



**STRATEGIC CHOICE MODELS  
OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article assesses the use of strategic choice models in the study of Latin American politics. These models explore how given actors pursue goals by shaping the context in which other actors make choices. The discussion centers on Hirschman's analysis of "reform-mongering," Przeworski's "threshold" model of transitions to democracy, and O'Donnell's model of democratic consolidation.

Basic components of the models are examined, including the definition of actors, preference distributions, coalitional thresholds, perceptions of the likelihood of given outcomes, and efforts to change actual and perceived costs of these outcomes. The relationship between such models and more familiar perspectives in the Latin American field is then explored. The models have a distinctive emphasis on uncertainty and the creative use of uncertainty by political leaders; yet they also have much in common with other research traditions. The article advocates eclecticism in employing these alternative analytic approaches.

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo evalúa la utilización de modelos de elección estratégica para el estudio de la política latinoamericana. Estos modelos analizan como determinados actores persiguen ciertas metas modificando el contexto en el que otros actores toman decisiones. La discusión gira en torno al análisis del "afán reformista" de Hirschman, al modelo de "las condiciones mínimas necesarias" para la transición hacia la democracia de Przeworski, y al modelo de la consolidación democrática de O'Donnell.

En el trabajo se analizan los componentes básicos de estos modelos, incluyendo la definición de los actores, la distribución de preferencias, las condiciones mínimas necesarias para las coaliciones, las percepciones sobre la probabilidad de determinados sucesos, así como los esfuerzos para modificar tanto los costos reales como los percibidos de dichos sucesos. Es así como se examina la relación entre dichos modelos y otros enfoques más comunes en el ámbito latinoamericano. Un rasgo distintivo de los modelos es el énfasis que ponen en la incertidumbre y en el uso creativo de ésta por parte de los líderes políticos; sin embargo, tienen también mucho en común con otras tradiciones de investigación. Este trabajo aboga por el eclecticismo en el uso de enfoques analíticos alternativos.

Models based on rational choice analysis and game theory have come to play an important role in political science and comparative politics.<sup>1</sup> Despite this development, analysts of Latin America often view these models as an alien tradition of research.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in fact, an important variant of the rational choice perspective, “strategic choice” analysis, has been usefully applied to research on the region.

The strategic choice approach explored in this article emphasizes the methods through which actors pursue goals by shaping the context in which other actors make choices. The discussion focuses on three models. Each grew out of a particular historical and analytic context, though each has broader implications. Albert O. Hirschman’s model of “reform-mongering,” from his classic book *Journeys Toward Progress*, reflects the widespread concern of political research in the 1960s with the politics of reform in Latin America. Adam Przeworski’s threshold model of regime transition grew out of the concern of the late 1970s and early 1980s with democratization and was vital to the major collaborative project on *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. Guillermo O’Donnell’s model of democratic consolidation in Latin America, an important component of his writing on democracy, deals with a central political issue of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

The goals of this article are two. First, it examines the building blocks of these models. We show how the models treat actors, preference distributions, and thresholds, and we explore the strategies presented in the models: building coalitions through issue linkage; modifying subjective probabilities

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Frank C. Zagare, *Game Theory: Concepts and Applications* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984); the symposium on the role of rational choice models in international relations theory published in *World Politics*, 38: October 1985; Peter C. Ordeshook, *Game Theory and Political Theory: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert H. Bates, *Toward a Political Economy of Development: A Rational Choice Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); and George Tsebelis, *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent summary of a debate that in part reflected this assessment, see Scott Mainwaring, “The Consolidation of Democracy in Latin America: A Rapporteur’s Report,” Working Paper No. 73, Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Another outcome in Latin America with which scholars have been concerned is revolution. While models relevant to this form of political change are not included in the present discussion, models of revolution can be, and have been, developed. See James DeNardo, *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), and John Roemer “Rationalizing Revolutionary Ideology,” *Econometrica*, 53: January 1985.

of success;<sup>4</sup> modifying costs; and modifying perceptions of costs, especially by shaping information through the manipulation of signals and communication.

Second, we address three questions about the contribution of these models. How can one determine whether such models fit the specific Latin American contexts to which they are applied? How different are these models from other, more familiar, analytic perspectives in the Latin American field? Finally, what are the implications of these models for understanding the relation between causal regularities, uncertainty, and choice in the study of development?

### **Strategic Choice Analysis**

The strategic choice approach is an analytic perspective, based on individual choice models, that focuses on strategies for shaping the context of decision-making. This approach is closely related to rational choice analysis and game theory.<sup>5</sup> Rational choice analysis may be understood as a broad label for approaches which assume that actors make choices in light of an assessment of costs and benefits. Game theory is a more specific label for analyses which explicitly focus on the interdependence of actors. Strategic choice models, like game theory, involve games in which actors take account of what other players will do, but this approach also places a particular emphasis on efforts to influence these players' choices. Compared to game theory, strategic choice analysis tends to be less formalized and to employ fewer restrictive assumptions.

