KELLOGG INSTITUTE
THE HELEN KELLOGG INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

POLITICAL CRISES AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Luis E. González

Working Paper #353 - December 2008

Luis E. González is professor of social sciences at the Universidad Católica and of political science at the Universidad de la República, both in Montevideo, Uruguay. The author of books and articles on Uruguayan and Honduran politics, Central American party systems, and comparative Latin American politics, he is cofounder and director of CIFRA, a Uruguayan consulting and polling firm. He has conducted applied research on elites in most Latin American countries, and since 1989 he has been known as a "leading political pollster" for his work on public opinion, and quoted by newspapers in Latin America, Spain and the US. He is a political columnist for Uruguayan TV, a radio commentator, and a print media columnist. After studying sociology in Argentina, he obtained his PhD in political science at Yale, with Juan Linz.

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses current problems of democratic instability in continental Latin America, assuming that all its countries have been at least "minimalist" democracies during the years 2000–07. To identify essential factors leading to instability, it focuses on the countries' most recent and acute political crises. It considers two periods in the post–cold war years: 1992–99 and 2000–07. The number of crises is similar in both periods, but their nature changes, from mostly "traditional" crises in the first (essentially elite-led affairs) to mostly non-traditional crises in the second (with crucial participation by the population). The data suggest that the main causes of the 2000–07 crises were already in place before the 1990s. Building on the available literature this leads to an explanation based on two medium-to-long term processes: the accumulation of unsatisfied expectations during a generation or so, and the still-precarious nature of these minimalist democracies. A cluster analysis strongly confirms that this model can explain both acute crises and their opposite, cases of democratic consolidation. The model also produces some post-dictions on electoral volatility (empirically confirmed), and some predictions for the years 2008–15. The discussion leads to some conclusions concerning prospects for democracy in the region. First, in spite of the crises, minimalist democracy is helping to impel democracy beyond minimalism. Second, to define "democracy," it is not necessary to include stronger political requisites than those of "minimalism," nor socioeconomic requisites. Both are needed, in any case, merely to stabilize minimalist democracies.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la inestabilidad política contemporánea de los países de América Latina continental, asumiendo que durante los años 2000–07 todos ellos han sido al menos democracias "minimalistas." Para identificar las principales causas de esa inestabilidad se concentra en las crisis políticas agudas más recientes. Se examinan dos períodos post-guerra fría: 1992–99 y 2000–07. El número de crisis es similar en los dos, pero su naturaleza cambia: principalmente crisis "tradicionales" en el primero (esencialmente asuntos internos de las elites), y no-tradicionales en el segundo (la participación popular es crucial). Los datos sugieren que las principales causas de las crisis son anteriores a los años 1990s. Estos resultados y la literatura disponible sugieren una explicación de las crisis basada en dos procesos de mediano y largo plazo: la acumulación de expectativas insatisfechas durante aproximadamente una generación, y la relativa precariedad de esas democracias minimalistas. Un análisis de conglomerados confirma vigorosamente que ese modelo puede explicar simultáneamente las crisis agudas y las situaciones opuestas, las consolidaciones. El modelo produce post-dicciones (confirmadas empíricamente) sobre las volatilidades electorales, algunas predicciones para los años 2008–15, y también dos conclusiones sobre las perspectivas de la democracia en la región. Primero, la democracia minimalista, a pesar de las crisis, está ayudando a superar su propio minimalismo. Segundo, no es necesario definir la democracia incluyendo requisitos políticos más fuertes que los "minimalistas," ni requisitos socio-económicos. Ambos son necesarios simplemente para estabilizar las democracias minimalistas.

This study addresses the current problems of democratic instability in Latin America. "Latin America" means here the seventeen *continental* countries (from Argentina and Chile in the south to Mexico in the north) whose populations have mainly Afro-Amerindian *and* Iberian roots. This excludes the Caribbean islands, Belize, and the three former Guianas (Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana). Though from a geographical point of view the seventeen continental countries are not the whole region, they certainly include most of its territory and population. Thus, the restriction to these countries is relatively minor regarding size and population, but it greatly increases the homogeneity of the area under study, i.e., shared country characteristics, simplifying the discussion.

A focus on *democratic* instability assumes that there is some democracy to begin with. For present purposes the starting point is some definition of democracy. This is the task of the first section, which does not seek to propose a new definition, but merely to state concisely which of the available ones seems to be most appropriate in this context ("minimalist" democracies). Additionally, a focus on democratic *instability* assumes that we assign some specific empirical meaning to "instability," a meaning that must be anchored in the previous definition of democracy. This leads to a definition of *acute political crises* (i.e., particularly severe instances of democratic instability).

Once those necessary starting points are established, the second section probes democratic instability in contemporary Latin America by examining the region's acute political crises, first during the early post–cold war years (1992–99, mainly "traditional" crises), and then during the following eight years (2000–07, mainly *non*-traditional crises). The analysis of these crises suggests that the factors leading to them were already in place *before* the end of the cold war. The third section proposes an explanation of recent acute political crises (2000–07) based on two relatively long-term processes: the prolonged insatisfaction of people's expectations and the still-precarious nature of many Latin American democracies. The fourth section examines the usefulness of that explanation, probing some of its past ("post-dictions") and future implications. The study concludes with a brief discussion of the meaning of minimalist democracy and acute political crises for the prospects for democracy in the region.

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC MINIMALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

"Electoral" or "Minimalist" Democracies

Thirty or forty years ago in Latin America (and elsewhere) there was no agreement on the meaning of democracy in academia, among elites in general (including political elites), or among the people. Parts of the political right were not even interested in defining democracy, because they disliked its broadest implications and consequences, irrespective of the details of such a definition. Sometimes, though rarely, this dislike was explicit. Parts of the left believed that the political systems of the then relatively prosperous "capitalist democracies" were not democracies, because the dominant term in "capitalist democracies" was "capitalist," and under capitalism no real democracy was possible. From that point of view things were even worse in Latin America, because in the region's circumstances neither democracy nor relatively prosperous *capitalism* was possible. "Formal democracy," including political parties and electoral competition, was really an illusion even if votes were fairly counted, because most people, for many reasons, had no real choice.

These views have changed, particularly after the implosion of the Soviet Union and the end of "real socialism." The current dominant view in most of Latin America is that what in the past was seen disparagingly as "formal" or "bourgeois" democracy is actually a necessary part of democracy, whatever the exact meaning of "democracy" might be. Some believe that those traits alone are enough to define democracy; some disagree with that view, but most agree that without those traits there is no democracy. Concerning elites in general, a large study conducted by the UNDP concluded: "Latin American leaders agree for the most part that institutional characteristics are not enough to claim that democracy exists, [but] they realize that they are necessary. The institutional dimension is not seen as something that is incidental to what really matters, but rather as a fundamental element of democracy" (UNDP 2005, p. 171). The newly agreed upon necessary *requisites* of democracy (which used to define "formal" or "bourgeois" democracy) may be concisely summarized as follows:

(i) presidents and legislatures are elected in elections open to almost all adults;
(ii) in these elections there are no egregious frauds (though "pressures" may exist);
(iii) elections are contested by at least two parties which have some chance of winning, and
(iv) there is some rotation of parties in government.

These necessary requisites for democracy are similar to those stipulated in Przeworski et al. (2000, pp. 18 and ff.) definition of democracy, except for the "almost universal" participation assumed in (i) and for the explicit requisite of "no egregious fraud" of (ii). Przeworski et al. did not include participation "as a definitional feature of democracy" (id., p. 34), and since they analyzed democracies during the second half of the 20th century (1950–90), from the point of view of their goals they were probably right.[1] But this study is concerned with Latin American politics in the 21st century, where such limitations to participation are no longer acceptable, not even among many socially and politically conservative elites. Requisites (i)–(iv) are thus an updated version of the Przeworski et al. definition of democracy. They are a limited version of *procedural* definitions of democracy, because they include just the essential procedures concerning the election of presidents and legislatures. Furthermore, these "necessary requisites" are clearly weaker than those required for "entirely free and fair elections." Specifically, concerning Dahl's well-known definition of *polyarchy* (Dahl 1971), they satisfy his requisites for widespread political *participation*, but do not satisfy those concerning contestation.

This sort of democracies may or may not be polyarchies in Dahl's sense, nor satisfy the conditions of those who claim that "social citizenship" (including social and economic aspects) is a necessary requisite of democracy, since (i)–(iv) are purely political statements. In short, according to a wide range of possible (and plausible) definitions of democracy, these "democracies" are not necessarily democracies. What can actually be said, then, about them? First, since (i)–(iv) are deemed *necessary* for democracy (without adjectives), then, other things being equal, their birth or restoration is

desirable from a normative point of view (irrespective of the details of the "final" idea of democracy). Second, considering requisites (i)–(iv) as a necessary part of democracy allows a crude and imperfect ordering of existing definitions of democracy, particularly those which are politically relevant. This approximate ordering consists of three concentric circles. The conceptually smallest circle includes purely procedural definitions of democracy. This circle is surrounded by the conceptually more comprehensive space of definitions of democracy that include procedures and go beyond them, but are still purely political (as Dahl's polyarchy). This, in turn, is surrounded by the conceptually most comprehensive (and empirically smallest) definitions of democracy that explicitly include social and economic requisites. This reasoning will be central in the discussion below.

In the following analysis all political regimes satisfying the requisites (i)–(iv) will be called *electoral* or *minimalist* democracies,[2] which it is possible to do without taking a stand on a "final" definition of democracy. This avoids difficult conceptual problems (or at least postpones them) and simplifies terminology. The qualifying terms "electoral" and "minimalist" (applied to "democracy") will be used indistinctly, as a reminder of the limitations involved in the definition of these particular democracies.

Finally, what are the *political* consequences of the birth (or restoration) of minimalist democracies? From the point of view of *normative* democratic political theory, are those empirical consequences meaningful events as well? For the region as a whole these are central questions of perhaps not much lesser importance than that of the nature of a "final" definition of democracy. The last section will return to this point.

Latin America's Democracies at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Just three of the seventeen countries examined in this study (Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay) are generally seen as *consolidated* democracies, meaning *stable*, institutionalized political regimes that satisfy most of Dahl's requisites of *polyarchy* (which, as seen above, are much more stringent than those defining merely electoral democracies). Costa Rica has been described in these terms for many years while Uruguay reached that point in the 1990s.[3] Chile has been labeled a consolidated

democracy most recently, because of the enduring legacies of its military regime. According to George Philip, "Costa Rica would be judged by most observers to be one of Latin America's *three genuine polyarchies* (the others being Chile and Uruguay)" (Philip 2003, p. 11, emphasis added). In 2003 that statement on Chile was still polemical, but events during the following years strengthened Philip's case. Freedom House (2007) rates political rights and civil liberties using scales 1–7, assigning 1 to the highest standards and 7 to the lowest. Considering both dimensions, only three countries in continental Latin America averaged a perfect score of 1 (i.e., were "most polyarchical") during three consecutive years, 2005–07 (and were also "stable," at least in the short run), thus justifying the label *consolidated* democracies. These three countries are precisely Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay.

