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IN LATIN AMERICA, 1945–1999**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about two related subjects: how to classify political regimes in general, and how Latin American regimes should be classified for the 1945–99 period. We make five general claims about regime classification. First, regime classification should rest on sound concepts and definitions. Second, it should be based on explicit and sensible coding and aggregation rules. Third, it necessarily involves some subjective judgments. Fourth, the debate about dichotomous versus continuous measures of democracy creates a false dilemma. Neither democratic theory, nor coding requirements, nor the reality underlying democratic practice compel either a dichotomous or a continuous approach in all cases. Fifth, dichotomous measures of democracy fail to capture intermediate regime types, obscuring variation that is essential for studying political regimes.

This general discussion provides the grounding for our trichotomous ordinal scale, which codes regimes as democratic, semidemocratic, or authoritarian in nineteen Latin American countries from 1945 to 1999. Our trichotomous classification achieves greater differentiation than dichotomous classifications and yet avoids the need for massive information that a very fine-grained measure would require.

RESUMEN

Este artículo trata dos temas relacionados: cómo clasificar los regímenes políticos en general y cómo deben ser clasificados los regímenes latinoamericanos en el período 1945–1999. Formulamos cinco argumentos generales sobre la clasificación de regímenes. Primero: la clasificación de regímenes debe apoyarse en definiciones y conceptos razonables. Segundo: dicha clasificación debe estar basada en reglas de codificación y agregación explícitas y sensatas. Tercero: la clasificación de regímenes políticos entraña algunos juicios subjetivos. Cuarto: el debate que contraponen medidas dicotómicas y medidas continuas de la democracia crea un falso dilema. Ni la teoría democrática, ni los requisitos de codificación, ni la realidad que subyace a la práctica democrática obliga a una aproximación dicotómica o continua en todos los casos. Quinto: las medidas dicotómicas de la democracia no capturan los tipos de régimen intermedios, oscureciendo así la variación que es esencial para el estudio de los regímenes políticos.

Esta discusión general provee la base para nuestra escala ordinal tricotómica, que clasifica a los regímenes como democráticos, semidemocráticos o autoritarios en diecinueve países latinoamericanos desde 1945 hasta 1999. Nuestra clasificación tricotómica consigue una diferenciación más clara que las clasificaciones dicotómicas y, sin embargo, no necesita de la enorme cantidad de información que requeriría una medida más detallada.

This paper is about two related subjects: how to classify political regimes in general, and how Latin American regimes should be classified for the 1945–99 period. The second task is impossible without a broader understanding of how regimes should be labeled. And regimes cannot be labeled without first establishing clear definitions of what we mean by the various regimes. If a regime classification is not based on sound and well-defined concepts, it is likely to be fraught with problems.

We therefore begin with a definition of democracy that underpins our classification of regimes. A democracy is a regime 1) that sponsors free and fair competitive elections for the legislature and executive; 2) that allows for inclusive adult citizenship; 3) that protects civil liberties and political rights; and 4) in which the elected governments really govern and the military is under civilian control. This is a minimalist procedural definition. It contrasts with nonprocedural definitions such as Bollen's (1980, 1991) and with some subminimal procedural definitions such as the classic one proposed by Schumpeter (1947) and the one recently defended by Przeworski and his collaborators (Alvarez et al. 1996).

Our second building block is explicit coding and aggregation rules for classifying regimes. Without such rules, even if the conceptual ground is firm, other researchers cannot understand the procedures used to classify the regimes. Our regime classification is based on first disaggregating the concept of democracy into the four defining criteria discussed in the previous paragraph and then reaggregating to form an overall regime assessment.

Following this general theoretical and methodological discussion, we classify the political regimes in nineteen Latin American countries from 1945 to 1999. We employ a trichotomous classification (placing regimes into democratic, semidemocratic, and authoritarian categories) that builds on all four dimensions of our minimal but not subminimal definition of democracy, achieves greater differentiation than dichotomous classifications, and yet avoids the need for massive information that a very fine grained measure would require.