Strategic choice models have two essential components: choice and strategy. In focusing on individual *choice*, the models emphasize that actors have discretion. The economy does not fully constrain actors, nor do culture or institutions. No absolute external determination of political outcomes is incorporated in these models. Obviously, choices are influenced by the context

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<sup>4</sup> Subjective probabilities of success are actors' subjective assessment of a preferred outcome.

<sup>5</sup> The meanings of these three labels vary; we rely on the definitions that follow in the text. The label "strategic choice analysis" parallels Zartman's discussion of "strategic" and "strategic choice" approaches, yet we are also centrally concerned with issues he identifies with the analysis of "process variables." See William Zartman, ed., *The 50% Solution* (New York: Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1976), pp. 26-27 and 30. See also the discussion of strategic interaction in Glen H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decisionmaking, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 37 ff.

and by changes in context. Yet in the end, actors' discretion makes a difference.

A *strategy* is a calculus of behavior adopted to enhance the likelihood of achieving some goal, such as reform or democracy. Strategies may vary in coherence and design and may range from single, isolated decisions to complex, interrelated sets of choices. They may consist of actions that directly promote the goal at hand, or that take "one step backwards in order to take two steps forward later on...."<sup>6</sup> Whatever the level of complexity or coherence, each component of the strategy involves goal-directed choice. Political outcomes derive from the interaction among different actors' strategic choices.

However, choices and strategies can only have an impact if outcomes are not known and predetermined and if decisions are not so tightly constrained as to eliminate discretion. Thus, another element of the models is *uncertainty*. Clearly, the level of uncertainty varies. In some situations, uncertainty may simply mean not knowing precisely what choices other actors are likely to make. In other contexts, uncertainty may also exist about the rules of the game, or even about which actors are participating. As Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter point out, uncertainty may be particularly great in periods of regime transition. "Not only are (the rules of the political game) in constant flux, but they are usually arduously contested; actors struggle not just to satisfy their immediate interests and/or the interests of those whom they purport to represent, but also to define rules and procedures whose configuration will determine likely winners and losers in the future."<sup>7</sup> One might surmise that levels of uncertainty will be somewhat lower during periods of democratic consolidation, and lower still for actors pursuing reform within consolidated regimes. Yet all these cases share major elements of uncertainty, since in the politics of reform, democratization, and democratic consolidation, rules are not always known and inviolate, preferences are not always evident and unchanging, and all available strategies cannot necessarily be identified. The centrality of uncertainty to

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<sup>6</sup> Jon Elster (echoing Lenin), in *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 6.

strategic choice analysis makes this approach well suited for the study of these processes.

Strategic choice analysis is, of course, not novel within the Latin American field. First of all, Hirschman's model is hardly new. Second, the strategic choice perspective has much in common with the coalitional approach to Latin American politics used with such skill in Charles W. Anderson's "prudence model" of development policy-making and in the work of scholars such as Eldon Kenworthy, Gary W. Wynia, William Ascher, and Barry Ames.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, it must be recognized that in many respects the strategic choice approach focuses on the "banalities" of practical politics. It is built on relatively obvious facts of political life, such as: political leaders build coalitions to promote their goals; leaders should strike an appropriate balance between winning or retaining supporters and antagonizing opponents, making this a non-zero sum relationship if possible; actors may switch sides in a political battle simply out of a desire to go with the winner; leaders must therefore try to convince potential supporters that they will in fact win; and to the extent that leaders are skilled at these tasks, they are more likely to achieve their goals.

Anyone who studies Latin American politics "knows" these things. What have been lacking are systematic procedures for linking this understanding of the ordinary give-and-take of politics to social science theorizing about the region. The models examined here merit attention precisely because they make this link.

### **Building Blocks of the Models**

The three models differ both in substantive emphasis and in the specific building blocks they utilize. Hirschman is concerned with how political

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America: The Governing of Restless Nations* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1967); Kenworthy, "Coalitions in the Political Development of Latin America" in Sven Groennings, et al., eds., *The Study of Coalition Behavior: Theoretical Perspectives from Three Continents* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970); Wynia, *Argentina in the Postwar Era: Politics and Economic Policy Making in a Divided Society* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), and *The Politics of Latin American Development*, third edition (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor: The Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); and Ames, *Political Survival: Politicians and Public Policy in Latin America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

leaders can increase the probability of reform by shaping political coalitions, especially by influencing the perceived likelihood of certain outcomes, such as revolution. He considers decisions for or against a single reform, as well as the coalitional options that arise when two reforms are considered simultaneously. This permits the introduction of such strategies as shifting alliances and logrolling, i.e., trading support on different issues.