With regard to the remaining fourteen countries, in substantial terms (though not necessarily in the terminology suggested here) it is widely agreed that at the beginning of the 21st century all (or almost all) continental Latin American countries were at least minimalist democracies. It is also agreed that in the early 1970s, just three decades before, almost none were.[4] Probably the most debated case is that of Venezuela.[5] Some observers think it is a democratic regime (in some sense); others think Venezuela is a nondemocratic regime, and still others argue that it is difficult to tell, because is not clear how things will evolve. The defeat of President Hugo Chávez in a 2007 referendum that would have allowed indefinite presidential reelections bolsters the case of those who see Venezuela as an electoral democracy, but does not close the debate. The average Freedom House (2008) score of political rights and civil liberties in Venezuela for 2007 is 4 (on the 1–7 scale mentioned above), the highest in the region, but that score still means "partially free" (instead of "not free"). Taking into account these caveats, Venezuela and all the remaining thirteen countries will be considered here as (at least) minimalist democracies.

Most of these electoral democracies were born, or restored, during the third wave of democratization (in Huntington's term), which began at the end of the 1970s.[6] Before that wave—during its whole independent history—the Latin American political landscape *never* looked like this. From a normative point of view this is good news.

Nevertheless, during the past decade this wave stalled (though not everywhere), and there were some setbacks as well. As Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán wrote,

> "after stunning and unprecedented progress, this wave of democratization ground to a halt in the 1990s …. democracy has eroded in several countries …; unconstitutional means of deposing presidents (but not through traditional coups leading to military regimes) have become more common; and more citizens now than in 1996 question that democracy is always the best form of political regime." (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005, p. 59)

A longer historical perspective is not reassuring. Most of the earliest democracies in Latin America according to Huntington's classification—i.e., those appearing in his "first wave" (Huntington 1991)[7]—are already in their *third* attempt at building democracy. Starting from a different perspective of democracy, centered in its processes, degrees, and changes (and using different indicators as well), Charles Tilly analyzes four periods of relatively rapid democratization.[8] There are many Latin American countries in each one of those periods, which is true of no other region in the world. Three of its earliest democracies, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, appear in three of those waves. Leaving aside debatable details, the big picture emerging from Huntington's and Tilly's analyses shows that among large world regions Latin America has sustained the most extended effort at building democracy, effort which, according to the previous discussion, has not yet delivered stable results on a regional scale. Skeptics could be forgiven for seeing here a rather Sisyphean task.

Prospects are not good, either. The scarce regional forecasts available are rather pessimistic, except for a few countries. According to the project Global Trends 2020, the most likely Latin American scenarios for the coming years anticipate that most South American and Caribbean countries (and some Central American ones) will suffer recurrent governance crises, and that the answers to those crises will oscillate between weak governments, populism and authoritarian leadership, none of which will contribute to political institutionalization (Burdman et al. 2004, section 3.2.a).[9] In short, the history of democracy in Latin America shows recurrent problems of instability, and at the

beginning of the 21st century less than one in five of the region's countries may be seen as *consolidated* democracies. From a comparative point of view, consolidating democracy in the region has been and still is particularly difficult.

Analyzing Democratic Instability

There are many case studies and some comparative discussions of the region's current electoral democracies. But there is no *comprehensive explanation* for the stagnation and setbacks observed since the 1990s, or for the consolidations, either. There is no consensus about which countries have a pessimistic forecast or why, exactly, those forecasts are pessimistic (though trends are identified, rightly or wrongly, and extrapolations are made on the basis of those trends and the *ceteris paribus* clause). A reasonable strategy for advancing in these matters begins by analyzing the most extreme cases of instability, in the hope that emphasis on the extreme situations will help highlight the essential factors. Taking into account the complicated history of democracy in Latin America, such a strategy appears as follows:

(a) First, we should identify the *acute* political crises of the last few years. Comparatively less problematic situations, being more or less "politics as usual," will not do. Once this is done, the question that follows is:
(b) Are there common factors linked to the crises? *If* such common factors are indeed found, *then*,
(c) Do they provide a common rationale for explaining the crises *and* their opposites, the success stories?

In fact, current discussions tend to analyze the setbacks and the successes separately, without a common rationale linking the two families of stories. Democratic instability and democratic consolidation seem to be relatively independent processes: there is one explanation for instability, and another, different one for consolidation. This is not necessarily true. Perhaps we should look for relevant factors that, if present, contribute to democratic consolidation, but when absent promote instability. This last idea deserves further exploration, and the final sections of this essay attempts just that.

Acute political crises must be those affecting the *central* political institutions. In Latin American electoral democracies the *central* political institutions are presidents and legislatures, because they are the only ones involved in the definition of this particular type of democracy (as stated in the "necessary requisites" (i)–(iv) above). Identifying those central political institutions in this way is necessary for conceptual coherence; whether it is empirically sensible as well will be seen below. For those crises to be *acute* they must occur at the borderline or beyond of what is allowed by existing laws. If this were not so, then the events would be contained within the existing legal framework, without testing institutional limits. Thus, "acute political crises," for present purposes, are those in which:

- presidential and/or legislative authority is severely questioned, threatening to unseat incumbents;
- the procedures channeling these threats are (at a minimum) of dubious character, beyond or at the borderline of existing law.

This excludes normal impeachment procedures, or dissolution of legislatures within legal procedures (which exist in some, but not all, Latin American countries). According to this definition, the final result of an acute political crisis *may* be a presidential resignation or sacking, or the dissolution of parliament, or both. These results, however, are not necessary to characterize a political crisis as "acute." What is necessary is a situation of dubiously legality in which any of those results are clearly possible, and are being sought by at least some relevant actors. From these definitions it follows, in particular, that all coups (successful or failed) are "acute political crises," but the reverse is not true. A situation of dubious legality that might depose a president but ends without changing the status quo, for example, is an "acute political crisis," but it is not a coup.

Finally, as will be seen below, many acute political crises involve conflicts between presidents and legislatures. All acute political crises are crucial instances in the development of conflicts between political actors. In such crises there *might* be heroes and villains in the story of building democracy, but here it is not necessary to ascertain which is which. Such historical judgments are not easy, and depend on both normative

and empirical assumptions. It might even happen that the most law-abiding actors are not necessarily "heroes," and their rivals are not necessarily "villains." What matters for present purposes is the occurrence of the crises themselves (as defined above).

LATIN AMERICA'S DEMOCRATIC INSTABILITY, 1992–2007

This study addresses the *current*, 21st-century problems of democratic instability in Latin America. For practical purposes, the relevant period starts at the beginning of the century and finish with the latest information available at the time of this writing. The task is, thus, identifying and explaining the acute political crises occurring during the eight-year period 2000–07. To situate that period in a somewhat broader perspective, the crises occurring during the previous eight-year period, 1992–99, will be identified as well. The two periods provide an appropriate comparison: both are eight years long, and both belong to the present, post–cold war era. Since the cold war had a significant impact on many Latin American conflicts and crises (political and armed ones), the direct comparison of acute political crises occurring before and after its end might be distorted by the weight of such a big factor, present in the earlier crises but not in the later ones.

The same procedure was followed to identify the acute political crises occurring in both periods: examining the volumes corresponding to the years 1992–2007 of *The Annual Register* (the Latin American sections, vols. 234 through 249) and of *Current History* (the final section of each monthly issue, "The Month in Review," vols. 91 through 106) to systematically identify and cross-check appropriate events. Both sources proved consistent, with few exceptions, increasing the reliability of the identification process. This basic information was complemented with other sources when necessary.

Early Post–Cold War Years, 1992–99: Mostly Traditional Crises

During the years 1992–99 there were eight acute political crises in six countries (Table 1). The countries are (in chronological order) Venezuela, Peru, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Ecuador; both Venezuela and Paraguay experienced two crises each. Lawful impeachments of several presidents (or at least "reasonably lawful," perceived as such by many observers), successful or not, are *not* included in this list: those of

presidents Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil, 1992), Carlos Andrés Pérez (Venezuela 1993), and Ernesto Samper (Colombia 1996).[10] At least one semi-critical situation threatening a legislature was not included either. In Venezuela, in late March 1999, President Hugo Chávez threatened to declare a state of emergency and to dissolve Congress, but an agreement (conceding most of President Chávez's demands) was finally reached.

TABLE 1

Acute Political Crises in Latin America, 1992–1999

		Main characteristics of crisis	
Country	*Crisis*	*Focused on*	*Result***
Venezuela 1	February 1992	President	did not fall
Peru	April 1992	Legislature	dissolved
Venezuela 2	November 1992	President	did not fall
Nicaragua	December 1992	Legislature	no change
Guatemala	May 1993	Legislature	no change
Paraguay 1	April 1996	President	did not fall
Ecuador	February 1997	President	fell
Paraguay 2	March 1999	President	fell

* According to the definition of acute political crises presented in the text, the initial focus of the crisis may be the president, the legislature, or both.

** Presidents may or may not fall, legislators (all or some of them) may retain or may lose their seats.

Sources: *The Annual Review*, *Current History* and (for specific crises) other sources quoted in the text.

Table 1 presents Latin America's acute political crises during the years 1992–99 chronologically, and summarizes their main characteristics: the *initial focus* of the crisis (president, legislature, or both; in practice, either presidents or legislatures), and its *result* (presidents may fall or not; legislators may lose their seats or not). The fall of presidents and the unseating of legislators are drastic changes in the status quo. As acute political crises are crucial instances in the development of a conflict in which several actors confront others, those changes in the status quo also mean that the actors attacking presidents or legislators have won. Hence, for the sake of brevity it may be said that a crisis is "successful" if the president is sacked or legislators lose their seats (that is, when

the crisis does lead to "drastic changes in the status quo"); otherwise it is "failed." It is not necessary to be a hard-nosed structuralist to speak in these terms.

Venezuela's crises were both failed military coups attempting to overthrow the president (Carlos Andrés Pérez). The first attempt (February 1992) was commanded by then Lieutenant Colonel Chávez, and the second (November 1992) by Air Force officers.[11] Peru's crisis, also in 1992, was a successful coup (an *autogolpe* led by President Alberto Fujimori with military support). In Nicaragua, on December 30, 1992, President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro "ordered police officers to seize the National Assembly building and its assets and documents, stating that an interim board of directors would be appointed."[12] The president "sided with the Sandinistas and a small group of UNO congressmen (…) to oust the majority faction of the [governing] coalition from control of the National Assembly" (Millett 1994, p. 127). The events of December 1992 began a long crisis that took a full year before reaching a political solution. Guatemala's crisis was a failed *autogolpe* led by President Jorge Serrano in May 1993. The president, initially with military support, dissolved Congress (and the Supreme Court), but a successful counter coup forced Serrano's resignation. The first Paraguayan crisis (April 1996) was a failed military coup, whereas the second crisis (March 1999), detonated by the assassination of the vice president, Luis Argaña, concluded when Congress initiated impeachment proceedings against President Rául Cubas, who resigned and fled to Brazil, where he obtained political asylum. In Ecuador (February 1997), Congress declared President Abdalá Bucaram "mentally incapacitated" to govern; the country had three presidents in a single week. Bucaram finally obtained asylum in Panama.

Only one of these crises replaced an electoral democracy with an increasingly authoritarian regime (Peru 1992). In all other crises at least minimalist democracies were followed by other minimalist democracies, or by the reequilibration of the former one. Most crises (five out of eight) were conventional coups with active military participation (they led in three, and followed the president in the other two, which were *autogolpes*). Two of the crises (Nicaragua 1992 and Ecuador 1997) were not standard coups, though for different reasons. In Nicaragua, President Chamorro attempted to control (or to unseat) the majority of her own coalition. Ecuador's crisis was one of the first of a "new" type of crisis, which will be discussed in the following section. The remaining episode

(Paraguay 1999) is difficult to classify, for its initial event (the assassination of the vice president) may have been linked to factional conflicts within the then governing Colorado Party; if so, the crisis was a miscalculated political crime run amok. Most of the five "classical coups" (four in five) failed. The success rate of the other three episodes was higher (two out of three).

