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Delegative Democracy Revisited

LATIN AMERICA'S PROBLEMS OF SUCCESS

Juan Pablo Luna and Alberto Vergara

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In recent years, the state of democracy in Latin America has been the topic of much debate. Some observers believe that a democratic reversal is underway due to the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism. Others argue that democracy has become so deeply entrenched that even leaders with authoritarian leanings must exercise power through ballots and constitutions, not bullets and coups. The preceding essays seek to shed light on the matter by examining how six Latin American political regimes have evolved over the last two decades.

These essays all draw upon the late Guillermo O'Donnell's classic 1994 *Journal of Democracy* essay on "delegative democracy," and in particular the ideas of "horizontal" and "vertical" accountability that he sketched there. What can they tell us about how power is wielded in Latin America today? Horizontal accountability means the ability of other state agencies (the legislature, courts, and so on) to check presidential power. Vertical accountability refers to something that is imposed "from below" by the voters. According to O'Donnell, representative democracy features both kinds of accountability: Both state institutions and citizens restrain presidents.

For O'Donnell, "delegative democracy" results when vertical accountability is strong but its horizontal cousin is weak: A popular president, likely chosen during an economic crisis, rules as a "savior of the nation" empowered by emergency and the people's trust to brush off normal democratic "checks and balances." Yet this is only one of several possible scenarios. After O'Donnell's essay appeared, scholars fo-

cused on horizontal accountability and left the notion of vertical accountability relatively untheorized.

Several democracies in Latin America today suffer from the kind of imbalance that O'Donnell identified back in 1994. Specifically, they feature strong presidents with strong electoral mandates and social legitimacy, and their problem is poor horizontal accountability. Catherine Conaghan describes this dynamic in the case of President Rafael Correa's Ecuador. The directly elected leader now overshadows liberal institutions to such a degree, she argues, that the regime has turned authoritarian. Correa faces little pressure to respond either to other branches of government or to citizens. In the same vein, Alberto Vergara and Aaron Watanabe confirm O'Donnell's observation that the regime headed by Alberto Fujimori in Peru during the 1990s was authoritarian and featured low levels of accountability, even if it permitted political competition and enjoyed, for some time, strong popular backing.

The cases of Bolivia and Colombia illustrate different trajectories. Santiago Anria stresses that in Bolivia, horizontal accountability has not fared well even as the political system has opened up to include disadvantaged and long-marginalized sectors of the population. President Evo Morales, Anria argues, has overseen a decline in horizontal accountability, yet he still faces checks that often come in the form of protests by elements of his own base. Lindsay Mayka's analysis of Colombia highlights the surprising ability of horizontal-accountability institutions there to endure despite extreme political violence. Even Alvaro Uribe, a strong president whose security policies made him formidably popular, had to accept legal limits such as a constitutional ban on his ability to run for an additional term.

Then there are the clear horizontal-accountability success stories. Chile, as Juan Pablo Luna describes it, exemplifies the interplay of checks and balances among functioning liberal institutions. Brazil's experience, as related by Frances Hagopian, also reveals the role that institutional strengthening can play in making horizontal accountability strong and steadfast. And Vergara and Watanabe argue that post-Fujimori Peru has been a place where other branches of government have in fact held presidents accountable.

Together, these six cases refute the claim that Latin America is witnessing a general trend toward authoritarianism.¹ The true picture is mixed: Horizontal accountability has unexpectedly eroded in some countries, consolidated in others, and at least made progress toward consolidation in still others. Some countries have done worse than O'Donnell feared in 1994 (these include Venezuela especially, but also Ecuador and possibly Bolivia). Others have done better, managing to sidestep the threat of an overweening presidency.

Looking back from more than two decades on, what did O'Donnell get right and what did he get wrong? First, he was correct to insist that politi-

cal regimes do not follow a linear, irreversible trajectory from authoritarianism to low-quality and then high-quality democracy. Diminished democracies can become fully representative regimes by recovering proficient horizontal accountability (Brazil after Fernando Collor de Mello, Colombia under Juan Manuel Santos). Democracies can witness the erosion of both types of accountability until they cross the “nondemocracy” threshold, as in Alberto Fujimori’s Peru, and in contemporary Venezuela. As Catherine Conaghan notes, a number of authors have begun to depict Rafael Correa’s Ecuador as another instance of authoritarianism. Or, as O’Donnell pointedly argued, different regimes can simply persist despite whatever flaws or ambiguities they may have as regards either kind of accountability.