Przeworski analyzes the breakdown of authoritarianism by looking at the risk of promoting such a breakdown. If the authoritarian regime is strong, the risk of opposing the regime may be great. Yet as the regime begins to crumble, the risk decreases. Further, as the threshold of regime disintegration approaches and a political opening becomes likely, opposition actors face the danger of jumping on the bandwagon too late, rather than too early. Przeworski's model focuses on these risks and on changing perceptions of risk as this threshold of breakdown is reached and passed.

O'Donnell's model examines the period after the transition from authoritarianism and explores strategies for consolidating democracy and preventing a return to authoritarianism. Like Przeworski, O'Donnell is concerned with thresholds, although the goal in this case is to *prevent* the coalition favoring a breakdown from reaching the critical size. He analyzes not only the subjective probabilities of success of those who prefer a breakdown, but also explores other costs and benefits that may affect actors' decisions to support a potential coup. In sum, O'Donnell's model, like Hirschman's and Przeworski's, focuses on strategies oriented toward changing the context in which choices are made. Figure 1 summarizes the models and provides a guide to the discussion below.

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**FIGURE 1: BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE MODELS**

	<b>Hirschman</b>	<b>Przeworski</b>	<b>O'Donnell</b>
----- <b>Organization of the Models</b> -----			
Goal Being Promoted	Reform	Democratization	Democratic Consolidation
Approach to Defining Actors	Preference Centered	Focus on Risk Aversion	Preference Centered
Key (Cs), Actors (Bs), Neutrals (Ns) with More	Reformers, Conservatives, Revolutionaries, Plus Intermediate Categories	Risk-Insensitive Advocates of Democracy or Authoritarianism; Risk-Contingent Preferences	Consolidators or Prefer Breakdown and Averse Actors
Definition of Preference Benefits and Distributions Participa- Break- Democracy	Categories of Advocates of Democratic Consolidation to Intermediate Positions	Focus on whether Advocates, Opponents, and Coalition	Continuum from Balance of Risks Leads to Advocates of down of
Focus on Thresholds	Not a Central Concern	Central Concern	Central Concern
----- <b>Strategies for Promotor of Change</b> -----			
Coalition Building Based on Issue-Linkage	Central Concern	Not Discussed	Crucial to Game between C's and N's
Modify Subjective Concern Probabilities of Success	Focuses on Issue-Linkage to Subjective	Central Probability of Revolution	Central Concern



Changing Costs	Not Discussed	Not Discussed	Central Concern
Modify Perceptions of Costs	Not Discussed	Not Discussed	Central Concern
Role of Signals and Symbols to "K"	Inform Leaders of Threats Such as High Probability of Violence Impending Changes or Revolution	Inform Risk-Averse Actors of Their	Consolidators Use Media To Signal Position Relative in Costs

## **Actors and Preference Distributions**

Przeworski identifies three ways to define actors. The first focuses on groups and organizations associated with relatively conventional institutions, classes, and social sectors. The analyst assesses these groups “by imputing to them the interests that they may be expected to defend and promote in the face of conflicts” (Przeworski, p. 53). In the game of democratic transition, groups identified through this method include the armed forces, the bourgeoisie, the state apparatus, and the working class.

The second approach is “preference-centered,” identifying actors “directly by their strategic postures” (Przeworski, p. 53). For example, actors might be defined as favoring the breakdown of democracy, favoring democratic transition, or favoring reform, irrespective of the institutional or sectoral groups to which they belong.

The third approach focuses on risk aversion. Building on the preference-centered perspective, it emphasizes actors’ tenacity in defending their positions. Thus, actors unwilling to modify their stance, despite the risk, are risk insensitive, while actors whose choice about joining a coalition is centrally influenced by its apparent likelihood of success are risk averse (Przeworski, p. 54).

Przeworski adopts the third approach, making risk aversion his central theme. Specifically, he distinguishes actors favoring and opposing the transition to democracy in terms of degrees of risk aversion and seeks to assess the point at which the balance of benefits and risks is likely to lead to participation in a democratizing coalition.

By contrast, O’Donnell and Hirschman primarily employ the second, preference-centered approach, although elements of the third approach are found in O’Donnell’s analysis. O’Donnell begins by focusing on two groups, those committed to democratic consolidation (the Cs), and those committed to the breakdown of democracy (the Bs) (p. 1). Actors at either of these two poles pursue the outcome (consolidation or breakdown) they prefer. Similarly, the actors in Hirschman’s game are defined by their preferences for reform, revolution, or the status quo. Whereas the reform-monger’s first priority is obviously reform, those at the more progressive end of the spectrum favor revolution over reform, and reform over the status quo. Conservatives, on the other hand, have the opposite order of preferences.

Hirschman and O'Donnell elaborate this initial perspective, introducing the complications of differing intensities of preferences and changes in preferences. Thus, Hirschman divides conservatives and progressives into more moderate and more extreme groups, each with its own preference ordering. In his analysis of the simultaneous consideration of two reforms, Hirschman differentiates among the supporters and opponents of each reform according to whether their commitment is strong or weak, yielding four positions on each reform (p. 372). He argues that actors can be convinced to sacrifice a reform for which they have a weaker preference in order to garner support for a stronger preference. Furthermore, actors may be convinced to support measures they do not favor by appealing to their fear (or hope) of revolution. Yet in Hirschman's model, preferences themselves do not change.