All but one (Ecuador 1997) of these crises were essentially intra-elite conflicts. They were elite-planned and -led events, in most cases including military elites as well. Some of them included protests (and some may have sought to address popular demands as well), but actual mass participation did not play a central role in the course of events.[13] These crises may then be called *traditional*, since whatever their actors' aims they retained old, traditional patterns of acute political conflicts in the region. The trait defining traditional crises is thus the *absence* of decisive (or almost decisive) mass participation.[14] The presence of elites, in broad terms, does not discriminate between traditional and non-traditional crises because elites are always present in both of them.[15] The crisis in Ecuador in 1997 was *not* traditional in this sense, for mass protests contributed decisively (or almost decisively) to the final result.

Recent, Nontraditional Crises, 2000–07

During the eight years 2000–07, there were ten acute political crises in seven countries (Table 2). The number of crises and of countries experiencing them was similar to those found in 1992–99, though slightly higher on both counts. The countries experiencing crises were, in chronological order, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Bolivia had two crises, and Ecuador three. As in the previous period, reasonably lawful attempts to impeach presidents were not counted as acute political crises. There were two such attempts: in Paraguay (April 2002), against President Luis González Macchi, and in Ecuador (November 2004), against President Lucio Gutiérrez. Both attempts failed.

TABLE 2

Acute Political Crises in Latin America, 2000–2007

		Main characteristics of crisis	
Country	*Crisis*	*Focused on**	*Result***
Ecuador 1	January 2000	President	fell
Paraguay	May 2000	President	did not fall
Peru	November 2000	President	fell
Argentina	December 2001	President	fell
Venezuela	April 2002	President	did not fall
Bolivia 1	October 2003	President	fell
Ecuador 2	April 2005	President	fell
Nicaragua	June 2005	President	did not fall
Bolivia 2	June 2005	President	fell
Ecuador 3	March 2007	Legislature	57 lawmakers (out of 100) lost their seats

* According to the definition of acute political crises presented in the text, the initial focus of the crisis may be the president, the legislature, or both.

** Presidents may or may not fall, legislators (all or some of them) may retain or may lose their seats.

Sources: *The Annual Review*, *Current History* and (for specific crises) other sources quoted in the text.

In Ecuador's first and second crises (January 2000 and April 2005) presidents Jamil Mahuad and Gutiérrez, respectively, fell amidst heavy pressures and mass demonstrations.[16] In its third crisis (March 2007) an absolute majority of lawmakers (57 out of 100) lost their seats: "On March 7th, the electoral tribunal decided, by three votes to two, to expel 57 opposition legislators from Congress. The previous day they had backed moves to sack the head of the tribunal because he had used his casting vote to call a referendum on the new assembly. That was a job for the legislature, they said. Both decisions were of dubious legality."[17] Ecuador's President Rafael Correa achieved his aim and replaced those 57 legislators with their designated alternates.

The Paraguayan crisis (May 2000) was a military coup led by supporters of General Lino Oviedo. The coup failed after pressure from Brazil and the United States; both wanted to avoid a breakdown. Peru's crisis (November 2000) was President Fujimori's fall (he went to Japan and sent his resignation back to Peru, in the wake of the "Vladivideos" scandal; Congress refused his resignation and declared him "morally

unfit" to govern). Argentina's President Fernando de la Rúa resigned (in December 2001) after public order broke down; as in Ecuador in 1997, Argentina had four presidents in less than two weeks. Venezuela's crisis (April 2002) was a failed military coup (this time with support of the United States) against President Chávez, preceded and followed by mass demonstrations (for and against Chávez).

In Bolivia, two presidents resigned under duress: Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada (in October 2003) and Carlos Mesa (in June 2005). President Sánchez de Losada resigned after four weeks of clashes between security forces and protesters, and Vice President Mesa was sworn in as president. Less than two years after assuming his post, President Mesa resigned after nationwide protests. In a pattern now familiar (as in Ecuador and Argentina), his successor was not the first in line to the presidency, nor the second (because protesters were not willing to accept them), but the third, Eduardo Rodríguez, president of the Supreme Court.[18]

Finally, in Nicaragua, President Enrique Bolaños was almost ousted by an alliance of two former presidents, Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán, who in January 2005 pushed through constitutional changes that weakened presidential power, and in June created a commission to lift the president's immunity and probe his alleged misuse of public funds. The crisis concluded in October, when an agreement was reached to suspend the application of the constitutional reforms voted in January and to maintain presidential immunity. The US deputy secretary of state had been in Managua in early October "for two days of talks intended to rally support for President Enrique Bolaños against what the secretary called 'a creeping coup.'"[19]

The final results of nine of these crises maintained the existing regime: they were followed by a reequilibration of the existing minimalist democracy, or replaced it with another minimalist democracy. In the remaining case (Peru), the fall of an authoritarian regime was followed by an electoral democracy, undoing the results of Fujimori's 1992 coup. Only two of the ten crises were standard coups with strong military participation (Paraguay, May 2000, and Venezuela, April 2002), and both failed. All but one of the crises (Ecuador 2007) threatened presidents,[20] and two-thirds of them (six out of nine) succeeded in sacking them. Furthermore, in two of the three crises in which presidents did not fall (Paraguay 2000 and Nicaragua 2005), it may be argued that external pressures

were very influential, if not decisive. The third crisis, in Venezuela in 2002, was different: external pressures ran both for and against the president; the coup failed because the local coalition defending the president was strong enough to resist both internal *golpistas* and external influences.

In most of these crises (seven out of ten: all but those of Paraguay, Venezuela, and Nicaragua), mass participation played a central or decisive role in the course of events. As the *Times* put it, in the whole of Latin America "eight presidents have been ousted or forced to resign *in popular uprisings* since 2000."[21] Two years later Pérez-Liñán agreed: "popular uprisings (…) are the main force behind the collapse of elected administrations" (2007, p. 206). Thus, most crises during this period *were not traditional* in the sense described at the end of the previous section. These labels (traditional or not-traditional) are certainly not perfect; in particular, "not-traditional" crises are not really new. But in the past most Latin American acute political crises and coups have indeed been, by far, of the traditional sort.

Continuities and Changes in Post-Cold War Acute Political Crises

When comparing the events of both periods some significant similarities emerge. First, crises were slightly more numerous (and involved just one more country) in the most recent period, so it is not possible to say whether their frequency is actually increasing. But so far it is not decreasing. Somewhat paradoxically, democratic instability looks either stable or increasing. Second, the crises did not change the nature of political regimes: they were mostly minimalist democracies before and after the crises. Just one crisis, that of Peru in 1992, produced an authoritarian regime, but this result was undone eight years later, when Fujimori fell. In short, Latin America's democracies are not endangered so far by these crises, but most are non-consolidated, potentially unstable minimalist democracies.

In fact, many are *actually* unstable. Most countries experiencing acute political crises in one of those periods *also* suffered crises in the other period. Guatemala had just one crisis, in the first period, and Argentina and Bolivia experienced crises only in the second period; but five countries out of eight (Venezuela, Peru, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Ecuador) had crises in both periods. Leaving aside the division between the two periods,

almost half of the region's countries (eight in seventeen) experienced acute political crises since the end of the cold war. Six of them (Venezuela, Peru, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia), more than one third of the region's countries, suffered two or more crises. These results suggest that whatever the nature of the factors leading to those crises, they are neither accidental nor short-term events. Since the crises tend to occur repeatedly in the same countries, they cannot be the result of haphazard, one-off events. The factors leading to acute political crises in the 21st century were already in place or were building up *before* the 1990s (since the first of the two periods examined here begins in 1992). They seem to have strong residual effects as well.

There are significant differences between the two periods, too. First, the frequency of standard, old-fashioned coups is decreasing. There were five of them in the first period (out of eight crises: all but those of Nicaragua 1992, Ecuador 1997, and Paraguay 1999), but just two in the second (Paraguay 2000 and Venezuela 2002). This is consistent with a pattern of long-term decline: in Latin America, military rebellions and successful coups have both been declining systematically since the 1960s.[22] Perhaps they are becoming less frequent, at least in part, because they increasingly fail: most of the five earlier "classical coups" (four in five) came to naught; both "classical coups" of the second period failed as well. Second, in five out of eight crises during the first period, the initial target was the presidency, as in nine out of ten crises in the second period. Presidents seem to be increasingly threatened, and legislatures safer. Third, seven of the eight initial crises were "traditional" (the five coups, Nicaragua's crisis of 1992–93, and Argaña's assassination) in the sense described above, but in the second period there were only three such crises (three out of ten: Paraguay 2000, Venezuela 2002, and Nicaragua 2005). Thus, traditional crises are less frequent. Besides the fact that traditional crises are essentially intra-elite conflicts in which mass participation does not play a central role, whereas in non-traditional crises mass participation is always central, there is at least one additional characteristic that further distinguishes them: non-traditional crises are far more successful (all of them, eight crises in all, were "successful") than traditional crises (among them just three out of ten "succeeded"). Thus, seen from the point of view of post-cold war acute political crises, mass political participation in Latin America appears clearly to be increasing, and it is increasingly successful as well.

This preliminary analysis of the nature of acute political crises in present Latin America poses many relevant questions for the prospects of democracy and democratic stability in the region. Before attempting to explore them it is necessary to turn first to the *causes* of those crises.

EXPLAINING *RECENT* POLITICAL CRISES, 2000–07

Probing the Relevant Literature

There is not much comparative literature on the roots of "acute political crises" *as defined here*.[23] For the purposes of this essay, however, there are at least three relevant sources of ideas: first, studies on the breakdown of democracies, such as the classic work of Linz and Stepan (1978); second, studies of the opposite process, transitions from authoritarian rule (since this paper expects to probe the consolidation cases as well); and third, general studies of political instability, such as that of the State Failure Task Force, which attempts to forecast political instability (though defined in much more severe terms than the acute crises analyzed here). According to Linz and Stepan, the *direct* effect of social and economic factors on the breakdown of democracies is somewhat secondary. They provide the restrictions and opportunities within which social and political actors choose and act, and those decisions and actions are the actually decisive factors. The final turn of events, towards either breakdown or reequilibration, is the combined result of those options and actions. A classic investigation of the same route but in the opposite way, from authoritarian regimes to democracies (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986), also underscores the central role of political actors and their options.

A recent study on political instability (in any context, democratic or not), that of the State Failure Task Force (now known as the Political Instability Task Force), identifies the most important factors attached to political *stability* (Goldstone et al., 2005). When these factors are absent, then a potentially large number of circumstances might unleash crises. The final model the Task Force found most appropriate to forecast severe crises has just four central factors or independent variables. The most important factor by far is the type and characteristics of the political regime.[24] Two of the remaining variables are political factors as well: the regional context (the "bad neighborhood"

effect: when several frontier countries suffer extreme crises, the “contagion” probability is high), and governmental discrimination (political or economic) against at least one group or community (“factionalism”). The only socioeconomic factor is infant mortality, used as an indicator of prevailing life conditions.

The goals of these three lines of research are different, and their methodologies are *very* different (particularly that of the Task Force with regard to the other two). In spite of those differences they somehow share two central conclusions. First, what might be called “the primacy of politics”:

- in the breakdowns and transitions studies, political actors and their decisions (and actions) are the central factors deciding the course of events, and
- the Task Force identifies four factors contributing to severe political instability, three of which are political; one of the political factors (the nature of the political regime) is by far the most important of them all.