O’Donnell was on shakier ground in claiming that delegative democracy is a child of economic crisis. It may have seemed that way back in the structural-adjustment 1990s, but in many places Latin America’s recent economic boom has done the reverse of what O’Donnell expected: It has fostered rather than crushed the delegative dynamics that he decried.² Delegative democracy, in other words, is not a function of socioeconomic conditions. Recent increases in the “delegativeness” of Bolivia and Ecuador (as well as Venezuela and, arguably, Argentina) came during sustained periods of unprecedented economic growth.

If delegative democracy can occur under varying socioeconomic conditions, what does this mean for the widely accepted notion that there has been a trade-off going on in Latin America between substantive socioeconomic incorporation and traditional liberal institutions? Is there a conflict between respect for the liberal dimensions of democracy and the urgent desire of the leftist governments that won elections from 1998 onward to bring reform to a highly unequal continent?³ Our six cases furnish evidence that social incorporation and liberal respect for individual rights move on independent pathways even within the same country. There is one case in which a popular president tried to erode horizontal accountability while not pushing for substantive socioeconomic incorporation (Uribe in Colombia). There is a pair of other cases in which improved socioeconomic incorporation has gone hand-in-hand with improved horizontal accountability (Brazil and Chile). And there is a case in which significant advances toward equity and symbolic incorporation have been accompanied by a clear weakening of horizontal-accountability institutions (Bolivia under Morales).

In sum, how a polity does at cultivating and applying both horizontal and vertical accountability has little to do with either economic events or the dynamics of social incorporation. And countries can score well and poorly in surprising combinations. Brazil and Chile achieved remarkable social progress while preserving and even strengthening

horizontal-accountability institutions, yet struggled—and are still struggling—on the vertical-accountability dimension of democracy.

The Rise of “Uprooted Democracies”

O’Donnell understood elections to be the key link between governing elites and society (vertical accountability). Yet the question of how power was exercised between elections (horizontal accountability) took a primary role in his analysis. The six foregoing essays suggest that such a restricted view of vertical accountability needs to be expanded: Looking beyond the electoral mechanisms that regulate access to power, we should attend to the importance of political representation between ballotings.

Frances Hagopian (Brazil) and Juan Pablo Luna (Chile) discuss democracies that are doing well on the horizontal dimension of accountability but less well on its vertical dimension. Brazil gradually improved as a representative democracy after a bout with delegative democracy under Collor de Mello in the early 1990s. Yet more recently, horizontal accountability has remained relatively satisfactory while political parties have lost their hold on society, which is a net loss for representativeness. Luna describes the rise of a similar situation in Chile, where horizontal accountability is strong but where the gap between demanding social movements and the established political class is growing wider. In both countries, party nonidentification (meaning the phenomenon of telling a pollster that you do not identify with any political party) is at record levels: 77 percent in Brazil and 87 percent in Chile.⁴ Political elites in Brazil and Chile, our authors tell us, may be good at making policy and implementing horizontal accountability, but they lack empathy (not to mention organizational links) with civil society.

Vergara and Watanabe offer a variation on this theme. They describe Peruvians’ persistent and deep dissatisfaction with their democracy—good economic times notwithstanding—as the fruit of a split between society and a weak political class that cedes policy making to skilled technocrats. In 2014, the share of Peruvians who told pollsters from the Latin American Public Opinion Project that they felt no identification with any political party was 81 percent. Failures of representation, particularly in the context of economic malaise, corruption scandals, or visible policy failures, can set off systemic crises of legitimacy. The troubles currently roiling party systems in the United States and Europe are cases in point. Ecuador and (arguably) Bolivia each currently has a president who is strong to a fault, but after they leave it is not hard to imagine either or both of these countries falling into a Peruvian-style situation of inadequate representation. The presence of a strong leader can hide a weak system of political intermediation for only so long.

O’Donnell worried most about the democratic deficits that flow from weak horizontal accountability. Since he wrote, some studies have ex-

amined the vertical dimension of accountability, but those have largely focused on “policy switches”—instances in which presidents ran on one platform only to switch to another (and sometimes opposite) one after taking office.⁵ Other works have analyzed the decline of traditional party systems, especially in the Andean region. But those challenges are just two among several that face vertical accountability.