Hirschman makes good use of this somewhat static constellation of actors, however, by recommending methods for inducing particular outcomes within the context of given distributions and intensities of preferences. For example, a reform-monger may: a) use logrolling, in which votes for an issue generating only a weak level of preference intensity are traded for votes on an issue on which the actor in question feels much more strongly; b) link one issue to another, convincing other players that their preferred reform cannot be successful unless the other reform is enacted as well; or c) form new alliances on every issue (pp. 371-77). Thus, although utilities are treated as static, the reform-monger may still create new alternatives for change by convincing actors that supporting a particular reform will, in one way or another, be in their interest.

Yet taking preferences for particular outcomes and the distribution of these preferences as given excludes some useful techniques from the reformer's guide, some of which are considered by O'Donnell. As mentioned, O'Donnell initially presents a simplified game between the Cs and the Bs (those favoring Consolidation and Breakdown) in which preferences within these modes are fixed. However, the entire game is dependent on changing the preferences (or the likelihood of acting on preferences in a certain way) of the heterogeneous set of actors who are neither Cs nor Bs: the "Ns," or neutral group. Those within the C or B modes are more likely to be risk-insensitive, while those in the N-range are more likely risk-averse. The immediate goal of

both the Cs and Bs is to influence the Ns, who are less committed, to move toward their respective ends of the spectrum.

Within this framework, aspiring consolidators possess a range of options for affecting the outcome. They may alter the subjective probability of success for either consolidation or breakdown, for instance, by influencing perceptions of where the threshold of success lies; raise the cost of strategies promoting the breakdown of democracy and minimize the cost of a strategy of inaction for those within the B mode (breakdown), or those contemplating moving into the B mode; and attempt to influence *perceptions* of costs so as to benefit their cause.

### **Thresholds**

Thresholds in coalition formation, along with perceptions about the location of such thresholds, are central to both O'Donnell's and Przeworski's analyses.<sup>9</sup> For Przeworski, the key threshold is the point at which the coalition includes "the number of actors necessary and sufficient to make a move toward liberalization successful" (p. 55). The concern of actors about their position vis-à-vis this threshold in itself motivates certain kinds of action: nobody wants to be on the wrong side. If the coalition for democratic transition (or for the breakdown of democracy) succeeds, those who joined too late could find themselves in less than ideal standing with the new government. On the other hand, if the coalition does not succeed, those who did join could also be in some trouble. Hence, the goal of those concerned with self-protection, and lacking an overwhelming dedication to a particular form of government, is to judge where the threshold is in relation to the current distribution of actors. "What is apparent is the importance of expectations of success. Neither position is safe under the circumstances: to make a precipitous move is as dangerous as not joining in a movement that is successful" (Przeworski, p. 55).

O'Donnell's version of this game is similar. He explains that "given a certain preference distribution (among) a number of actors, the decision to participate or not in (an attempt to destroy the regime) is not only a function of those preferences but also of the anticipated costs and benefits of

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<sup>9</sup> Their analyses are drawn, respectively, from Mark Granovetter, "Threshold Models of Collective Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology*, 83: May 1978; and Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: Norton, 1978), chapter 7.

participation which result from how many other actors make which choice. Another assumption is that the costs of participation decrease as an increasing number of actors engages in such actions” (pp. 33-34). In other words, as the coalition favoring a breakdown of democracy gathers a large enough following to approach the threshold, the apparent probability that the coalition will succeed rises dramatically, and the advantage of being within that coalition grows correspondingly. At this point, a “bandwagon effect” may occur (p. 71).

In this less than utopian world, all actors are of course not equal. Certain groups, in particular the bourgeoisie and the military, carry more weight.<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, O’Donnell (p. 46) adopts from Przeworski the idea that “a necessary condition for the consolidation of democracy is that the bourgeoisie, or most of it, does not opt for breakdown.” Furthermore, “a second necessary condition...is not to subvert, nor seem willing to subvert, the vertical lines of command of the armed forces” (p. 47).

The reasons for the privileged position of these groups are relatively clear. The bourgeoisie’s critical position in the economy gives it leverage disproportionate to its numerical size. It is also frequently seen as one of the most difficult sectors in Latin America to convince of the advantages of democracy. As Przeworski (p. 57) emphasizes, democracy implies uncertainty, and hence risk, for the bourgeoisie. This occurs in part because democracy employs a majoritarian principle, while the bourgeoisie is a small minority. Under a democratic regime, this disparity may disadvantage the bourgeoisie, augmenting its distrust of democracy.

