ELECTIONS
Fernando Limongi, University of São Paulo
José Antonio Cheibub, Texas A&M University

INTRODUCTION

Elections are the cornerstone of representative government. Modern governments are elective governments, governments in which public officials serve for a constitutionally defined term after being selected by popular vote. As the term ends, elections occur again and it determines who will hold office in the next period. The method may or may not work. In some cases, elections happen but either their outcome is not respected and the winner never takes office, or the winner’s term is interrupted by a coup d’état. In other cases, elections are held but the outcome is pre-determined, with the decision about who rules having already been made. And in still other cases, rulers are chosen by elections, but once in office they do everything in their power to abolish or manipulate them to perpetuate their tenure. But the fact is that even leaders who do not intend to leave office are forced to delegate to voters the initial decision about who will rule. Election is the only legitimate method through which modern polities select and replace political leaders.

In what follows, we approach elections in Latin America from this narrow and precise perspective: as a method for deciding who rules. In fact, Latin America has a long history of popular elections, and our main objective is to assess their capacity to define who will rule, that is, whether they function as a mechanism to select leaders. Hence, a crucial indicator in the Latin American experience with the electoral method is the frequency with which those holding the presidency were popularly elected and completed their constitutional term: did presidents come into power via elections? Were their terms interrupted by coups?

We intend to underscore the uniqueness of the Latin America experience with the representative government. For this reason, we focus on the 19th century, the moment in which national representative institutions were adopted around the world and
elections substituted heredity as the method through which political offices were filled. Focusing primarily on elections for the national executive office allows us to contrast the Latin American and the European experiences with the adoption of the electoral mechanism. Latin Americans elected presidents whereas throughout most of the 19th century, the vast majority of European countries were governed by monarchs. Even though by then the struggle between a popularly elected parliament and the monarch over the control of the national government was well underway in England and a few other countries, access to what was still the main executive office was based upon heredity and not election. In Latin America, like the United States, the center of power was subject to electoral dispute from the very moment national representative institutions were adopted.

In this sense, when compared to Europe, it can be argued that the establishment of representative institutions in most of the Americas faced additional issues, making them at their inception, more consequential. This is important because when we think about the institutionalization of elections in Latin America we tend to take Europe as the yardstick; yet, we must keep in mind that the stakes in the two regions were fundamentally different.

Following Przeworski et al. (2000) we consider that elections can only be democratic if they are competitive, and that they can only be competitive if they happen periodically and their outcomes are uncertain, that is, if the opposition has a positive chance of winning and taking office as a result of the electoral process. Given this definition, it is clear that for a relatively long period of time, the period we will deal with in this chapter, in Europe and in the Americas, elections were held but were not democratic. Thus, our goal is not to evaluate whether elections in the 19th century, in Europe as in the Americas, were democratic. They were not, or at least not most of them. Our goal is simply to ask whether they served their primary purpose, that is, to determine who will be the leader for a specific point of time.

THE DARK TALE OF REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA
The study of elections in Latin America has been dominated by what historian Antonio Annino (1995: 7) calls the *leyenda negra*, the dark tale of absolute failure of modern political representation in all countries of the region. The supremacy of this view led to an almost complete absence of systematic research about Latin American elections in the early years after independence: Why bother learning about something that is politically irrelevant? Yet, as the same Annino states, if we consider the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole, Latin America was at the vanguard in the adoption of popular elections (1995: 10).

Elections have been held from the early days of independent life in Latin America. No one denies that, but according to the *leyenda negra*, elections were not relevant for determining who would get to rule. Consequential struggles for power took place in different arenas and with different methods. Per the *leyenda*, roughly speaking, between independence and the end of Second World War, Latin America was governed by undisguised dictators or winners of limited, oligarchic squabbles. Rulers came to power by coups or equally unconstitutional means. But once in office, elections would be held to ‘legitimize’ their power and, thus, adjust reality to the existing formal representative institutions. To be sure, there were periods of constitutional rule and respect for the electoral calendar, but the governments that came into being could not be considered popular in any reasonable conception of *popular*. These were oligarchic governments that reflected the de facto rule of large landowners, and elections, events in which few people (in fact, very few) voted, provided the government with a thin veneer of popular legitimacy.

According to this widely-held view of the history of representative institutions in Latin America, for over a century beginning at independence, countries in the region alternated between brutal dictatorships and oligarchic governments. From time to time, a small fraction of the population was called to cast ballots, but few were under the illusion that the outcome would reflect their will.