Our endeavor is predicated on two additional key beliefs about regime classification. First, this enterprise demands some subjective judgments about the nature of political regimes. By 'subjective' we do not mean arbitrary but rather informed judgment based on knowledge of the cases and guided by explicit coding rules. The cost of an assessment limited to elections is to leave out some elements that are essential to a democracy, producing a subminimal definition of democracy—and that is too high a cost. Our viewpoint challenges recent arguments advanced by Adam Przeworski and his

collaborators in their seminal project, as well as Vanhanen (1990), who argues for purely objective measures of democracy.

Second, we endorse the pragmatic position advocated by Collier and Adcock (1999), who argue that both regime labels and more continuous measures of democracy serve useful research ends. There is no need to always choose one over the other. Although continuous measures are preferable for some research tasks, categorical measures can help integrate traditional comparative research and large- N analysis. We argue, however, that dichotomous classifications are insufficiently sensitive to regime variations because many regimes fall into an intermediate semidemocratic zone. An ordinal, trichotomous classification—democracy, semidemocracy, and nondemocracy or authoritarian—better captures the significant variations in regimes.

The final section of the article compares our trichotomous measure with the two most widely used measures of democracy, both of which are continuous (the Freedom House and Polity classifications), and with the Alvarez et al. (1996) dichotomous measure. We point out some deficiencies of the existing measures and argue that our trichotomous classification is a useful alternative.

We go to some lengths to reclassify political regimes in Latin America because without careful regime classification, it is impossible to adequately study important substantive issues related to political regimes. For example, any attempt to quantitatively determine what factors are favorable to democracy hinges on being able to assess how democratic different regimes are. If we cannot operationalize measures of democracy, the enterprise is impossible. Moreover, we believe that it will serve the scholarly community to bring together and critically reflect on different approaches to regime classification in Latin America.

Defining Democracy

The first step in classifying political regimes is defining them; it is impossible to classify whether a regime is a democracy, or how democratic it is, until we know what a democracy is. Much has been written on this subject, but definitions of democracy still vary widely. The first part of this section proposes a definition of democracy that is *minimal*; in the second part we show that this definition is *complete*.

Following Sartori (1976, 60–64), we advocate minimal definitions. “A definition is minimal when all the properties or characteristics of an entity that are not indispensable for its identification are set forth as variable, hypothetical properties—not as definitional properties. This is the same as saying that whatever falls beyond a minimal characterization

is left to verification—not declared true by definition” (61). A definition of democracy should be minimal but not subminimal; it should include all essential features of democracy but not properties that are not necessary features of democracy.

Modern representative democracy has four defining properties. The first two are the two classic dimensions analyzed in Dahl’s renowned work (1971) and in many other discussions of democracy in recent decades. First, the head of government and the legislature must be chosen in open and fair competitive elections.¹ Free and fair elections are a core ingredient of modern representative democracy. Fraud and coercion may not determine the outcomes for democratic elections. Elections must offer the possibility of alternation in power even if, as occurred for decades in Japan, no actual alternation occurs for an extended time.

Second, the franchise must include a sizable majority of the adult population. Today this means something approximating universal adult suffrage for citizens, but many countries have minor exclusions (the insane, convicts) that do not detract from their democratic credentials. If large parts of the population are excluded, the regime may be a competitive oligarchy, but in the past few decades it could not be considered a democracy. The most notorious such regime in recent times was South Africa before the end of apartheid. South Africa had free and fair elections, but the franchise was limited to the white minority.

Although this criterion seems obvious for contemporary times, less clear is how rigidly one should apply it to the past. On the question of inclusion, it is reasonable to apply somewhat different standards for earlier regimes. Until shortly after World War II, we consider some countries democratic even if women had not yet gained the right to vote. In a similar vein, the nonfranchisement of the illiterate did not automatically prevent us from coding a regime as democratic. In short, our criteria for judging inclusiveness are to some degree historically contingent because democracy itself is ever changing (Markoff 1996)—although democracy also embodies a few core unchanging principles such as free and fair elections and respect for basic civil liberties. This second criterion does not filter out many regimes in the contemporary world, as standards for inclusion have become quite universalized in modern democracies.