Second, social and economic factors *do matter*, but for the purposes of short-term political analysis they are relevant in a different (or “secondary”) sense:

- in the breakdowns and transition studies, they provide the constrains and opportunities within which the actions of political actors decide the course of events, and
- the Task Force sees them, according to the coefficients of its model, as one of three second-tier factors.

These simple, basic ideas will steer this search for an explanation of acute political crises.

Social and Economic Factors

Honduras and El Salvador, both relatively poor countries in the regional context, did not experience acute political crises during the period under study here. Argentina and Venezuela, both relatively rich countries, suffered such crises. More generally, it may be easily shown that material well-being (as measured by gross domestic product per capita)

or levels of human development (as measured by the Human Development Index of UNDP) are not directly linked to acute political crises. Those crises do not necessarily occur where there are many poor people, nor are relatively rich populations spared. These remarks are not limited to the 21st century either. During the three decades following World War II, Latin American democracies and semi-democracies with higher development levels were slightly *more* vulnerable to breakdowns than their less favored neighbors. During Huntington's third wave of democratization, national economic performances or per-capita incomes were not significant factors contributing to greater democratic stability in Latin America (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005, pp. 56–57). Still, socioeconomic factors must be somehow present. For the Task Force they are one of four main factors contributing to political instability. From other points of view socioeconomic factors provide, as a minimum, the constraints and opportunities within which choices can be made and actions undertaken. So, one way or another, they must be present; in *what* ways, exactly?

Since Linz and Stepan (1978) many authors have argued that "legitimacy of results" (of *social and economic* results) is one of the necessary conditions for democratic stability, at least in the long run.[25] That is, "legitimacy of results" (of the regime, not of a particular government) must be reasonably high to support democratic stability. But this idea of legitimacy introduces, by definition, subjective factors. "Legitimacy of results" is a judgment: the result of comparing "results" (the *situation* as it is perceived by people) with some *benchmark* embodying what is seen as both feasible and desirable (i.e., "legitimate" goals). What matters, then, is the distance between benchmark and situation. If that distance is nil or not significant, then results are legitimate (or expectations are satisfied). If the distance is large, results are not legitimate (or expectations are unsatisfied). That distance may vary because any or both of its defining points vary. And if both vary about the same, in the same way, then the distance itself does not change: the situation is constantly improving, but as the benchmark is being raised at about the same rate, the distance between them (i.e., the level of satisfaction of expectations) does not change. Thus, "absolute" or "objective" social and economic factors, by themselves, do not matter (that is, not *directly*). What actually matters is

- the *distance* between actual living conditions (as people perceive them) and people's legitimate goals (what they see as both desirable and feasible), and
- the *changes* in (a) actual living conditions and (b) people's legitimate goals (and the change in the *distance* between them as well, which is a consequence of the other two changes).

These are the factors relevant to ascertain the incidence of socioeconomic circumstances on acute political crises. It is not easy to measure them with precision, but in contemporary Latin America we do know something important about how one of them is changing through time. Benchmarks are continuously rising in two senses: they involve more things (in a broad sense, not restricted to material objects), and they are making increased demands on the quantity and quality of those things as well. We also know *why* benchmarks are rising. One of these reasons is minimalist democracy itself, partly because some kind of equality of circumstances (as a minimum, of opportunities) is a natural generalization of the idea of political equality, a central pillar of democracy, and partly because political competition makes candidates offer more promises to voters, which in turn reinforces what is seen as desirable and attainable. Benchmarks are ever higher also because of what used to be called "demonstration" effects (and are seen now as part of globalization[26]). Ever more people know about living conditions in rich countries because of the increasing penetration of mass media. Radio, in particular, is now practically universal, even in the poorest rural regions of the poorest countries, and television is not far off. The region's growing migrations to rich countries (and particularly to the US) provide first-hand witnesses for an ever larger proportion of Latin Americans (the migrants' relatives, their friends, their neighbors). And finally, the remittances of those migrants provide actual proof that "people like me" (and among those receiving remittances, "my own family") can live far better than I can. If living better is both desirable and feasible, then I have the *right* to live better.

Thus, even though we do not know exactly the ways benchmarks vary over time, for the beginning of the 21st century (and for the foreseeable future) we do know the shape of this function: it is monotonic, always increasing. It follows that, if *benchmarks* are constantly rising, then the *situation* must (constantly) improve as well, merely to

avoid frustrating expectations. It is necessary to run just to stay in the same place. How can we check whether the *situation* is indeed improving? The "situation," i.e., living conditions as people perceive them, depends on actual, "objective" conditions of living, but it does not boil down to those conditions. People judge their actual living conditions partly by comparison with their own and/or their parents' past experience, and partly by comparison with "how they see people around them living" (Friedman 2005, p. 81).

> "[T]he essential point is that … people who live better now than they did before, or better than they recall their parents living, are likely to think they are doing well … psychological studies have repeatedly confirmed that people's satisfaction depends less on the *level* of their income than on how it is changing." (Friedman 2005, p. 82)[27]

The best way to see how people perceive their living conditions should be asking them, that is, using public opinion surveys. But in practice that is a difficult task, and probably an impossible one on the basis of existing surveys. First, a single question would not be enough, because all, or at least most of the just mentioned factors should be measured; a set of questions is needed. Second, it is necessary to differentiate the kind of short-term unsatisfied expectations that merely lead to votes for the opposition, from those capable of leading many people to face real risks participating in the protests characteristic of nontraditional crises. This task needs filtering questions capable of discriminating among these very different types of unsatisfied expectations. All of this could be done, but it is not available yet, at least not in known questionnaires of regional reach.

Is there an acceptable alternative? On one hand, the discussion so far strongly suggests that factors relevant for the occurrence of acute political crises must be relatively long-term. As seen above (2.3), the causes of the crises occurring in 2000–07 must have been already in place, or were building up, *before* the 1990s. In the same vein, the "legitimacy of results" involved in Linz and Stepan's discussion is that of regimes, not of individual governments. It requires the accumulation of unsatisfied expectations throughout at least several years and governments. This is consistent with the kind of attitudes needed to risk one's safety in the potentially dangerous business of defying existing order and institutions. On the other hand, as Friedman put it, we know that

“people’s satisfaction depends less on the *level* of their income than on how it is changing;” and we know, too, that “rising incomes are, in turn, what economic growth is all about” (Friedman, loc. cit.). As it is commonly observed, economic growth is the tide capable of lifting all boats.

Therefore, an available, alternative estimator of “satisfaction with the *situation*” (i.e., satisfaction with living conditions as people perceive them) is the *change* of gross domestic product during at least a full generation. This should be expressed in per-capita terms, to control for the effects of population growth, and preferably adjusted by purchasing power parity, to avoid other spurious effects. This is just a poor approximation of what is really needed, because economic growth per se does not preclude its fruits being distributed unevenly. Economic growth with increasing inequality may not improve living conditions for most people. But from a methodological point of view, it is a conservative approximation. Without economic growth most people cannot perceive improvements in their living conditions (the “situation” is at best stagnant).[28] As we already know that the benchmarks are systematically rising, this implies, necessarily, the accumulation of increasingly unsatisfied expectations.

Table 3 presents the seventeen continental countries ordered by decreasing levels of average gross domestic product (GDP) growth per capita, adjusted by purchasing power parity (PPP), for the years 1975–2003; this is a 28-year span. The final year (2003) lies appropriately at about the middle of the period being analyzed here, 2000–07. Countries may be grouped in thirds. The upper or “best” third includes six countries with the highest GDP growth. The lower or “worst” third includes six countries with the lowest GDP growth. The intermediate third includes the five remaining countries having intermediate levels of GDP growth. *Seven* countries experienced acute political crises during the years 2000–07. Thus, if low GDP growth is a reasonable indicator of unsatisfied expectations, and if the model summarized above is about right, then all or most countries in the worst third should have experienced acute political crises, none or almost none of the countries in the best third should have experienced such crises, and at least one country of the intermediate third should probably have experienced a crisis (in a perfect relationship all six countries of the worst third should have experienced a crisis, which leaves an additional country going to the intermediate group).

TABLE 3

Average Annual Growth of Gross Domestic Product Per Capita 1975–2003 (adjusted by purchasing power parity, PPP) and Year of Highest Value

Country	Growth of GDP per capita (adjusted by PPP), 1975–2003	Year of highest value of GDP per capita (adjusted by PPP)*
Chile	4.0	2003
Colombia	1.4	1997
Costa Rica	1.3	1999
Uruguay	1.2	1998
Panama	1.0	2003
Mexico	0.9	2000
Brazil	0.8	2002
Paraguay **	0.6	1981
Argentina **	0.4	1998
El Salvador	0.2	1978
Guatemala	0.2	1980
Honduras	0.1	1979
Ecuador **	0.1	1988
Bolivia **	-0.3	1977
Peru **	-0.5	1981
Venezuela **	-1.1	1977
Nicaragua **	-2.8	1977

* Year of the highest GDP per capita of the period 1975–2003 (adjusted by purchasing power parity, PPP). Source: PNUD (2005), based on World Bank data.

** Countries having acute political crises during the period 2000–07 (according to Table 2).

This is indeed so. None of the countries of the best third had a crisis; five of the six countries of the worst third, and two in the intermediate third, did have crises.[29] Average annual growth of GDP for the seven countries experiencing crises was negative, -.51; for the countries of the best third it was 1.63. For the seven countries that

experienced crises, the best year of the whole period (the year of highest growth of GDP, 1975–2003) was, on average, 1983; for the countries of the best third, the best year was 2000. For people living in 2003 in the countries that experienced acute crises, therefore, the "good times" (or the least bad times) had occurred *twenty* years before. For people living in the first third countries the best times had been, on average, just *three* years before. In such circumstances perhaps you could be persuaded to vote for the opposition, but probably you would not risk your shirt in anti-government riots.

The relationship between GDP growth and acute crises is not perfect, however, and it shows in a more formal probing. As seen above, the average growth of GDP for the seven countries experiencing crises was -.51; for the ten countries *not* experiencing crises was 1.11. The difference between those two means is not significant (t-Student, at .05 level of confidence). This alone does not discard the argument, but demands a careful appraisal of its merits in the final discussion below.