Behind this negative view of elections in Latin America lies an implicit contrast with Europe and the United States, areas where representative institutions were
supposedly genuine and effectively adopted. In these areas, real elections took place; elections in which the voice of the people was heard and taken into account as an effective input in defining who would govern.

At the root of the contrast was the fact that Latin America allegedly lacked the cultural and social conditions necessary for a well-functioning popular government. Moments of relatively smooth operation of representative institutions occurred and these raised hopes that they might ‘take root’ in the inhospitable Latin American environment. But these moments were unceremoniously interrupted by caudillos and other varieties of dictators. This only reaffirmed the notion that, after all, the environment was such that representative institutions could not blossom. Latin America’s electoral history would necessarily be a negative one, a history devoted to explaining why and demonstrating how representative institutions and popular governments were corrupted, distorted from their original design.

Examples of this view abound. An early one is provided by Seymour and Frary (1914), who assert in their imposing work on How the World Votes, that elections in Latin America were “usually perfunctory occasions which must be gone through for the sake of the form” (p. 284). They were an expedient ‘military presidents’ used to provide a “veil of legality over their coups d’état” (p. 267). The message was clear: Latin American countries did not really elect their governments. Conflicts were solved in a more brutal, non-civilized way. Coups backed by the military, not votes, would decide who held power.

More recently, Safford (1985: 349-350) echoed Seymour and Frary while, at the same time, emphasizing the imported nature of the representative institutions adopted by Latin American countries. The transplanted institutions, according to him, “frequently proved dead letter. [...] In few cases were the political elites sufficiently united to enable their countries to escape frequent coups d’état, rebellions and civil wars.” The tendency to uncritically appropriate foreign political institutions was so strong that one can wonder if suffrage restrictions based on property were adopted as a matter of conservative principle or automatic copying of what existed in the source countries.
For Safford (1985: 254), representative institutions in post-independence Latin America “were more form than content”.

The negative account of the early Latin American experience with elections rests on an important misconception of representative governments and their evolution. As a matter of fact, some of the evidence invoked to deride the practice of elections in 19th century Latin America, including the elitism and contempt for the poor embedded in their specific rules, do not really distinguish them from those that took place in the countries were representative government was being originally developed.

As Posada-Carbó (2000) forcefully argued, fraud and other distortions of representative institutions were far from being exclusive to Latin American elections. As a matter of fact, he claims the universality of electoral corruption by stating that “wherever electoral democracy took root, the process went hand in hand with notable distortions” (2000: 627). In a similar vein, Przeworski (2017: 35) argues that “repression, intimidation, manipulation of rules, abuse of state apparatus, and fraud are standard instruments of electoral technology,” through which incumbents seek to reduce the chances of electoral defeat. More broadly, those involved in electoral disputes will always seek to affect their chances of winning in any way possible.

In order to understand the importance of representative institutions in Latin America and elsewhere, we need first to demystify them in the places where they were being invented. Indeed, we go one step further and suggest that we need to abandon the view of Latin American countries as mere mimics or distorters of a preexisting and ready to be applied institutional model developed elsewhere. As Aguilar Rivera (2000) has emphasized, Latin American countries in the 19th century could not have borrowed a model since there was none to copy from. Representative institutions were still under construction around the world and Latin America was a co-participant in the process of forging them.

As Manin (1997: 97) argues, the creators of representative government knew well that “elected representatives would and should be distinguished citizens, socially different
from those who elect them.” The creators of representative government were averse to popular participation and democracy in both sides of the Atlantic. As Aguilar Rivera (2000: 31) puts it, “like Madison or Sièyes, the Hispanic-American liberals used terms such as ‘república’ or ‘representative government’ to denote the government of an elective aristocracy.”

EUROPE IN THE MIRROR OF LATIN AMERICA

The history of elections in Latin America is part of the history of the creation and implementation of representative institutions in the world. And, in Europe as much as in the Americas, the process was not a smooth one. The evolution and specific obstacles electoral institutions faced in Latin America and Europe were not the same; neither was the modal constitutional architecture that emerged in each continent after the crises of the Ancién Regime. Whereas many European countries evolved toward some form of constitutional monarchy, Latin American countries adopted a republican form of government. Thus, when it came to selecting rulers in the Americas, elections were the exclusive acceptable mechanism, whereas Europe preserved, even if in an increasingly embattled form, heredity as a method to select its leaders. This is not a trivial difference.

