

Diversifying Democracy in Latin America in the 21st Century

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While various intellectuals decry the erosion of democratic institutions in Latin America due to overpowering leaders in various Latin American countries, the articles that we introduce in this issue of the *LASA Forum* discuss a series of developments in Latin American democracies that give us cause for optimism. As the authors argue, Latin American governments have developed various mechanisms in recent years that are likely to enhance and deepen the democratic character of the region. From the diversification of democratic mechanisms, to accountability and direct popular participation, to effectively utilizing the legal system as a tool for social redress, and to the rise of indigenous rights, Latin American democracies appear to be developing various devices that are likely to deepen the democratic character of the region in the years to come. While these trends sometimes lead to contradictory and even chaotic practices, if allowed to grow and continue they are likely to create a powerful democratic culture in the region.

According to Maxwell Cameron, professor of political science and director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions at the University of British Columbia, the new institutionalized mechanisms of direct participation may potentially strengthen democracies in Latin America as they create direct (rather than delegated) participation and deliberation at the grassroots level. Direct participation may ultimately lead to collective decision making that can have an impact on state policy. Cameron argues that these new mechanisms can provide a series of democratic goods including (1) inclusion and accountability, (2) disruption of patron-client relations, (3) the exercise of active citizenship, and (4) the tools to make governments more responsive and representative. He warns, however, that

these new mechanisms are a double-edged sword: political parties may reinforce clientelism, and central authorities may decide to bypass representative institutions and establish direct connections with voters, practices that tend to erode democracy.

Cameron further argues that democracies involve “a whole ecology of institutions,” of which elections are only one dimension. Other characteristics to observe include signs of constitutionalism, the rule of law, judicial independence, civilian supremacy over the armed forces, and leader accountability. While these new dimensions of democracy can build resilience among citizens, they also have the potential to address long-standing democratic deficits in the region including the tyranny of minorities, historical inequalities that are reproduced by traditional forms of representation, and lack of deliberation and active citizenship. Cameron concludes that the new form of direct, institutionalized participation sweeping Latin America today is an indication that citizens seek to participate in collective deliberation and decision making over matters that affect them directly. Traditional representative institutions are insufficient to generate this particular democratic good.

In an effort to observe additional forms of citizen participation to fully understand democratic changes in the region, Sharon Lean, associate professor of political science at Wayne State University, contends that while several recent reports raise serious concerns about democracy in Latin America, these concerns should be moderated because of the promise of institutional and civic innovation in the area of government accountability. Lean focuses on twin trends that are likely to reap democratic gains in Mexico: (1) the

proliferation of autonomous governmental agencies with specific oversight on the state, and (2) civic associations and civic networks that engage with these autonomous agencies to ensure that they fulfill their role. She discusses a series of agencies that have been created or reformed by the Mexican government in order to provide them with more autonomy and the power of oversight. These include the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) and Instituto Federal de Acceso de la Información (IFAI). She also describes a *sui generis* network, Red por la Rendición de Cuentas (RRC). These and other similar organizations are designed to bring greater transparency and accountability to the government and the democratic process while enhancing collaborative initiatives that link the state with civil society.

Gabriela Delamata, CONICET researcher at the Universidad de San Martín in Argentina, contends that modern democracies are not only characterized by institutionalized political regimes but also by the types of rights that the citizens enjoy. The normative recognition of civil, political, and social rights is the end result of social struggles that have redefined the limits of liberty and equality in the region. The powerful social struggles that consumed Latin America in the late twentieth century resulted in recent constitutional reforms that have expanded the list of citizen rights in multiple Latin American countries.

Using Argentina as a case study, Delamata argues that the organization and activism of social movements in Argentina underwent a process of transformation that is evident in the growing number of lawsuits in defense of the rights of Argentine citizens. She further argues that when social movements use the legal system as a tool to advocate for the rights

of citizens, the impact of these legal instruments often surpasses the concrete demands of the lawsuit. In essence, they impact the procedural rights of citizenship and ultimately have the capacity to strengthen democracy. Current struggles for greater recognition of citizen's rights (such as same-sex civil unions or environmental demands) demonstrate the strengthening of judicial activism and the confluence of social and judicial actors as a basic link for organizing social movements. The rapid transformation of social movements and their impact is visible through the increase in public interest lawsuits in Argentina, the greater presence of human rights specialists in different circles, and the incorporation of young and innovative lawyers into the legal process. Overall, the state is setting the precedent for deeper forms of democratic engagement in the future.

Roberta Rice, an adjunct professor at the University of Guelph, maintains that the rise of indigenous peoples as social and political actors is a positive development for Latin American democracies. She claims that contemporary indigenous struggles are doing for the plight of indigenous peoples what unions did for workers in early twentieth-century Latin America. The emergence of autonomous forms of organization and mobilization by indigenous groups is challenging existing models of citizenship and democracy in the region. An example of this is the constitutional recognition of plurinationality in Ecuador and Bolivia, which marks a watershed moment in indigenous and state relations in Latin America in which the goal of indigenous movements is no longer to control state power but rather to transform power within the context of the state. Indeed, plurinationality challenges long-standing efforts by Latin American states to divide

indigenous peoples in ways that obscure their ethnicity, exclude them from national policy debates, and/or denigrate them as obstacles to development. The plurinational state recognizes the plurality of cultural, legal, and political systems that exist within a nation-state, and places indigenous communities on an equal footing. Indigenous mobilization plays a much-needed role in broadening democratic representation and participation for the masses.

Pablo Stefanoni, from the Center for Intellectual History at the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes in Argentina, provides a glimpse of the transforming nature of Latin American democracies in an era of globalization by focusing on Bolivia's experience since Evo Morales took over the presidency in 2006. Economic, political, and social change are linked to webs of "globalization from below." Examples include greater connections to China and other Asian countries, the popularity of Asian soap operas and K-Pop music, and so on. Stefanoni contends that this somewhat chaotic and contradictory model of ethnic revival in an increasingly globalized society in Bolivia leads to unexpected results. For example, recent census results demonstrated that the population above 15 years of age that self-identified with being indigenous declined from 62 percent in 2001 to 42 percent in 2012, despite Evo Morales's Indianist policies. Some have argued that this was due to "the revenge of the mestizo," while others maintain that these results were proof of a policy of "nationalist re-colonialism" promoted by the Morales government to diminish the power of indigenous communities. Census results could also be due to a rising middle class (an explanation favored by the World Bank) or the changing nature of the Bolivian indigenous communities, which

are often no longer rural. Indeed, indigenous people can be either rural or urban, rich or poor. However, many Bolivians still believe that being indigenous goes hand in hand with being rural, a belief that could influence recent census results. Finally, while Evo Morales has done much to modernize Bolivia's political system, there is no doubt that the legitimacy of his government is based on an economic bonanza that is unprecedented in that country.

Overall, these articles give us reason to believe that despite the challenges still facing Latin America, mechanisms are in place that are likely to strengthen the region's democratic structures in the long run. ■