Political Factors

Political factors, according to the relevant literature, should play a central role in explaining the occurrence of acute political crises. According to the Task Force findings, specifically, regime type was the single most important factor. Here, however, all the countries under consideration are at least minimalist democracies. At *this* level regime type is a *constant.* It is thus necessary to search beyond the defining characteristics of electoral democracies, following the logic of the discussion in the first section. That logic showed an arrangement of definitions of democracy in approximately concentric circles, starting from strictly procedural definitions, through more demanding political requisites (e.g., as those of Dahl's polyarchy), until the still more demanding requisites of those who see *social* citizenship as a defining condition of democracy. According to this progression, immediately beyond purely procedural definitions are found Dahl's conditions for *contestation* (since those concerning participation are already present in minimalist democracies) and, from a different perspective, the requisites associated with *civil* citizenship. These two families of conditions do not necessarily include the same set of requisites, but at the core of both are sets of *rights* that must be enforced. As O'Donnell wrote,

> "The fundamental point ... is that there is a close connection of democracy with certain aspects of equality among individuals who are posited not just as individuals, but as *legal persons*, and consequently as citizens—i.e., as carriers of rights and obligations …. Whatever the definition of democracy, since Athens until today, this is its common historical core." (O'Donnell 2007, p. 113)

In Latin America there are rights aplenty, but they are not necessarily enforced. Rights cannot be properly enforced without an independent (in particular, *politically* independent) and reasonably efficient judiciary. The weaker that judiciary, the poorer the enforcement of rights, and the lesser the advancement from minimalist democracies to fuller forms of democracy. Thus, if all of our countries are already minimalist democracies, the independence and effectiveness of the judicial branch should play a similar role to that of regime type in the world-wide analysis of the Task Force. The less independent and effective the judicial branch is, the more likely the occurrence of acute political crises. It is also evident that such a factor has a built-in, relatively long-term view (as is necessary in this context, according to the arguments discussed above, in 5.2), since the building of a reasonably efficient and independent judiciary is a long-term endeavor. To summarize: in countries that already are (at least) electoral democracies, judicial-legal effectiveness is in fact an indicator of democratic advancement (or "progress," to use a rather outmoded word) on the path from minimalist to fuller forms of democracy. Kauffman (2004) provides an index of judicial-legal effectiveness based on surveys of firms. It is based on the percentage of firms in each country giving satisfactory scores to questions on judicial independence, judicial corruption, quality of the legal framework, protection of property rights, and judicial and police effectiveness; the index is the average of satisfactory answers for each one of the six indicators.

Table 4 presents Kaufmann's index of judicial-legal effectiveness for the seventeen continental countries (circa 2002–03) in the same format as Table 3. It must be noted that the index's values themselves may be somewhat debatable. The single most important criticism is probably that concerning Argentina's position. Should Argentina

really be last on this list? First, it is likely that the judgments of the surveyed firms were influenced by the problems and fierce debates that occurred in Argentina during and after the crisis (the surveys were conducted a few months after De la Rúa's resignation). In fact, according to a single, direct indicator of judicial-legal effectiveness mentioned below, Argentina still belongs to the "worst third," but is no longer at the bottom of the list. Bolivia, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Venezuela (in that order) show lower values than Argentina. But using this alternative indicator does not affect the present discussion, since Argentina would remain in the worst third. Second, probably the most important explanation of Argentina's position on this list is that respondents in different countries do not use a common "absolute" scale. Their answers to most questions that are part of the index involve subjective judgments that depend on the distance between what they actually see and what they think they *should see* (exactly as in 3.2 above). For Argentina this last expectation (what respondents think they should see) is surely far higher than those prevalent in many countries on the list. This does not damage the present analysis, however, because the attitudes and actions of all relevant actors are based on this kind of perceived distance, not on eventual "absolute" judgments of experts. In many circumstances the bigger these perceived distances are, the less likely actors will behave as law-abiding citizens (persons, politicians, parties, firms, or other institutions).

Table 4 shows that the link between acute political crises and the index of judicial–legal effectiveness looks stronger than that between crises and GDP growth. As in Table 3, none of the countries of the best third (those of highest judicial-legal effectiveness) had crises, and five of the six countries in the worst third, plus two in the intermediate third, did have crises. The two countries in the intermediate group that had crises are the two lowest ranked in the group. The only misclassified country, Guatemala, which is in the worst group but did not have an acute political crisis in this period, did have a crisis in the first period, 1992–99 (in May 1993, as seen in Table 1). The mean value of the index for the first third countries was 44.98%; for the countries having political crises in the period, just 14.36%.

TABLE 4

Judicial-Legal Effectiveness, circa 2002–2003

Countries	**Judicial-legal effectiveness***	
	Percentage	Rank
Chile	66.8	1
Uruguay	50.5	2
Costa Rica	47.2	3
Brazil	41.5	4
El Salvador	33.9	5
Colombia	30.0	6
Mexico	29.8	7
Panama	25.9	8
Honduras	17.6	9
Peru **	17.5	10
Nicaragua **	16.3	11
Ecuador **	15.0	12
Guatemala	14.6	13
Paraguay **	13.4	14
Bolivia **	13.2	15
Venezuela **	12.8	16
Argentina **	12.3	17

* Index of judicial-legal effectiveness circa 2002–03: percentage of firms in each country giving satisfactory scores to questions on judicial independence, judicial corruption, quality of the legal framework, protection of property rights, and judicial and police effectiveness. Source: Kaufmann (2004).

** Countries having acute political crises during the period 2000–07 (according to Table 2).

The same analysis conducted on the basis of a single indicator of judicial independence (Stein et al. 2005) shows a somewhat stronger relationship between judicial independence and crises, because all the countries of the worst third experienced crises, plus one of the intermediate third (tied in the last position of that third; not shown here because of reasons of space). The discussion above uses Kaufmann's index partly because it combines six relevant variables, and partly because in Stein et al.'s indicator several countries have equal scores, which blurs and obscures the general discussion below. This decision is thus methodologically conservative. The relevant point here,

however, is that the conclusion of the analysis does not depend on one particular indicator of judicial-legal effectiveness.

In a more formal probing, the average value of Kaufmann's index for the seven countries experiencing acute crises in the period, as reported above, is 14.36%, whereas that average for the ten countries that did not experience crises is 35.78%. The difference between the two means is significant (t-Student, at .01 level of confidence). Hence, both informally and formally the link between judicial-legal effectiveness (the "political" factor) and crises is stronger than the link between the growth of GDP per capita (the "socioeconomic" factor) and crises. This is consistent with the "primacy of politics" idea.

Explaining Acute Political Crises

Unsatisfied expectations (as measured by GDP per capita growth, 1975–2003) and "democratic advancement" (as measured by judicial-legal effectiveness) are both, as expected, directly linked to acute political crises. They are also correlated between them (R square = .567). What matters for the present purposes is their *combined* effect on the occurrence of acute political crises. It seems entirely natural to expect that the consequences of unsatisfied expectations should differ according to the level of democratic advancement. Dissatisfaction that in an established democracy may simply castigate incumbents, in a precarious democratic order may rock the boat.

Figure 1 presents conjointly the results of Tables 3 and 4. The three countries that belong simultaneously to both "worst thirds" in Tables 3 and 4 (Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela) are thus in what could be called the "critical" zone of Figure 1; the three experienced acute political crises during the years 2000–07. Six countries combine one of the two "worst thirds" with an "intermediate third," thus belonging to a "risk" zone; four of them (Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, and Nicaragua) experienced crises in 2000–07, one (Guatemala) did not, but had an acute crisis in the first period (May 1993), and only one, Honduras, has been spared so far. Beginning from the opposite extreme of Figure 1, four countries combine two "best thirds" (Chile, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Colombia), thus belonging to a "safe" zone, and four additional countries (Panama, Mexico, Brazil, and El Salvador) combine one "best third" with an "intermediate third," thus belonging to a

"probably safe" zone. None of these eight countries had a crisis, either in the second period or in the first.

FIGURE 1

Judicial-Legal Effectiveness (circa 2002–03), Unsatisfied Expectations (according to average annual growth of GDP per capita, 1975–2003) and Acute Political Crises, 2000–2007*

Judicial–legal effectiveness circa 2002–2003

Growth of GDP per capita at PPP, 1975–2003	**Least effective third**	**Intermediate third**	**Most effective third**
Third with greatest GDP growth	—— **III**	Panama Mexico **II**	Chile Uruguay Costa Rica Colombia **I**
Intermediate third	Guatemala ***Paraguay***** ***Argentina***** **IV**	—— **III**	Brazil El Salvador **II**
Third with least GDP growth	***Ecuador***** ***Bolivia***** ***Venezuela***** **V**	Honduras ***Peru***** ***Nicaragua***** **IV**	—— **III**

* Judicial-legal effectiveness circa 2002–2003 (from Table 4); *unsatisfied expectations* according to average annual growth of GDP per capita at PPP, 1975–2003 (from Table 3). ** Countries that experienced *acute political crises* during the period 2000–2007 according to Table 2. Within each cell countries are ordered (higher to lower) by diminishing levels of legal effectiveness.

Zones (groups of cells): I, "safe" zone; II, "probably safe" zone; III, "intermediate" zone (empirically empty); IV, "risk" zone; V, "critical" zone.

The combination of a "best" with a "worst third," or of the two intermediate groups, is empirically void: there are no countries in this "intermediate" bi-dimensional zone. This might merely reflect the sizable correlation between the two factors. But it

also hints at the presence of two circles, one vicious (that of the “risk” and “critical” zones), and the other virtuous (the “safe” and “probably safe” zones). From this view, the intermediate space between these circles seems to be an unstable zone. Perhaps it is not impossible to stand on this particular fence, but it looks difficult. It might happen, for example, that the pressures of accumulated, unsatisfied expectations make institutional (and judicial) consolidation even harder, which further complicates governing, which in turn leads to poor socioeconomic results for most of the population, thus deepening unsatisfied expectations. Analogously, sustained good times, with comparatively satisfied populations, may facilitate institution building, which facilitates policy making and execution, which in turn leads to even better times.

At first sight the argument summarized in Figure 1 provides a potentially good explanation of the occurrence of acute political crises in the region during the years 2000–07. But two additional questions should be answered. First, to what extent do these results depend on arbitrary ways of analyzing the information (e.g., grouping the countries in three thirds, but not in halves, or in fourths)? Second, to what extent do these results depend on examining (also arbitrarily) the information of the two explanatory variables as if they were simple orderings, though they actually are quantitative variables? The simplest way of answering these two questions simultaneously is to perform a cluster analysis on the bi-dimensional space formed by growth of GDP per capita and judicial-legal effectiveness. On *substantive* grounds, for the purposes of this discussion there are three significant groups of countries:

- consolidated democracies (three countries, as seen above: Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay),
- the seven countries experiencing acute political crises during the years 2000–07 (Table 2: Paraguay, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua), and
- a third, intermediate group, neither consolidated nor experiencing acute crises (the remaining seven countries, Colombia, Brazil, El Salvador, Panama, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras).

It makes sense, then, to consider first three clusters. In this kind of cluster analysis the observer indicates the number of clusters to be formed, and a standard statistical procedure calculates how many countries are in each group (and what countries they are) by minimizing the sum of the distances of each member of each group to the group's center (or "centroid"). Groups are defined precisely in order to minimize those sums. Do the resulting clusters actually reproduce the three substantive groups?

TABLE 5

Cluster Analysis of Figure 1 Data, as Detailed in Text
Cluster Composition and Distance of Members From Their Respective Centers ("centroids")

Three clusters, their compositions, and distances to their centroids					
Cluster 1	***Cluster 1 Distances to its center***	**Cluster 2**	***Cluster 2 Distances to its center***	**Cluster 3**	***Cluster 3 Distances to its center***
Uruguay	4.440	El Salvador	1.805	Ecuador	0.532
Costa Rica	7.682	Colombia	2.285	Guatemala	0.585
Chile	12.106	Mexico	2.420	Bolivia	1.546
		Panama	6.322	Paraguay	1.656
		Brazil	9.280	Venezuela	2.078
				Argentina	2.562
				Peru	2.759
				Nicaragua	2.888
				Honduras	2.893

Source: Estimation on the basis of the data from Figure 1.