The importance of the military is even clearer: they have guns, and a history of using them. Latin America’s democratic experiments of the 1980s and 1990s would not be the first to fall victim to military coups. One of the greatest challenges to consolidators is to convince the military to work within democratic rules and institutions. For too long the military has followed its own rules and procedures, occasionally dissolving the democratic game. If democratic transition or democratic consolidation is to succeed, the military must give up this option.

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<sup>10</sup> The term “bourgeoisie” is employed in this article, following O’Donnell’s usage. Przeworski generally refers to “capitalists.” References to the “bourgeoisie,” or to the military or the popular sector, are not intended to imply that these are unitary actors. They can always be disaggregated, but as a first approximation it is helpful to refer to them collectively.

However, it may be more important to ensure that actors such as the military do not oppose reform, democratic transition, or democratic consolidation, than it is to win their support. As William Ascher argues, generating support may not be nearly as important as avoiding opposition.<sup>11</sup> This idea is central to O'Donnell's model. He suggests that the goal of democratic consolidators should be to avoid a sufficient movement into the breakdown coalition for that coalition to succeed. Noncommitted actors, or Neutrals, are only a problem if they are available to be recruited into the opposition. To be sure, with this emphasis on avoiding opposition, the government could go too far and neglect to cultivate popular support. Yet under some circumstances, this may be realistic. Passive acceptance, in the absence of active support, may not be a problem; active opposition is.

### **Subjective Probabilities**

A key factor influencing “neutral” actors’ decisions about whether to join a particular coalition is their perception of the likelihood of its success—in other words, its subjective probability. In games of coalition-building, the actual value of future outcomes and the probability of attaining them is difficult to ascertain. While a gambler in a casino may accurately calculate the likelihood of alternative outcomes, political games have no such precise probabilities. Actors must judge the conditions as best they can; they must rely on their perceptions. Hence, actors considering joining a coalition base their decisions not simply on the “objective” situation, but on their perceptions of that situation and on their inevitably subjective prediction of future developments. Other actors who wish to influence their decisions may seek to alter these perceptions. For example, one goal of the democratic Consolidator is to convince Neutrals who are potential Breakdown recruits that any coalition favoring the breakdown of democracy is far from attaining a critical mass.

When democracies are threatened with revolutionary movements, perceptions of the likely success of revolution are also important. Thus, Hirschman argues that when revolution appears a real possibility, “self-preservation will impel the decision-makers to ‘give up something in order not to lose everything’” (p. 359). At this point, the reform-monger may try to

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<sup>11</sup> Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor*, pp. 308-9.

convince conservatives that reform will substantially reduce the probability of revolution, thereby seeking to modify the conservatives' subjective perceptions of the situation. Consequently, the probability of successful reform may increase.

Yet reform may not quell the revolutionary movement. Hirschman notes that "revolutionaries are likely to redouble their energies when they notice that the problem on which they had counted to revolutionize society is fading away" (p. 355). In this case, a lowered subjective probability of success stimulates increased activity rather than surrender. In particular, subjective probabilities may have a differential impact on those who lead coalitions and those who consider joining them. Whereas a lowered subjective probability on the part of followers would probably lead to defection, the same altered perception on the part of the leadership may stimulate renewed commitment.

### **Changing Costs**

Outcomes can also be affected by altering costs and benefits. In the game of democratic consolidation, both the bourgeoisie and the military can be discouraged from moving into the "B" mode, or at least from taking immediate action toward the breakdown of democracy, if they are already in that mode. This can be done by minimizing the costs of inaction, or by raising the costs of actions potentially leading toward a coup.

Regarding the first option, the bourgeoisie inevitably faces such costs as uncertainty about future economic policies. Any exacerbation of that uncertainty, or any economic policies that infringe on the bourgeoisie's property rights, makes inaction less tolerable. As O'Donnell points out, even the hint of measures such as expropriation or nationalization of enterprises stimulates opposition. On the other hand, the trend toward privatization and neoliberal economic policies may ameliorate these fears, thereby diminishing the perceived costs of democracy for important sectors of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, in pursuing initiatives that favor the working class, the government can design policies which avoid directly confronting business interests.

With regard to the armed forces, unacceptable costs include any significant intervention into the military's internal functioning. O'Donnell refers to internal autonomy as an "objectively nonnegotiable core interest" (p. 49). To diminish costs, the government can assure the military's

institutional integrity and, as in Brazil in the 1980s, support such benefits as technological modernization.

Of course, diminishing costs for the bourgeoisie and the military entails a good deal of balancing. The exercise of extreme caution in dealing with them may conflict with basic programmatic goals that animated the effort to restore democracy in the first place. Likewise, democratic competition pushes governments to seek the support (or at least acquiescence) of the popular sector, and favoring the bourgeoisie and the military may mean losing votes.