In his original “Delegative Democracy” essay, O’Donnell makes only a handful of references to vertical accountability, tying it to the retrospective accountability that is the product of free, fair, and regular elections. In his discussion of the role of institutions in representative democracy, he attributes to them four basic functions.⁶

First, institutions represent individual and societal interests by aggregating preferences. Second, institutions also help to constrain (and contain) societal demands on the system. Third, institutions tend to provide stability and thus facilitate coordination across time as well as cooperation among different actors in the system. And last but not least, by performing the three previous functions democratic institutions promote the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Although he distinguishes between vertical and horizontal accountability on the conceptual level, in the cases that he is examining O’Donnell sees the two as standing or falling together. This was natural, given the sequence of events in those cases. The cases of Colombia under Uribe and Ecuador under Correa analyzed by Mayka and Conaghan, respectively, also fit this trajectory. A security crisis in Colombia and an economic crisis in Ecuador ate away at representative institutions and stripped them of legitimacy—they did not, in the eyes of many voters, seem equal to the challenges facing them, and seemed to be breaking down.

When crisis hits, an “outsider” can promise to be the answer, establishing a model of representation in which society delegates to the president large powers to meet a large emergency. With institutions eroding, the president finds it easy to centralize power (usually informally) and to ignore horizontal accountability. Although O’Donnell says that delegative democracies maintain vertical accountability (elections still serve as plebiscites on the leader to whom so much has been delegated), we have our doubts about that: With representative institutions reduced to a parlous condition, delegative democracies may retain a measure of vertical accountability, but it will be an unsteady thing, and weakly institutionalized at best.

Brazil, Chile, and Peru, as described in the preceding essays, all exhibit weak vertical accountability. Free elections occur and office changes hands, but the institutions that aggregate, mediate, and arbitrate interests and conflicts are ineffectual and lack legitimacy. Yet in each country, the agencies charged with applying horizontal accountability have stayed strong or even grown stronger. In fact, the corruption scandals that fueled political parties’ legitimacy crises in Chile and Brazil would be unthinkable without the degree of horizontal accountability that prevails in each

country. Here, robust horizontal accountability (courtesy of honest and diligent judicial institutions, plus a free press) has been at least partly responsible for the weakening of a vertical-accountability channel—an ironic state of affairs that has developed since O'Donnell wrote more than twenty years ago.

What should one call a democracy with a decent level of horizontal accountability and democratically elected officials who represent (at least nominally) different policy programs, but in which representative institutions such as parties are so weak and dysfunctional that democracy's legitimacy is threatened? We call such a polity an "uprooted democracy" because "the system" (together with the political class that runs it) has lost its roots in the wider society. It is a place where democracy has become a faulty game. In their own respective ways, Brazil, Chile, and Peru all fit this description. So does Colombia, where a weakened party system faces vertical-accountability challenges. Vertical-accountability deficits lurk in Ecuador and Bolivia as well, even if popular presidents are masking those shortcomings for now.

Sources of Weakness

The democratic troubles seen in several of the six cases stem from the weakness of representative institutions. Why have representative institutions lost their capacity to aggregate and mediate societal interests? We can only point to a series of possible reasons, which are neither exhaustive nor independent of one another.

First, postindustrial societies have the highest levels of social, territorial, and cultural segmentation ever seen in history. When sharp socio-economic inequalities are present, as they typically are in Latin America, and when these often coincide with subnational territorial boundaries, the interest-aggregation challenges are huge. Parties and other representative institutions must be constantly on their "A" game just to keep up—unless they function at a very high level, they will have no chance of adequately representing very different social interests through their campaigns and actions while in office.

Second, neocorporatist arrangements and political parties traditionally emerged out of compromises among conflicting interests and encompassing ideologies.⁷ Contemporary societies now often are replete with "single-issue citizens" who stress a given interest or issue stance above all others. With news and information readily available and with public affairs relatively transparent (certainly more so than in the past), these single-issue citizens can demand unmediated vertical accountability. What used to be a punctuated, intermittent affair—there was an election every four or five years but politics tended to "go quiet" and be left to insiders during the long stretches in between—has now given way to "the permanent campaign." Scandals, media reports, and spontaneous social

mobilizations around specific interests or passionately held beliefs are the order of the day and shape the tone and content of politics.⁸ This emergent dynamic is consistent with compressed cycles of legitimation and delegitimation that see outsized faith in leaders give way to rapid disaffection. Politicians and parties now rise and fall in public estimation with a whiplash speed that would have seemed shocking just a generation ago.