Table 5 shows the results of such a cluster analysis, performed on the data from Tables 3 and 4. When three groups are required, the results reproduce the three substantive groups shown above very closely. The first cluster of Table 5 includes just the three consolidated democracies (Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay): exactly the first substantive group. The third cluster presented in the table includes nine countries: the seven countries experiencing acute political crises during the years 2000–07, plus Guatemala, that (as was pointed out above) had no crisis in 2000–07, but did have one in the first period (May 1993),[30] plus Honduras, which has been spared so far, though its political situation is becoming increasingly difficult.[31] These are all the countries of the "critical" and "risk"

zones of Figure 1. The remaining cluster (the second one, five countries) includes all the countries of the intermediate group (neither consolidated, nor experiencing crises) minus Guatemala and Honduras. Thus, Table 5 amounts to an even better description of the facts than Figure1.

This description is robust, particularly regarding the group of countries included in the third cluster of Table 5 (the countries of the "critical" and "risk" zones of Figure 1). As might be expected from the distances reported in Table 5, this cluster is very closely knit. If cluster analyses are conducted to form four, five, or even six groups, in all three analyses one of the resulting groups is exactly the same nine-country cluster. If a different cluster analysis is conducted (the so-called "hierarchical" procedure, which does not specifies a priori the number of clusters), the same nine-country cluster reappears. The results above are indeed robust, then, and it may be concluded that in continental Latin America, at the beginning of the 21st century, acute political crises probably are a conjoint result of the unsatisfied expectations of citizens and of the still precarious nature of most of the region's minimalist democracies. This idea is scarcely new or surprising; the relevance of the preceding analysis (if any) is that: (a) it assigns a reasonably precise empirical meaning to that idea, within a consistent conceptual framework; (b) it shows the very strong (almost "deterministic") nature of the link between the likely causes and their consequences, the crises, and (c) it does so providing a *single* explanatory model for both acute crises and their opposite, the success stories of consolidated democracies.

Finally, before probing the implications of this analysis it should be underscored that its two causal factors are not events, but processes. In each of them there is an accumulation of events (expectations persistently unsatisfied during at least a generation, and the building of a working, autonomous judicial branch during a similar or perhaps even larger timeframe). These causes, thus, are not direct, "efficient" causes; they rather create the opportunities and increase the likelihood for their consequences (the crises) to actually occur. The *direct* causes are the goals, decisions, and actions of the actors whose conflicts finally unleash the crises. The causal factors of the present explanation accumulate inflammable substances; once they reach dangerous levels, many particular events may provide the spark that lights the fire. The relationship between causal factors and the resultant crises is in the end probabilistic; even very dangerous situations do not

necessarily end in a crisis, because some circumstances, as the quality of leadership, for example, may prevent it. Nevertheless, as long as the basic causal processes are not reversed (or begin to be reversed), crises become increasingly likely. When the existing order cannot process accumulated grievances, some leaders (old or new) will emerge to head the protests of aggrieved actors, and other leaders and actors will attack them . Some will attempt to attend to those demands, some to end the existing order, others will defend that order; among all those actors, some (or many) will see an opportunity to further their own goals. If established leaders cannot cope, there will usually be many aspiring leaders ready to capture or create their own opportunities. The crises themselves are attempts at resolution of those conflicts (failed or successful). Given enough time, the likelihood of a crisis becomes higher, and because of this the final relationship between the causal processes and their resulting crises becomes so strong as to look "deterministic."

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Robust as it is, this model could be wrong. The events themselves (the crises) and their associations with their assumed causal factors (unsatisfied expectations of citizens, and the precarious nature of most of the region's minimalist democracies) are historical facts, but the explanation of those associations may or may not be correct. If not, all that is left is an accurate *description* of individual events and their associations with their supposed causes, but linked by an erroneous analytical framework. *Assuming* the explanation is reasonably accurate for the medium term (say, for at least three decades after the end of the cold war) several consequences follow, some of them concerning the recent past, others involving future events. The implications concerning the recent past, or "post-dictions," may be checked, and if they are confirmed, the explanation itself becomes more convincing. The consequences involving the medium-term future result from the logic of the proposed explanation; they describe a relatively likely future, or at least a plausible one. Both types of consequences, past and future, are thus worth probing.

“Post-dictions”: Parties and Party Systems

Factors that cause acute political crises should affect parties and party systems. It should be expected that the accumulation of unsatisfied expectations intensifies voters’ search for solutions. In (at least) minimalist democracies this may lead first to governing parties and established oppositions changing their roles with increasing speed and bigger swings. As things do not improve, at some point this may lead to experimenting with new, untested alternatives (which may look risky for some actors). If many voters look for different alternatives in a systematic way, in large numbers, far beyond “normal” rates of changing preferences, then, by definition, *electoral volatility* (the amount of change in voters’ choices) must increase.[32] That is, electoral volatility prior to, or approximately simultaneously with, the occurrence of acute political crises.

Is this link between electoral volatility and acute political crises right? Michael Coppedge (2007) discusses the recent evolution of several characteristics (including volatility[33]) for eleven Latin American countries, those having the longest electoral experience.[34] Coppedge’s sample includes five of the seven countries experiencing acute political crises during the years 2000–07 (Nicaragua and Paraguay are not in his sample). According to Coppedge’s estimations, electoral volatility followed the expected pattern in these five countries. Venezuela’s volatility was stable from 1978 to 1988 (14% +/- 2), and jumped to 37% in 1993, just one year after the two crises of 1992. Since then it has remained high (47% in 2005, higher than the average for the eleven countries, 39%). Peru, with extremely high historical levels of volatility, averaged 52% between 1978 and 1990 (its highest value, 61%, occurred in 1978), and jumped to 75% in 1992, the year of Fujimori’s coup. Since then it has remained high by Latin American standards, though lower than its own average of 1978–90. Ecuador, as Peru, had high volatility in the past, but from 1986 to 1994 (five elections) its electoral volatility was stable, around 20% (its highest value was 22% in 1990); in 1996 (one year before the crisis of 1997) it increased to 27%, and then, except for 1998, went on increasing (57% in 2002, 62% in 2006), as the country experienced crises in 2000, 2005, and 2007. In Argentina the pattern is present as well, but less clear-cut. Average volatility from 1985 to 1995 was 23%, jumped to 50% in 1997, fell to 24% in 1999, and then began to grow steadily again: 36% in 2001 (the year of the crisis), 48% in 2003, 56 % in 2005.[35] Finally, Bolivia also clearly

fits the expected pattern. From 1989 to 1997 (three elections) its average volatility was 35% (highest value: 39%); then jumped to 52% in 2002 (just one year before the crisis of 2003) and to 67% in 2005 (the year of the second Bolivian crisis). In short, in all five countries that had acute political crises in the years 2000–07 and are included in Coppedge's sample, electoral volatility on the dates of their respective crises followed the expected pattern (high and increasing, with regard to their own previous levels).

To properly ascertain the meaning of this result, the analysis should focus on what happened with electoral volatility in the remaining six countries of Coppedge's sample that did not have crises. This is not a real comparison, since in these countries there are no critical dates linked to predicted increases in volatility, but at least levels and trends may be compared. In this group of six countries only Colombia had recently electoral volatility levels comparable to those of the other group of countries. Colombian volatility has been increasing since 1994, reaching about 50% in 2002 and 2006 (though these figures are lower than that of 1990, 57%). Three of the remaining five countries (Mexico, Brazil, and Chile) show very clear trends of *decreasing* volatility, and their most recent values are significantly lower than those quoted so far: 18% in Mexico (2006), 14% in Brazil (2006), and 7% in Chile (2005).

The two remaining cases, Costa Rica and Uruguay, are particularly interesting for present purposes. During the past half century Costa Rica has experienced three similar periods of relatively high volatility (according to its own standards): 1958–62 (33% +/- 5), 1974–78 (31% +/- 3) and 2002–06 (31% +/- 4). Volatility was lower in the intervening years 1966–70 (11%, on average) and 1982–98 (five elections with an average volatility of 16%). There are *two* significant differences between Costa Rica's volatility and those of the countries experiencing acute crises. First, even at its peaks, volatility is lower. Second, those peaks seem to be episodes of relatively high voter dissatisfaction, and these episodes have been resolved so far through changes in policies, in the governing party, and/or in the party system itself. The last peak reflected the rise of a new center-left party, the Citizen Action Party (*Partido Acción Ciudadana*, or PAC), led by Ottón Solís, a former National Liberation Party (*Partido Liberación Nacional*, PLN) congressman and minister. The PAC defied the established role of the two leading parties, PLN and the Social Christian Union Party (*Partido Unidad Social Cristiana*, or

PUSC), which dominated political life during the last thirty years (since 1978 each won the presidency four times). In the 2002 presidential election, Solís won 27% of the vote, forcing (for the first time) a second-round election (won by PUSC's Abel Pacheco). In 2006, polls and most observers expected a landslide for PLN's Oscar Arias, who won, indeed, instead with just 40.9% of the vote against 39.8% for PAC's Solís. Thus, in Costa Rica unsatisfied expectations were "processed" within existing democratic institutions (provoking neither crises nor breakdowns), though they did change the party system. The same conclusion applies to Uruguay. Uruguay had very low volatility from 1966 to 1999 (10% +/- 4), which suddenly doubled in 2004 (27%), the year in which the historical left (the Broad Front, or *Frente Amplio*), led by Tabaré Vázquez, won presidential elections for the first time in the country's history. As in Costa Rica, this volatility is low by Latin American standards, and it reflects changes in the party system resulting from accumulated unsatisfied expectations. Furthermore, the Broad Front shares several traits with Costa Rica's PAC (though Vázquez won, whereas Solís "almost" won). Costa Rican and Uruguayan political changes and increased volatility are thus *normal* changes occurring within a working institutional framework, changes that ultimately reflect significant turns in citizens' preferences.

In several senses what happened in Colombia is similar to events in Uruguay and particularly to those in Costa Rica. Colombia's recent high volatility (2002 and 2006) reflects the political ascent of President Alvaro Uribe, first elected in 2002, and reelected, after a constitutional reform, in 2006. Uribe is a former liberal; regarding party affiliations Uribe is more akin to Costa Rica's Solís than to Uruguay's Vázquez. Uribe won *against* the traditional parties (as Solís attempted and failed, though in 2006 he was very close to winning). In spite of Colombia's oversize political problems, dissatisfaction with both traditional parties led to significant political changes, including Uribe's two presidencies, *without* acute political crises.

Latin America's consolidated democracies show different situations in this regard. Costa Rica and Uruguay confronted increasing voter dissatisfaction, as shown by their increasing electoral volatility, which led to significant political changes. In Chile surely there is dissatisfaction too, as shown by some problems experienced by Michelle Bachelet's government, but volatility has been systematically decreasing. Furthermore,

Chile is the *only* case of continuity of the same governing coalition since democratic restoration. This is surely linked to the fact that for many voters right-wing parties were too close to the unpopular military regime led by Augusto Pinochet, but it must also have something to do with the fact that growth of Chile's GDP per capita from 1975 to 2003 (4.0, Table 3) was almost *triple* that of its closest follower (Colombia, 1.4). Thus, Chilean center-left governments were in a far better position to attend to citizens' expectations (and to develop social policies) than those of all other Latin American countries.

In short, the argument explaining acute political crises led to empirically correct post-dictions concerning electoral volatility in Latin American countries. Volatility was higher in countries experiencing acute crises, and increased considerably just before or around their respective crises. All other countries in Coppedge's sample (except Colombia) showed lower levels of volatility. In three of them (Mexico, Brazil, and Chile), volatility has been consistently decreasing. In the two remaining countries, Costa Rica and Uruguay, both consolidated democracies, increased volatility in recent years produced significant political changes. These changes occurred within their respective institutional frameworks, and reflected larger than usual changes in citizens' preferences. Thus, the model presented in section 3 also suggests an explanation for some significant differences (in electoral volatility and changes in the party system) observed between the regions' consolidated democracies.