Fortunately, the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the working class does not have to be zero-sum, as Przeworski frequently emphasizes (e.g., p. 62). In fact, a key challenge for the Consolidator is to make relationships such as this non-zero sum by finding compromises that can benefit actors with conflicting preferences. Furthermore, it is not necessary for a democratic government to entirely avoid imposing costs on the bourgeoisie and the military. These costs simply must not become high enough to outweigh the costs of one specific course of action: an attempted breakdown of democracy.

Along with monitoring the benefits of cooperation, advocates of change may also directly raise the costs of defection—the second option noted above. In the case of democratic consolidation, the government can increase penalties for actions which threaten the breakdown of democracy, in particular, the organization of coup coalitions. As O'Donnell writes, “in Latin America it has been too often true that participating in a coup, or ostensibly supporting it, is a very low-cost decision” (p. 39). His advice is to make it a high-cost decision. In sum, the government has a variety of tools at its command to alter actors' calculations and thereby advance its cause.

### **Signals and Communication**

Just as the subjective probability of an outcome is central to actors' calculations, so is the subjective assessment of costs and benefits. The process of signalling or communicating information critically influences both types of subjective assessment. In the case of democratic consolidation, the Consolidator must not only change costs, but *advertise* the change. If it is not known that the punishment for attempted coups will be drastically increased, the planned use of such measures is not a good deterrent.



The perceptions which lead to political choices are based in part on specific signals. Signals which suggest the growing weakness of an incumbent regime include economic crisis and mass protest (Przeworski, p. 55). However, it is not just protest or noncompliance which is important, but the fact that people interpret it in a certain manner. In this domain of symbolic politics, a dramatic protest, the harsh repression of protest, or a threatening economic crisis can crystallize perceptions and fundamentally redefine the political situation.

In sum, the scope of choice for actors seeking to influence the course of political events is quite large. Through signals, and the manipulation of signals, actors can alter the perceptions on which decisions are based. The objective costs suffered by key actors may be modified, and the perception of changes in those costs can be shaped so as to alter the nature of the game. In addition, again through the manipulation and control of symbols, actors can further change the perceived context in which individuals make choices, by altering their subjective probability of success. Yet, while manipulating perceptions increases the variety of strategies available to actors, this commonly involves deliberate deception and must be evaluated in that light.

### **Assessing the Models**

To assess the utility of these models, we now explore how well they fit the specific contexts to which they are applied in Latin America, their relationship to more familiar analytic perspectives in the Latin American field, and their implications for the relation between constraints and choice.

### **Fitting the Context**

Under some conditions these models may be inappropriate. While the broad themes analyzed in the models (reform and democracy) are abiding issues of Latin American politics, the models were formulated with reference to particular contexts, which are subject to change.

Przeworski is the most explicit in dealing with such limitations. He notes that: “[a] regime does not collapse unless and until some alternative is organized in such a way as to present a real choice for isolated individuals” (p. 52). Prior to that point, while democratization may be normatively desirable to various actors and observers, the democratization game will not be played. The process of continually shifting calculations of the likely success of alternative

coalitions is frozen, suggesting that the model might become irrelevant. On the other hand, the model does provide a good summary of the reasons why risk-averse actors do not, under these conditions, participate in a democratizing coalition: their chances of success appear nil. If we view the model as concerned with a calculus about shifting coalitional alternatives, it does not apply. However, if we view the model as concerned with the limiting conditions under which such a potentially shifting calculus becomes frozen, then it does apply.

Hirschman is not as direct in pointing out when his model might not apply, yet this could occur. For example, one condition that animates his model is fear of revolution, and one technique of the reform-monger is to convince conservatives that accepting reform will reduce the likelihood of revolution. In the context of the deflation of developmental and revolutionary expectations beginning in the 1970s and 1980s in some South American countries, this central component appears far less relevant than when the model was proposed in the 1960s. Hence, in applying the model in the 1990s, one would have to search for alternative types of improvement from which conservatives might benefit if reforms are adopted. One candidate might be the fear of economic decline. In the 1980s, precisely this fear appeared to facilitate innovation in economic policy.

For O'Donnell's model, we can also establish criteria to assess its relevance in particular contexts. O'Donnell's point of departure, the problem of a return to authoritarian rule, is unquestionably an important issue in Latin America. However, the degree to which this outcome is likely varies both among countries and over time. Thus, one might begin by asking how likely a coup is in any given country and attempt to apply some reasonable set of "observer defined" criteria for assessing its likelihood. Next, one might determine how many actors *claim* that a coup is an issue and "play the consolidation game" by making other political choices with the apparent aim of reducing the likelihood of a coup. One must ask, how many "consolidation actors" actually exist? The near absence of such actors would limit the application of the model.

By juxtaposing these two criteria, one observer-defined, the other actor-defined, we can suggest how well a given model might fit different contexts (Figure 2). Where both outside observers and actors within the system consider a coup to be a central issue (upper-left cell), a major role

could certainly be played by consolidation actors and O'Donnell's model would be relevant. On the other hand, if neither outside observers nor actors within the system consider a coup likely (lower-right cell), an important step in democratic consolidation may have been achieved, and O'Donnell's analysis is less applicable.

