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coups</td>
<td>Removals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition radicalism</td>
<td>3.585**</td>
<td>1.913**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.050)</td>
<td>(0.720)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion</td>
<td>-2.822*</td>
<td>6.443**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.488)</td>
<td>(1.385)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Number of Parties</td>
<td>0.359**</td>
<td>0.172*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.090)</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition government</td>
<td>-0.915</td>
<td>0.573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.664)</td>
<td>(0.482)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita GDP (t-1)</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.250)</td>
<td>(0.187)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth (t-1)</td>
<td>-4.630</td>
<td>-11.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.694)</td>
<td>(8.579)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riots</td>
<td>0.245*</td>
<td>0.217**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.128)</td>
<td>(0.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.362**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.175)</td>
<td>(0.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>2.224</td>
<td>0.506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.565)</td>
<td>(1.172)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t²</td>
<td>-0.431</td>
<td>-0.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.396)</td>
<td>(0.343)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t³</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Beyond the effect of signs, it is difficult to substantively interpret the models’ coefficients. In order to address this, we calculate the predicted probabilities of presidential removal during any given year, allowing the two chief explanatory variables, **radical opposition** and **diffusion**, to vary, while all other continuous variables are held at their mean and government coalition is set at 0. At the bottom of the table, we report the baseline predicted probability of a coup (1.03%) and constitutional removal (0.81%) when all variables are held at their means for reference. We simulate four ideal-typical situations, when: 1) no other country in the region is democratic (diffusion = 0) and all
opposition actors are radical (radicalism = 1); 2) no other country is democratic, but no opponent is radical; 3) all other countries in the region are democratic and all actors are radical, and; 4) all neighbors in the region are democratic and no opposition actor is radical. Some interesting patterns emerge.

To begin with, as shown by the sign of the coefficient, an increase in the degree of radical opposition produces an increase in the probability of a coup, with the strongest effect resulting when diffusion is at its theoretical minimum of zero. In other words, higher radicalism increases the likelihood of coups, becoming more acute as the percentage of democratic countries in the region decreases. Here is from 0.34% chance of a president falling in a coup when all other countries are democratic and the opposition is moderate, to a 57.76% chance of removal when diffusion is at its minimum possible value and the opposition is most radicalized. Likewise, an increase in the radical opposition also causes an increase in the likelihood of presidential removal through constitutional means at all levels of diffusion. However, in contrast to the pattern for coups, an increase in the number of democracies in the region causes an increase in constitutional instability, with the probability of a president experiencing an impeachment or equivalent process rising from 0.06% chance of falling when diffusion and radical opposition are at their minimum to 30.14% when all countries are democratic and the opposition is strongly radicalized. So, why does democratic diffusion work in different directions for coups and impeachments?

The data suggest that impeachments and other legal procedures to remove presidents are similar to military coups d’état in many ways, but take on a constitutional cloak in a democratic context. So while a pattern of presidential instability may persist in
many countries in Latin America, the regional democratic status is important in helping shape whether the resolution to presidential crisis is constitutional or not. Underlying this removal—under whichever guise—is the common thread of radicalization of opposition groups to the government in power.

Table 4. Predicted Risk of Coups and Constitutional Removal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diffusion (prop. democratic)</th>
<th>Opposition (prop. radical)</th>
<th>Risk of Military coup</th>
<th>Risk of Removal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No country (0)</td>
<td>No radicalism (0)</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All radical (1)</td>
<td>57.76</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All countries (1)</td>
<td>No radicalism (0)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All radical (1)</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>30.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All variables at their mean 1.03 0.81

Note: Entries are predicted probabilities expressed as percentages (posterior estimates in Bayesian simulations based on Model 3.1). All continuous variables are set at their means for democratic and semi-democratic presidents, no coalition government is assumed.

Conclusions

We developed a unified theory of constitutional and unconstitutional presidential instability, and tested the theory using a competing risks model that examines the impact of economic, political, and social variables on an original data set of all Latin American presidential exits from 1945 to 2009. The key contribution of this piece is to analyze causes of all types of presidential exit in Latin America rather than each category separately, to show the convergent and divergent factors that affect presidential transfers of power.

Our findings indicate that in contrast to some of the established literature (Hochstetler 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007), all types of presidential exit are caused by a
common factor: the radicalization of the opposition. An increase in social mobilization resulting from radicalization may serve as a common mechanism to activate presidential instability. However, regional trends determined the particular impact of radicalism on the political regime. This is consistent with prior findings in the literature. For example, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2003) and Pérez-Liñán (2007) explain the decrease in democratic breakdowns in Latin America since the early 1990s partially through the changing post-Cold War international context (changes in U.S. foreign policy, the importance of the Organization of American States, the position of the Catholic Church, etc.).

An ample literature has examined the causes of coups and to a lesser degree, causes of presidential impeachment and other forms of presidential removal. Yet with few exceptions, research has not examined the causes of these phenomena together. This should change the way that Latin American politicians, pundits, and journalists, as well as others interested in Latin America, view political (in)stability across the region. Rather than understand an event such as the 2009 military coup in Honduras that removed President Manuel Zelaya as an anomaly, it should be understood as a logical outcome. Zelaya narrowly avoided impeachment proceedings and deigned to continue clinging to power against the wishes of the congress, courts, and much of the population. Given protests and anti-government demonstrations, economic weakness, and the long period in power, the military coup that toppled him should not be surprising.

Likewise, the successful “express impeachment” of Paraguayan president Fernando Lugo in 2012 illustrates the dual role of a united and vocal opposition and the broader regional state of democracy in producing and dictating the resolution of
presidential crisis. Facing a minority congress and anti-government demonstrations resulting from clashes between landless peasants and the government on June 15, Lugo was ultimately undone by a political coalition of the country’s largest parties that were determined to see him removed from office. However, unlike other presidential crises in Paraguay, this was resolved constitutionally (in law, if not spirit) in the bicameral congress and not by calling out the tanks. The opposition, aware of potential economic sanctions and repercussions from the MERCOSUR free-trade group, the OAS, and other groups in the event of a coup, pursued an impeachment procedure, securing it less than 48 hours after first proposing it in congress. So while the timing may have been a surprise to Lugo and others, the crisis and its outcome should not.
References