Democratic Instability 2008–15

As seen above, the variables explaining acute political crises are medium- to long-term processes. This is true both for the conceptual characterization of those variables (unsatisfied expectations; advancement on the path from minimalist to fuller forms of democracy) and for their actual indicators (growth of GDP per capita 1975–2003; judicial-legal effectiveness). The explaining factors are neither volatile nor highly sensitive to short-term actions. In the short term they can change only incrementally. "Real" change is the result of the sustained accumulation of incremental changes pointing in the same direction. In practice this means that the cells of Figure 1 are "sticky:" once you enter into one of them, it is not easy to exit. In particular: it is difficult to exit of them *quickly*. This is good news for the countries in the safer zones of Figure 1: they can make

several mistakes before having to pay for them (the role of this "stickiness" is thus similar to that of Hirschman's classic "voice"). But it is bad news for the countries in the riskier zones: they have to toil consistently, accumulatively, in order to leave their cells. In the meantime, lapses may be common (as seen in Tables 1 and 2).

Thus, although most Latin American countries have benefited from the economic bonanza of the last years, for many of them it is not a "solution," but merely a first step. Furthermore, in many countries progress on the institutional front seems to be slow or nil. Hence, "more of the same" should be expected in the next eight-year period, 2008–15, particularly if and when that economic bonanza ends. Acute political crises are unlikely in the now consolidated democracies (Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay). They are relatively improbable in the countries of the "probably safe" zone of Figure 1 (Brazil, El Salvador, Panama, and Mexico) and in Colombia,[36] though they are more at risk than consolidated democracies. At the opposite end of Figure 1 (following its main diagonal), crises are most likely in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela, and less likely in Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Argentina (though they are still at risk). This reasoning does not anticipate the *number* of countries experiencing crises (i.e., it could be similar to those observed in 1992–99 or in 2000–07, lower, or higher), but it does anticipate *relative probabilities* of experiencing a crisis. Eventual deviations from these expected probabilities might occur and, if so, they should follow the observed behavior of the explanatory variables (unsatisfied expectations; advancement on the path from minimalist to fuller forms of democracy). Significant changes in electoral volatility may serve as a short-term early warning, particularly for countries in the riskier zones.[37]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As discussed above, in the substance, if not the words, most observers agree that at the beginning of the 21st century all (or almost all) continental Latin American countries were at least minimalist democracies, and that thirty years ago almost none of them were so. This had never been seen in Latin American history, and from a normative point of view it is good news. But many of these new minimalist democracies have experienced acute political crises. True, those crises did not lead to nondemocratic regimes (and that is good news too), but the countries experiencing them are not *stable* democracies either,

much less consolidated ones. This is an improvement with regard to the region's past, but it is still far from the (normative) goal of stable, consolidated democracies.

This rather pessimistic view is partially true for the three countries that were already (at least) minimalist democracies at the beginning of the third wave. One of them (Costa Rica) became a consolidated democracy (though some observers would say it had been one since the beginning), one (Venezuela) has experienced three acute crises since 1992 (and as noted above, some analysts believe Venezuela is no longer a democracy, not even of the minimalist sort), and the third (Colombia) lies in between, neither consolidated nor unstable (that is, without acute crises), but improving, according to several indicators (such as the Freedom House indexes of political rights and civil liberties) during the last few years.

A first look suggests the pessimistic view rings truer for the remaining fourteen countries, minimalist democracies born or restored during the third wave. Two of them (Chile and Uruguay) have become consolidated democracies. Seven countries (Guatemala, Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia) have experienced acute political crises, and the remaining five countries (Brazil, Mexico, Panama, El Salvador, and Honduras) lie in between, neither consolidated nor unstable. Thus, out of those fourteen new or restored minimalist democracies just two (14%) became consolidated. An intermediate group (five countries, 36%) includes democracies not yet consolidated, but so far stable. The countries of the biggest group (seven, 50%) have not been able to stabilize their minimalist democracies, since they have all experienced acute political crises.

New or Restored, Unstable Democracies

Therefore, a preliminary appraisal of the meaning of minimalist democracies for the prospects of democracy in the region must begin by probing what happened in the biggest group of countries, those experiencing acute political crises. Two of these seven countries (Paraguay and Nicaragua) look rather stagnant. During the last four years their Freedom House indexes of political rights and civil liberties remained stable, at modest averages (3, in both cases, on a scale from 1, best, through 7, worst). To make real progress, Paraguay, after electing Lugo, the nation's first definitely non-Colorado president, still

has to survive the experience institutionally. Preliminary signals suggest it will not be easy. Nicaragua already made that jump, from Ortega to Violeta Chamorro and back, with Alemán and Bolaños in between, but after the first test (from Ortega to Chamorro), it had two acute crises, and most external observers tend to agree that institution building has been replaced by pacts between the two main parties (and their caudillos). Little or no progress has been observed during recent years.

Guatemala improved its Freedom House average slightly in 2007, and in early 2008 a center-left president (Álvaro Colom) was sworn in, for the first time in more than half a century. What matters here is not the precise ideological identity of the new president, but his position with regard to the conservative, relatively closed, elite establishment that has ruled Guatemala in recent decades. This is a significant change, but in too early a stage for its consequences to be seen.

Three of the remaining countries, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, are the scenes of six of the ten crises occurring between 2000 and 2007. Hence they seem to be difficult places for democratic development, particularly Ecuador (three crises: 2000, 2005, and 2007) and Bolivia (two crises: 2003 and 2005). Nevertheless, consider the following. All of these crises were nontraditional, because they involved decisive or almost decisive (and successful) mass protests leading to illegal or "borderline" sacking of presidents (almost always; in just one case, Ecuador 2007, they unseated legislators). These crises did not come out of the blue, for increasing political participation and protest was not limited to the streets. Voters had been actively looking for change "within the rulebook," as attested by high electoral volatility levels that jumped even higher just before the crises (see above). According to Mainwaring (2006, pp. 312 and ff.), since 1978 (i.e., since the birth or restoration of minimalist democracies in the three countries), "there has been a dramatic expansion of democratic representation" in them. This is true because of "the massive incorporation of new citizens, qualitative changes in citizenship, new opportunities for representation made possible by the introduction of direct elections for governors and mayors and by other political reforms, and new opportunities for representation of indigenous peoples" (loc. cit.). In particular, electoral participation, estimated as the ratio of votes cast to total population, increased significantly. The enfranchisement of the illiterate "led to a massive increase" in electoral participation in

Peru and Ecuador, and to a pronounced increase in Bolivia as well (p. 313). These facts (added to the final results of the crises themselves: minimalist democracies, not nondemocratic regimes) suggest that in these three countries there is real progress towards democracy, instability notwithstanding, at least from a normative point of view. In Peru, in particular, the last crisis marked the restoration of a minimalist democracy, undoing Fujimori's coup. Throughout non-institutionalized, messy processes, people are having *more* influence on the selection of their leaders and on the general direction of their policies than in the past, even though their behavior after the crises may be rather "delegative" in O'Donnell's sense (O'Donnell 1994). This, in turn, means that even *during* these crises some democratic ends are being achieved, though by dubious means. From a normative point of view there is actual progress towards fuller democracies (though not yet stability). Finally, Argentina, according to most observers, made significant progress after its crisis, and its Freedom House indexes in 2007 were among the highest in the region (2 in 2007; only the consolidated cases plus Panama had higher scores).

Hence, four out of the seven unstable democracies (or perhaps five, if Guatemala is included in this group) are making progress. This seems to be a far better result than at first sight could be expected. In all these cases becoming minimalist democracies was instrumental for making further progress, because it legitimated and opened the way for more political participation and for demanding real observance of rights previously nonexistent or ignored. Sometimes this led to dramatic progress, as in the core Andean countries.

New or Restored Democracies, Consolidated or at Least Stable

According to most observers, three of the five stable but non-consolidated democracies (Brazil, Mexico, and Panama) have made real progress in recent years (except for those who believe that Andrés Manuel López Obrador was illegally deprived of Mexico's presidency in the last election). In all three countries initial minimalist democracies were also instrumental for making further progress. El Salvador and Honduras, on the contrary, look rather stagnant. Finally, the two remaining countries (Chile and Uruguay) became consolidated democracies. In both cases it is very clear that since the beginning, even

though conditioned by the legacies of the preceding authoritarian regimes, the restoration of basic democratic principles (embodied initially in minimalist democracies) unleashed processes that could not be stopped without breaking democracy itself.[38]

Final Conclusion

According to this account the result is rather positive: nine, or perhaps ten out of the fourteen new or restored minimalist democracies have been advancing towards fuller democracies, and the initial, "minimalist" forms were instrumental for those processes. This answers (right or wrongly) two of the central questions stated above: in Latin America, the birth or restoration of minimalist democracies had politically significant consequences, both substantive *and* normative, even in several unstable democracies experiencing acute political crises. Minimalist democracy is helping to impel democracy beyond minimalism.

In more general terms, finally, this discussion suggests two main conclusions. First, in barely democratic or nondemocratic contexts it makes sense to start studying the problems of democracy building from a minimalist definition. Second, once "minimalist" democracies are in place, however, in order to fully advance towards stability and consolidation it is necessary to build on the more stringent requisites of *non*-minimalist definitions of democracy: on one hand, more extended *political* requisites, as those implied in higher judicial-legal effectiveness; on the other hand, better and quicker answers to growing popular *expectations*, including, of course, better life conditions (which in turn require increasing GDP per capita). If these conclusions are correct, according to the first it is not necessary to define democracy from the start to include (a) more stringent political attributes than those of the minimalist definition, and (b) socioeconomic requisites. This is right but somehow misleading, for according to the second conclusion, these other requisites are needed just to *stabilize* minimalist democracies.

ENDNOTES

[1] Even in rich Switzerland, home of some old and traditional forms of democracy, women could not vote during many of those years, for example.

[2] Przeworski et al. used the same term, which had already been used by Huntington (1991): "[T]his conception of democracy in terms of contested elections for executive and legislative offices is *clearly minimalist*," though they did not elaborate (Przeworski et al. 2000, p. 33; emphasis added). For some observers, however, and for good reasons, these definitions are *less* than minimalist.

[3] E.g., in 1996 Linz and Stepan (1996, chapter 10) described Uruguay as a consolidated (though risk-prone) democracy.

[4] As of 2003, according to UNDP, all continental Latin American countries "fulfill the basic requirements of a democratic regime," whereas 25 years back only three of them were democracies (UNDP 2005, p. 26).

[5] There is another difficult case, though on different grounds. It might be argued that Colombia does not satisfy the classic Weberian definition of a state, since it does not monopolize coercion in sizable parts of its territory. *If* Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's dictum "no state, no democracy" (Linz and Stepan 1996) had no exceptions, *then* Colombia could not be a democracy.

[6] Another controversial point concerns the dates upon which different countries may be considered electoral democracies. E.g., Payne et al. (2002, p. 3, Table 1) suggest transition dates for all continental countries, some of which (as Mexico, 1982) are surely debatable. This is not relevant here, however, because the alternative dates that might be considered *precede* the main period analyzed in this study, 2000–07.

[7] Huntington's three "waves" are 1825–1926, 1943–62, and a third wave beginning in 1974 that was still ongoing when he wrote his book (1990–91). According to Huntington, four Latin American countries were part of the first wave: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay.