Third, in this more volatile context, with public opinion and political support swinging wildly up and down, rival elites have less incentive to engage in long-term cooperation. When “the future is now,” politicians seek individual victory (however pyrrhic) above all and think little about the painstaking work of crafting stable and encompassing vehicles of representation. Analyses of “vibrant” parties that can still aggregate and mediate demands while providing incentives for long-term interelite cooperation find a sobering irony: The success of such parties tends to be rooted in the remembrance of society-wide traumas.⁹ As Juan Pablo Luna describes Chile, for instance, its vertical-accountability deficit is a “problem of success” that stems from the very skill with which the country’s senior political class, haunted by memories of the Pinochet dictatorship and the angry polarization that led up to it, has learned to keep contention muted and maintain a “concert” of parties within a stable (and now somewhat sclerotic) political establishment.¹⁰

In sum, contemporary societies lack a functional equivalent of such traditional vertical-accountability enforcers as strong parties and corporatist institutions. The revival of such enforcers in today’s social world is unlikely, and perhaps should not even be wished for: They all too often relied on authoritarianism and violence for their power, and they flourished when individual freedom, government transparency, public scrutiny, and media access were much less than what they are now.¹¹

In order to replace the traditional enforcers, Latin America has been thrown back on experiments with “democratic innovations” that have yet to prove they can do the crucial work of aggregating, mediating, and legitimating interests in an efficient way.¹² While promising in some respects, such innovations have a long way to go to before they can match what classic vehicles of vertical accountability used to be able to do. In the meantime, weakly institutionalized vertical accountability will continue to handicap democratic governance.

O’Donnell’s work remains relevant and useful, even if defective horizontal accountability is not the only, or even the most pressing, political trouble facing Latin American democracies today. In several regimes—the “uprooted” democracies—it is vertical rather than horizontal accountability that is the problem. Grasping this, however, requires rethinking the concept of vertical accountability itself. This rethinking has led us to be neither optimistic nor pessimistic about democratic prospects in the region. Instead, we are cautious. Latin America is not on the verge of an authoritarian trend, but neither is it a region where

all democracies are growing stronger. Cases diverge and new problems arise. Scholarship should reflect that.

NOTES

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1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 45–58.

2. Sebastián L. Mazzuca, "Lessons from Latin America: The Rise of Rentier Populism," *Journal of Democracy* 24 (April 2013): 108–22.

3. Kurt Weyland, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, *Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 142.

4. See the 2014 LAPOP survey, variable VB10. Across the Americas, an average of 66 percent of respondents said that they could name no political party with which they sympathized. In recent years, only Costa Rica and Uruguay (32 and 40 percent nonsympathizers, respectively) have seen party identification go up.

5. Lucas González, "Unpacking Delegative Democracy: Digging into the Empirical Content of a Rich Theoretical Concept," in Daniel Brinks, Marcelo Leiras, and Scott Mainwaring, eds., *Reflections on Uneven Democracies: The Legacy of Guillermo O'Donnell* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). See also Susan C. Stokes, *Mandates and Democracy: Neoliberalism by Surprise in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

6. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (January 1994): 58.

7. It is no wonder that, beginning in the late 1980s, the sudden advent of single-issue parties was seen as a destabilizing threat to Europe's post-1945 party systems.

8. Catalina Smulovits and Enrique Peruzzotti, "Societal Accountability in Latin America," *Journal of Democracy* 11 (October 2000): 147–58.

9. Fernando Rosenblatt, "How to Party? Static and Dynamic Party Survival in Latin American Consolidated Democracies" (PhD diss., Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, 2013).

10. This observation implies a troubling paradox: Empirically speaking, it seems to be the case that vertical accountability in posttransitional democracies has been promoted by institutions forged under authoritarianism.

11. Scott Mainwaring and Edurne Zoco, "Political Sequences and the Stabilization of Interparty Competition: Electoral Volatility in Old and New Democracies," *Party Politics* 13 (March 2007): 155–78; Rosenblatt, "How to Party?"; Steven Levitsky et al., eds., *Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

12. Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).