The implication is that executive power in Europe was not at stake in elections, whereas in Latin America it was. In this sense, the break with the Ancién Regime was more radical in the Americas than Europe.

Once we consider that the principle of election substitutes heredity, it is apparent that the experience with elections was qualitatively different in the two regions. For most of the 19th century, the vast majority of European countries had a monarch who either actively governed or claimed to do so, albeit increasingly less credibly as the years passed. Elections were legislative elections, which, in some cases, had no impact on the executive. This office was already occupied by someone whose power was derived
from whom they were and not what voters wanted. In Spanish America, on the other hand, the national executive office was from the very beginning open to electoral contestation. Moreover, this happened in a context in which borders were being defined and no military and administrative apparatus existed.

These differences have consequences for attempts to evaluate the observance of the electoral principle in both continents. One obvious way to do it is to look at how frequently elections outcomes were subverted, i.e., to count Coup d’État and they were much more frequent in Latin America than in Europe.

From independence to the beginning of World War I, there were 209 coups in the 19 countries of Latin America. This amounts to about 1 coup every seven years (6.8 to be exact) of the 1416 years of independent existence of Latin America countries. Although violent removals of rulers were far from being absent in Europe, by comparison the numbers for Latin America is indeed staggering. The 26 units that existed in Europe for at least one year between 1815 and 1913 experienced 31 coups. Among the European countries we are considering, 21 have not experienced any coup d’état during this time, although 15 of them existed for less than ten years when the WWI begun. In Latin America, only Panama, which became independent only in 1903, had not experienced a single coup. And this, of course, changed in the course of the 20th century.

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1 There was great variation across Europe in the extent to which the executive would be defined as a cabinet, and the cabinet would become dependent on the outcome of legislative elections (Clayton 1956): in England, Belgium, Italy, and Greece this process was well underway by the middle of the 19th century; in Austria, Denmark, Norway, Germany, and Sweden, the dependence of the executive on the outcome of legislative elections did not become firmly established until the end of the 19th or the first two decades of the 20th century; in the rest of Europe, this did not happen until several years after WWI or even later.

2 Throughout this chapter, we base our analysis on the PIPE dataset, created by Przeworski et al. (2013, downloaded on 6/30/2017). This dataset covers 1,503 years of republican regimes in 22 countries, beginning as early as 1804 with Haiti’s independence). PIPE is the most comprehensive comparative dataset available for countries since the 19th century. It also possesses the attribute of being based on verifiable and observable data. Unfortunately, there is a non-trivial amount of missing data in some of the variables we use. We see no solution to this problem at this time. For definitions and coverage, one should consult PIPE’s Codebook.

3 This is also true of Cuba, but it became independent only in 1902.
But, as we have pointed out, this fact does not take into account that in Europe there was an alternative (non-electoral and non-violent) way to change the government. In terms of executive instability, the relevant data for Europe consist of government dismissals and parliamentary dissolutions, discretionary prerogatives most monarchs kept throughout the period. As Przeworski et al. (2012) and Cheibub, Martin and Rasch (2017) document, dissolution was an instrument employed by monarchs in the struggle against parliament over control of the government and its policies. Some monarchs resisted what they saw as parliament’s encroachment upon their ‘right’ to rule by dissolving the assembly and staging elections that would produce results more akin to their preferences. Combined with a tight control over the electoral process, dissolution was the mechanism that, according to Lauvaux (1998), allowed monarchs to adjust the parliament to the composition of the government, rather than adjusting the government to the composition of parliament.

The history of monarchical Brazil becomes relevant here. Nine years after he assumed the reins of the newly created Brazilian Empire, Pedro I abdicated the throne in the middle of a violent conflict with the parliament. His son assumed power as Pedro II in 1840 and ruled until 1889, when he was deposed in a military coup and a republic was established. There were no coups during Pedro II’s long reign, even though we should not infer from this political stability and respect for the principles of representative government prevailed. Like in most European countries at the time, the monarch had the constitutional prerogative to dismiss the government at will and did so frequently: between 1847 and 1889, there were 32 cabinets; 9 out of 13 elections resulted from the early dissolution of parliament; and, like in many European countries, the parliament was dissolved and elections held after the President of the Council of Ministers had been chosen and appointed by the monarch. These tightly controlled elections never failed to obtain next to unanimous partisan support in Parliament.