[8] Tilly's periods are 1850–99, 1900–49, 1950–79, and 1980–2004 (Tilly 2007, pp. 40–44), though it is unclear whether the fourth period is somewhat artificial (because it is at least partly determined by the unavailability of his initial indicators of rapid democratization). In practice he analyzes the fourth period "as if" it were comparable to the former three.

[9] A rare, optimistic remark is Tilly's observation about his fourth period of rapid democratization, which "calls attention to continuing democratization (now *looking more definitive* than before) in Latin America" (Tilly 2007, p. 44, emphasis added).

[10] The most recent analysis of Latin American impeachments (1992–2004), including an updated bibliography, is Pérez-Liñán (2007).

[11] It could be argued that the two coups are part of a single crisis. But the second attempt came nine months after the first, with different leaders, and both involved bloodshed (78 reported deaths in the first attempt, 230 in the second). The first coup is the most remembered now, because of Chávez's direct leadership, but both were significant events, and in certain aspects (such as reported deaths) the second had more consequences than the first.

[12] *Keesing's Record of World Events*, V. 38, No. 12, 39231–39232. *Keesing's* titled its Nicaraguan notes of December 1992, and January 1993, "Nicaragua: Political Crisis."

[13] This is a tentative conclusion. It is a matter of judgment, and for such judgments to be solidly grounded more detailed information is necessary than that provided by the sources quoted above. As will be seen below, however, this approximation is good enough for the main purpose here, which is comparing the first (1992–99) and second (2000–07) periods.

[14] Mass participation may be decisive (or almost decisive) in unleashing the crises, defining their results, or both.

[15] Elites *may* be momentarily absent on one or more sides of an acute political crisis, just because they are being created during the course of events. But the building of truly new elites 'in real time,' as events unfold, is rare. This may happen in some prerevolutionary or revolutionary situations, themselves not very frequent.

[16] As Catherine Conaghan (2007, p. 77) commented: "[a] routine evolved to rid the system of discredited presidents: protesters take to the streets in the capital city of Quito, legislators spin a legal justification for their conspiracy, and the armed forces stand by in tacit approval as the beleaguered executive abandons the presidential palace."

[17] "Ecuador: Correa v Congress," *The Economist*, March 15, 2007.

[18] "Mr. Rodríguez, the third in line for the presidency, was seen as the best choice to defuse the furious uprisings that have paralyzed Bolivia for three weeks," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2005.

[19] "U.S. Envoy Goes to Nicaragua to Back Embattled Leader," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2005.

[20] This, of course, has already been pointed out many times; "Latin America seems to be transforming itself into the region of failed presidencies" (Nolte 2005, p. 197). Arturo Valenzuela (2004) and FLACSO (2004) discuss these crises in similar terms.

[21] "No.1 Quits in Bolivia, and Protesters Scorn Nos. 2 and 3," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2005, emphasis added.

[22] This is true for the whole region and for its competitive regimes in particular (Pérez–Liñán 2007, p. 43, Table 3.1).

[23] A preliminary version of the arguments of this section was presented in González (2006).

[24] Goldstone et al. consider five main types of political regime: full autocracies, partial autocracies, factionalized partial democracies, non-factionalized partial democracies, and full democracies. A partial democracy is "factionalized" if political competition is dominated by groups (whatever its nature) and all, or most of those groups pursue particularistic agendas, that is, agendas favoring only or mostly group members. According to their results, full autocracies are the most stable regime type, and factionalized partial democracies are the least stable.

[25] Legitimacy of *results* is thus different from legitimacy of *origins*, a political concept. Recent literature on Latin American politics normally uses "legitimacy" in purely political terms.

[26] Calderón (2003) is the general reference on the effects of globalization in Latin America.

[27] This is an old idea; Friedman quotes Adam Smith stating it clearly in *The Wealth of Nations*.

[28] Theoretically it might occur that equality increases (and with it, living conditions improve for many) even in a stagnant (or contracting) economy, but historically this has happened in few, truly exceptional circumstances.

[29] When exactly the same type of analysis is conducted ordering the countries according to infant mortality (the "absolute" indicator for living conditions in the Task Force study), no relationship is found between infant mortality and acute political crises. Most countries experiencing crises (four) are found in the intermediate third, one in the best third, and just two in the worst (i.e., that with the highest level of infant mortality).

[30] And its future is uncertain. As Mitchell Seligson (2005, p. 230) wrote, "many of the fundamental elements of the peace agreements [of 1996], aimed at breaking down the barriers to full participation by the indigenous population, by stimulating development of their human capital, have not been realized, and it is difficult to imagine how and when they could be achieved."

[31] On one hand, all professional surveys show dissatisfaction is rising, and party identifications with the two major, traditional parties (*liberales* and *nacionalistas*) are falling, though still there is no visible replacement for any of them. On the other hand, the last elections have produced presidents without a legislative majority. The Latin American experience suggests that in

Honduras's situation this is a potentially dangerous combination. In fact, the reflections leading to this article began as an attempt to explain Honduran political "exceptionalism" when compared to its neighbors (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua): why Honduras, being so similar to its neighbors (and particularly to Nicaragua) on social and economic grounds, has so far managed to avoid the conflicts that plagued them (Achard and González 2006).

[32] This kind of volatility might be called "from below." In some cases volatility may be caused "from above" too, by the decisions of leaders manipulating parties to their own benefit (including creating new parties and abandoning old ones). Such attempts may occur anywhere, but purely elite-manipulated initiatives may succeed only in particular contexts (normally with little or no democratic history and low party identifications).

[33] Measured by Pedersen's Index of Volatility: from one election to the next, it adds the changes in all the parties' share of the vote (in absolute value), divided by two (to avoid double counting, since one party's gain is the loss of other parties).

[34] This includes all of continental South America, minus Paraguay, plus Costa Rica and Mexico.

[35] The latter figures reflect some peculiar characteristics of Peronism and somehow may "overstate" volatility.

[36] In Colombia's case this is a rather theoretical statement conditioned by the unique nature of its internal conflicts.

[37] This paper was completed in March 2008. By the time of its final revision (early September 2008) events had been consistent with these expectations: increasing problems that might lead to acute political crises in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay (after President Lugo's assumption of power), and Venezuela (some observers would add Argentina to this listing), all of them in the "critical" or "risk" zones.

[38] That all-or-nothing quality is linked to the fact that before the breakdowns of the 1970s Chile and Uruguay already had established democracies. As it has been noted, *re*-democratizations have significant advantages over first-time attempts at building democracies. E.g., parties and party systems "are usually more readily reconstituted to operate in a democracy in such cases, and other political institutions, such as the organization of legislatures (…) all fall more easily into place." (J. Samuel Valenzuela 1992, p. 79)

REFERENCES

Achard, Diego, and Luis E. González (2006). "Política y desarrollo en Honduras, 2006–2009: Los escenarios posibles," in Achard and González, eds., *Política y desarrollo en Honduras, 2006–2009*. Tegucigalpa: PNUD-ASDI-AECI-DFID.

Burdman, Julio, Arturo Valenzuela, Rosendo Fraga, Andrés Allamand and Pamela Figueroa (2004). "Latinoamérica 2020: pensando los escenarios de largo plazo." Conclusions of a Seminar (Santiago de Chile, June 7–8, 2004) of the U.S. National Intelligence Council Project *Global Trends 2020.*

Calderón, Fernando, coord. (2003). *¿Es sostenible la globalización en América Latina? Debates con Manuel Castells*. México, PNUD-Bolivia / Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2 vols.

Conaghan, Catherine (2007). "Ecuador's Gamble: Can Correa Govern?" *Current History* Vol. 106, No. 697, 77–82.

Coppedge, Michael (2007). "Continuity and Change in Latin American Party Systems," Taiwan Journal of Democracy Vol. 3 No. 2, 119–149.

Dahl, Robert A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

FLACSO (2004). "Gobernabilidad en América Latina: Informe regional 2004," FLACSO - Santiago de Chile.

Freedom House (2008). "Freedom in the World 2008," www.freedomhouse.org.

______ (2007). "Freedom in the World: Country Ratings 1972–2007," www.freedomhouse.org.

Friedman, Benjamin M. (2005). *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*. New York: Knopf / Borzoi Books.

Goldstone, Jack A., Robert H. Bates, Ted Robert Gurr, Michael Lustik, Monty G. Marshall, Jay Ufelder, and Mark Woodward (2005). "A Global Forecasting

Model of Political Instability." Paper presented at the 2005 Meeting of the American Political Studies Association, Washington, D.C. (September 1–4).

González, Luis E. (2006). "Las crisis políticas de América Latina en los primeros años del siglo," in Achard and González, eds., *Política y desarrollo en Honduras, 2006–2009*. Tegucigalpa: PNUD-ASDI-AECI-DFID.

Huntington, Samuel P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Kaufmann, Daniel (2004). "Corruption, Governance and Security: Challenges for the Rich Countries and the World," World Bank, *Global Competitiveness Report 2004/2005*, 83–102.

Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan (1996). *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

______, eds. (1978). *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Mainwaring, Scott (2006). "State Deficiencies, Party Competition, and Confidence in Democratic Representation in the Andes," in Mainwaring, Bejarano and Pizarro Leongómez, eds., *The Crisis of Democratic Representation in the Andes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mainwaring, Scott, and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán (2005). "Latin American Democratization since 1978: Democratic Transitions, Breakdowns and Erosions," in Frances Hagopian and Scott Mainwaring, eds., *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America: Advances and Setbacks*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Millett, Richard L. (1994). "Central America's Enduring Conflicts," *Current History* Vol. 93, No. 581 (March), 124–128.

Nolte, Detlef (2005). "América Latina: ¿instituciones políticas en crisis?, *Diálogo Político* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Junio), 197–221.

O'Donnell, Guillermo (2007). "Polyarchies and the (Un)Rule of Law in Latin America," in his *Dissonances: Democratic Critiques of Democracy*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

______. (1994). "Delegative Democracy?" *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 5, No. 1 (January), 55–69.

O'Donnell, Guillermo, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, eds. (1986). *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 4 vols.

Payne, J. Mark, Daniel Zovatto G., Fernando Carrillo Flórez, and Andrés Allamand Zavala (2002). *Democracies in Development: Politics and Reform in Latin America*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Pérez-Liñán, Aníbal (2007). *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Philip, George (2003). *Democracy in Latin America*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press–Blackwell.

PNUD (2005). *Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano 2005. La cooperación internacional ante una encrucijada*. Madrid: PNUD–Ediciones Mundi-Prensa.

Przeworski, Adam, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi (2000). *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1959–1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Seligson, Mitchell A. (2005). "Democracy on Ice: The Multiple Challenges of Guatemala's Peace Process," in Frances Hagopian and Scott Mainwaring, eds., *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America: Advances and Setbacks*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stein, Ernesto, Mariano Tomassi, Koldo Echebarría, Eduardo Lora, and Mark Payne, coords. (2005). *The Politics of Policies: Economic and Social Progress in Latin America*. Washington: Inter–American Development Bank and David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University.

Tilly, Charles (2007). *Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

UNDP (2005). *Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy*. New York: UNDP.

Valenzuela, Arturo (2004). "Latin American Presidencies Interrupted," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 15, No. 4 (October), 5–19.

Valenzuela, J. Samuel (1992). "Democratic Consolidation in Post Transitional Settings: Notion, Process and Facilitating Conditions," in S. Mainwaring, G. O'Donnell and J. S. Valenzuela, *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*. Notre Dame, IN: Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies–University of Notre Dame Press.