**FIGURE 2: ASSESSING THE FIT OF O'DONNELL'S MODEL**

		Observer-Defined Likelihood of Coup	
		High	Low
Actor-Defined Likelihood of Coup	High	Conventional Consolidation Game: O'Donnell's Model Fits Well	"Paper Tiger" Syndrome: O'Donnell's Model Less Relevant
	Low	Potential Erosion of Center: O'Donnell's Model Merges with Linz-Stepan Model of Breakdown of Democracy	Important Step in Consolidation: Successful Outcome in Terms of

The upper-right cell suggests an important limit to the relevance of the model. One can imagine a situation in which a coup is not likely, yet some actors either oppose, or seek to promote, certain reforms or other initiatives with the claim that failure to accede to their wishes will lead to a reaction that could produce a coup. In this case, the prospect of a coup functions as a “paper tiger.”<sup>12</sup> It is evoked not to preserve democracy, but to block or promote other types of reform or change.

The fourth alternative suggests how this analytic framework can converge with other approaches to the study of Latin American politics. If breakdown is in fact a danger, but not many actors perceive this (lower-left cell) and few are playing a consolidation game, one would be confronted with a situation like the collapse of democratic forces—and in all likelihood especially the collapse of the democratic center—analyzed by Juan J. Linz and

<sup>12</sup> This expression was suggested by José Nun.

Alfred Stepan in *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the O'Donnell model would converge with the Linz-Stepan model and could provide a useful perspective for analyzing the behavior of the few consolidation actors who continued their attempts to avoid the breakdown.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, corresponding to the four cells in Figure 2, one can identify contexts in which: O'Donnell's model fits well; the goals that led to the construction of the model have to a significant degree been achieved and the model is superseded; the concern with consolidation is a pretext for blocking other forms of change; and the model serves as a useful tool for analyzing, in the spirit of Linz and Stepan, the final struggle of those who are losing the consolidation game. The contribution of the model can be much better assessed if one first engages in such an appraisal of the contexts to which it is being applied.

### **Relationship to Other Research Traditions**

This convergence between O'Donnell's consolidation model and the Linz-Stepan model raises another issue: how great are the discontinuities between strategic choice analysis and more conventional approaches to Latin American politics? On the one hand, strategic choice models approach political analysis in a different manner than most work in Latin American studies, and they certainly appear to differ from the structuralist and dependency perspectives that have been so important in the field.

Yet commonalities should also be underlined. The relationship to earlier literature on coalitions and bargaining has already been discussed. In addition, certain parallels emerge between strategic choice analysis and the literature on the rise of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Latin America. Although this literature in many respects adopts a macro, structuralist orientation quite distinct from the concerns of strategic choice models, areas of convergence may be identified.

First, it is true that O'Donnell's own earlier work, an exemplar of this approach, explores the rise and evolution of authoritarianism through what is

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<sup>13</sup> Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

<sup>14</sup> The same conditions might also prevail under slightly different circumstances, when actors perceive a coup as likely, but fatalistically play out the drama of the coup without attempting to prevent it. This might occur if potential consolidators were particularly risk-averse and perceived their probability of success as low.

often understood as a form of class analysis common in neo-Marxist, structuralist perspectives.<sup>15</sup> Yet in fact the principal political actors in O'Donnell's analysis are defined in terms of a complex understanding of social roles, involving shared identities based in part on preferences and goals that assume a distinctive character in the Latin American setting and that by no means correspond to conventional class categories. For instance, the "popular sector," a key actor in the model, includes both the working class *and* segments of the middle class. The definition of actors thus has a major element in common with the preference-centered perspective discussed above.

Second, O'Donnell's earlier work contained another subjective dimension that has been of central concern here: the emphasis on *perceptions* of reality in situations where a balanced assessment of actual conditions is difficult. While in one sense the rise of authoritarianism that he analyzes occurs in direct response to the polarization and "threat" generated by intense popular mobilization, elite perceptions of this threat are also central to his model. Thus, although O'Donnell's earlier writings are more deterministic than his later work, factors such as uncertainty and perceptions, as well as a partially preference-centered understanding of actors, nevertheless play a role.

Another more general area of convergence between strategic choice models and traditional analytic perspectives concerns the issue of resources. Strategic choice models emphasize that actors have discretion, yet the scope of discretion depends on resources and constraints on resources. We may ask, for example, what economic resources are available in the domestic and international context that may contribute to the promotion of reform, democracy, or democratic consolidation. What kinds of political resources—organizational, ideological, or cultural—can be utilized by the promoters of change? When do resource constraints become severe enough to sharply limit actors' discretion? These questions must be addressed in any effort to apply a strategic choice perspective, thus raising familiar concerns with constraints on development in the region.