Thus, if all one does is to count the number of coups, the conclusion is clearly that representative institutions in Latin America were substantially more unstable than they were in Europe. Yet, as the widespread use discretionary prerogative to dissolve
parliament indicates, to accept elections as the unique mechanism for deciding who rules was not an smooth process in both sides of the Atlantic.

Thus any comparison between the two continents has to be taken cum grano salis. For us, the point to underscore is that in only one of these regions (Latin America) was the executive at stake in popular elections. To this extent, its experience with elections was more demanding and consequential than those of European countries. Indeed, in this sense, the break with the Ancién Regime was more radical in the Americas than in Europe. In Spanish America, unexpected and abrupt.

REPUBLICS AND DICTATORS

What most characterizes LA in the century after independence is instability, the struggle over who will control the national government. Given this instability, the second notable thing is the persistence in attempting to create representative institutions through elections. This distinction has not been made and, because of this, people have focused on the first and not the second aspect. Our claim is that in the midst of the undeniable instability brought about by the struggle over control of the national state, elections have rarely been abandoned as the legitimate mechanism to decide who rules. In other words, few were the leaders who came to power and completely abandoned the principle of elections. A large number of leaders came to power through elections and a considerable number of them finished their terms. It is not our goal here to deny the undeniable: following their independence, Latin American republics were entangled in an almost continuous fight to control the center of the state. Only around the 1860s and 1870s do we observe a few countries establishing more stable national government. Beginning in 1804 (when Haiti was the only independent country in Latin America), and ending in 1913, there have been 719 leaders in the 22 countries. There are 1,438 valid observations on leaders, meaning
that these countries experienced a new leader every 2.4 years. Given that that the modal presidential term was 4 years, these numbers indicate that the electoral calendar was recurrently broken.

In order to evaluate the prevalence of the electoral method against its alternative, force, we need to construct indicators. Our evaluation is based on a minimal conception of elections. That is to say, we consider that elections work if they are held when scheduled and their outcome is observed, regardless of who wins. We say minimal because we do not require elections to be qualified as “free and fair” (Dahl 1971) or in any other way. We are interested in the experience with elections, seen as an alternative to using force, as a mechanism to ascend to the presidency.

There were 374 presidential elections in the 1503 observations of republican Latin America, that is, one presidential election took place every 4.01 years. However, the length of presidential terms varies across countries and over time within the same country due to constitutional changes. Furthermore, since the interruption of a presidential term may lead to new elections, the frequency of presidential elections is not the most revealing piece of information.

Perhaps, more relevant is to know whether the incumbent president was elected and if he completed the term for which he was elected. There are several indicators on the basis of which we can establish what happened after elections were held. Because the distribution of missing data is not uniform across countries, we chose to present as many indicators as possible.

To being with, 53% of the years covered here for which information is available were spent under a president whose term was completed according to previously specified

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4 We first computed each country number of years per leader and then took the average for the entire region. The simple and more direct average (leaders/observations) produces a smaller number: a new leader every 2 years.

5 We exclude Brazil (1822-1888) and Mexico (1820-1823 and 1864-1866) because they were not republics. For reference, in the same time there were 497 legislative elections, for an average of one every 3.03 years. Note that some countries (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Uruguay) had legislative terms shorter than 4 years.
rules (presidents who had been elected and finished their term). This information is significant and revealing of the difficulties to establish representative institution in the region. But the information results from a stringent pair of criteria: that the leader was elected and completed his term.

Thus, another way to organize the data is to simply consider how the president ascended into office, whether by elections or some other way. We have information for 396 presidents, 274 of whom, or 69%, came to office via elections. At the same time, of these 396 presidents, 235 (59.3%) left office because an election (they lost, did not run, or were prevented to run by constitutional limits to the number of presidential terms one person can serve). As a matter of fact, of the 274 presidents who came to office through elections, 83% left office for the same reason. Putting the two together, we see that 57.6% of all presidents entered and left office through elections, while 27.5% entered and exited by force. Force, of course, was not absent as a way to bring some presidents to and remove them from power.

Elections, therefore, were not mere occasional occurrences. The numbers in the previous paragraph are significant; they bring to the fore the difficulties in the adoption of representative institutions Latin American countries faced. Alternatively, they also point to the fact that the failure of elections did not automatically imply the abandonment of the electoral principle. Rare were the non-elected presidents who sought to exercise power for an indeterminate period of time without some form of electoral legitimation. In general, coups were quickly followed by the restoration of the constitutional order (in many cases under ‘a new’ constitution) and the convocation of presidential elections. Of the 192 years in which a coup occurred and we have information about what happened afterward, 43 (22%) were followed by another coup, before any presidential election took place. Of the remaining years, in 97 out of 192 years (51%), a coup was followed by presidential elections no later than in the second year following it and 136 (72%) was followed by an election within four years.

This pattern is at the root of another overlooked aspect of Latin America in the 19th century. Long periods of personal rule with no elections were much less common than
the usual stereotypical view of Latin America suggests. Of the 43 cases in which no presidential election happened between two coups, in only three cases was the number of years between the two higher than five: two cases with five years between coups, both in Ecuador and neither with the same person in the office of the president, and one in Paraguay, with 26 years between coups, when Francia declared himself Perpetual Supreme Dictator. As a matter of fact, of all the leaders observed between 1804 and 1913, only seven ruled for more than 10 consecutive years. These included Porfirio Diaz from Mexico (26 years), Francia (25 years) and Carlos Antonio Lopez (17 years) from Paraguay, Justo Rufino Barrios (11 years), Jose Rafael Carrera (14 years), and Estrada Cabrera (21 years) from Guatemala, and Santos Zelaya (15 years) from Nicaragua. Of these, only Francia and Rafael Carrera held only one election during their tenure. The other ones held periodic elections, such that their rule, even if initiated by force, was legitimized by elections. This is simply the other side of the political instability and dispute over control of the state that characterized Latin America in the 19th century. As Octávio Paz said, “dictators assuming power almost invariably declared that their government is provisional and that they are ready to restore democratic institutions as soon circumstances permit.” (cited by Przeworski 2009: 10.)

We are not claiming that the presidential elections held after or between coups were competitive. The majority of these elections led to the victory of the incumbent. But this fact should not be interpreted as the confirmation of the irrelevance of elections in Latin America. On the contrary. Even if accompanied by all measures to assure their victory, the fact is, dictators, even the more brutal ones, could dispense the popular legitimation of their mandates. Moreover, no dictator attempted to initiate a dynasty.

Overall, the evidence is clear. While Latin America was an extremely politically unstable region, it was also an early adopter of representative institutions, with elections as the exclusive legitimate mechanism to choose leaders. Whether the instability came from the fact that the office of the chief executive, the center of power, had to be legitimized through elections, or whether the very state was under
dispute we do not know. And we believe that we, or anyone else, cannot answer this question.

Conclusion

Election is the only legitimate method through which modern polities select and replace political leaders. As such, election is the cornerstone of the representative government.

The LA experience with election shows that the adoption of representative institutions was not an easy process. Once adopted, elections may or may not work, that is, not all leaders enter office as the outcome of an electoral process. Mandates acquired at the polls may be interrupted or winners may be impeded to take office by Coups d’État. Force, thus, in alternative method through which leaders may ascend to power. Besides, rulers, elected or non-elected ones, may use the state resources in order to make sure that challengers, if allowed to run, will have no chances to win the elections they celebrate.

The creators of representative government were averse to popular participation and democracy in both sides of the Atlantic. But the fact that the ‘elective aristocracy’ they created in the Americas took the Republican form had non negligible consequences. It meant a complete and radical break with the heredity, a feature absent in all Europeans countries. Moreover, this was a definite break, that is to say, despite the frequent disrespect for the electoral calendar that characterizes the Latin American political experience, no serious and lasting attempt to adopt an alternative method was registered.

Dictators were an ever present feature of the political landscape. Yet, long periods of personal rule with the complete suppression of the electoral calendar were much less common than the stereotypical reference to caudillismo suggests. Dictatorship did not mean government for life or a refusal to the electoral principle. In general, coups were
quickly followed by the restoration of the constitutional order (in many cases under ‘a new’ constitution) and the convocation of presidential elections.

As documented by Przeworski (2010), for a long period, incumbents won almost all elections held around the world. Competitive elections, elections in which the incumbents leave office as a consequence of an electoral defeat are recent phenomena. On this account, the LA experience we recast in this chapter is no different or specific.

Accepting that the decision about who will rule will be made by the aggregation of votes cast is not something that comes naturally. If it seems natural today, it is due to the numerous attempts and failures that happen in the past, and which made the point, time and again, that, in the end, if we do not want to fight, we have to live with the uncertainty intrinsic to elections.

Bibliography