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<sup>15</sup> *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics*. Institute of International Studies, Politics of Modernization Series No. 9, University of California, Berkeley, 1973; "Reflexiones sobre las tendencias generales de cambio en el Estado burocrático-autoritario," Documento CEDES/G.E. CLACSO/No. 1, Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad, Buenos Aires, 1975; and "Tensions in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Question of Democracy" in David Collier, ed., *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

## Constraints and Choice

Despite these convergences, structural approaches and strategic choice models do attempt something different. In some studies within the structural tradition, one may in fact find tucked away on the final page an expression of hope that deliberate human action may overcome the constraints that the analysis has portrayed.<sup>16</sup> In strategic choice models, by contrast, this voluntaristic option is more nearly the point of departure. Some might feel that O'Donnell and Schmitter's *Transitions* volume states the case too strongly in drawing a contrast between "normal science methodology"<sup>17</sup> and their variant of a strategic choice perspective. Yet these models do invert a basic orientation of structural approaches. Rather than exploring structural constraints, they come closer to presuming that, indeed, "actualities are...low probability events," as Hayward R. Alker has put it.<sup>18</sup> These models treat this low probability as an opportunity.

A central contribution of strategic choice models is thus to encourage the perspective of possibilism advocated by Hirschman, which deemphasizes constraints and focuses on opportunities for constructive change. In the introduction to *A Bias for Hope*, Hirschman focuses on three elements that he suggests are the "essence of the possibilist approach."<sup>19</sup> First, "blessings in disguise" are conditions or actions that appear to obstruct desired change, but prove instead to facilitate such change. Second, in the case of "unintended consequences," actions which do indeed have the direct effect of blocking desired change have the secondary effect of supporting it. The third refers to the accommodation of attitudes to actions. In this case attitudes and beliefs, often seen as a prerequisite for desired change, instead emerge as a consequence. They may thereby cease to be an obstacle to change.<sup>20</sup> Hirschman thus points to uncertainties and vicissitudes of causal patterns,

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<sup>16</sup> See footnote 8 above.

<sup>17</sup> *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> "On Political Capabilities in a Schedule Sense: Measuring Power, Integration, and Development" in Hayward R. Alker, Karl W. Deutsch, and A. M. Stoetzel, eds., *Mathematical Approaches to Politics* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1973), p. 307.

<sup>19</sup> Hirschman, "Political Economics and Possibilism" in *A Bias for Hope: Essays on Development and Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-35.

showing how actors can convert uncertainty into an advantage in their quest for change.

The discussion of strategic choice models presented above develops further the idea of taking advantage of uncertainty. These models stress that the likelihood of particular outcomes is uncertain, and the assessment of their probability quite subjective. The costs and benefits associated with particular outcomes are likewise uncertain, and their assessment again subjective. The models build on these uncertainties and subjective assessments to suggest new avenues through which desired outcomes can be promoted. Possibilism becomes even more plausible.

### **Conclusion**

Strategic choice analysis provides a systematic framework for analyzing the give-and-take of practical politics. Compared with other research traditions, it places distinctive emphasis on opportunities for choice and change, thus extending Albert Hirschman's methodology of possibilism.

Strategic choice analysis is not, however, a radical departure. Sometimes it converges with other traditions, in that alternative perspectives say similar things in different ways. An example is the literature on bureaucratic-authoritarianism, which includes a focus on the subjective and perceptual dimensions of politics, despite its predominantly structural focus. At the same time, variations among different applications of strategic choice analysis mean that some models have stronger parallels with traditional approaches than others. For example, Przeworski places relatively less emphasis on opportunities for choice and discretion than do Hirschman and O'Donnell.

In other instances, strategic choice analysis may complement, or dovetail with, other approaches, and the selection of perspective depends on the context. For example, in the analysis of reform and democratization, the traditional concern with economic and political constraints should not be neglected. Yet the balance between discretion and constraints varies. With regard to the economic context, constraints are sometimes so overwhelming that at least for certain issues, an emphasis on the discretion of actors is misleading. Alternatively, one might specify contexts of sharply reduced constraints in which a continuing analytic emphasis on constraints would

likewise not be helpful. In the latter cases, strategic choice analysis may be emphasized instead of more structured, deterministic approaches.

In sum, strategic choice analysis need not supplant other research traditions, but rather can be understood in terms of convergence and/or complementarity. Indeed, more in the spirit of Imre Lakatos than of Thomas Kuhn<sup>21</sup> one might argue that this kind of eclectic strategy of both merging, and alternating between, different approaches is the best way to respond to the challenge of a distinctive analytic perspective in any field.

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<sup>21</sup> For a balanced assessment of the application to political analysis of Lakatos's arguments about scientific research programs, as opposed to Kuhn's treatment of paradigm change, see Terence Ball, "From Paradigms to Research Programs: Towards a Post-Kuhnian Political Science" in Herbert B. Ascher, et al., eds., *Theory-Building and Data Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).