A third defining element is that democracies must protect political rights and civil liberties such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom to organize, the right to habeas corpus, etc. Even if the government is chosen in free and fair elections with a broad suffrage, in the absence of an effective guarantee of civil liberties it is not democratic, as

¹ The election of the head of government is often indirect. This is true in all parliamentary systems and in presidential systems that have electoral colleges.

that word is understood today. El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s, among other cases in contemporary Latin America, illustrate the point. A liberal component—the protection of individual liberties—is a necessary element of contemporary democracy. Because the liberal dimension is a defining characteristic of contemporary representative democracy, Diamond’s (1999, 42–50), Merkel’s (1999), and Zakaria’s (1997) concept of ‘illiberal democracy’ is problematic; it suggests that regimes that do not protect civil liberties and political rights might still be called democracies (Plattner 1998).² Illiberal regimes with competitive elections are semidemocratic at best and in some cases downright authoritarian.

Finally, the elected authorities must have the real governing power, as opposed to a situation in which elected officials are overshadowed by the military or by a nonelected shadow figure (Valenzuela 1992). If elections are free and fair but produce a government that cannot control major nonmilitary policy arenas because the military or some other force does, then the government is not a democracy. By our stringent definition, some of the ‘defective democracies’ of which Merkel (1999) speaks are not merely defective; they are not democracies.

The Perils of a Subminimal Definition

Our definition is focused on procedure but adds a concern for civil liberties and effective governing power. It is close to that proposed by many scholars (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989, xvi–xviii; Karl 1990; O’Donnell 1999a). It diverges from nonprocedural definitions that do not explicitly refer to elections (e.g., Bollen 1991, 5) and from Schumpeter’s classic definition and Alvarez et al.’s (1996) more recent one, both of which are subminimal.

Although Bollen has contributed richly to the understanding of how one should measure democracy, the definition upon which he hinges his measurement is not sufficiently linked to the operationalization that follows. He (1991, 5) defines democracy as “the extent to which the political power of the elites is minimized and that of the nonelites is maximized.” His operationalization is based on the notion that political rights and political liberties are the two central dimensions of democracy. It is not clear, however, whether regimes that protect political rights and liberties minimize the political power of elites and maximize that of nonelites, and it is doubtful that this is true in anything resembling linear

² Historically, the notion of ‘illiberal democracy’ is not an oxymoron; it was at the core of Tocqueville’s concern about majority tyranny in the United States as well as a central concern of Madison’s. In the contemporary context, however, we prefer nomenclature that indicates clearly that regimes that do not uphold traditional civil liberties fall outside the category of democracies.

fashion, as the definition suggests would be the case. This problem is emblematic of those stemming from nonprocedural definitions.

Schumpeter (1947) and Alvarez et al. (1996) equate democracy with holding free and fair elections that allow for an alternation in power regardless of the lack of civil liberties or the presence of ‘reserved domains’ in public policy that are under the control of unelected figures (Valenzuela 1992). In his classic work, Schumpeter (1947, 269) focused on electoral competition among political elites and parties: “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” In the past two decades most political scientists have used a more expansive and less parsimonious definition, more akin to the one employed here, but recently Alvarez et al. (1996, 7) proposed a definition similar to Schumpeter’s: “Democracy is a system in which government offices are filled by contested elections... For a regime to be qualified as democratic, the executive must be directly or indirectly elected in a popular election. Indirect elections qualify as popular only if the electors are themselves elected.” Vanhanen (1990) also operationalizes democracy using only electoral criteria.

Our definition bears one important similarity to Schumpeter’s and also Alvarez et al.’s: all three focus on procedures. In insisting on the second, third, and fourth dimensions of democracy, however, our definition differs considerably from that used by Schumpeter and Alvarez et al.

Even though Alvarez et al. represent an outlier in defining democracy so parsimoniously, the prominence of the scholars and the project makes them an outlier to take seriously. They defend their approach by arguing that classifications of political regimes should follow “an exclusive reliance on observables rather than on subjective judgments” (Alvarez et al. 1996, 3). Yet this distinction between ‘observables’ and subjectivity is drawn too sharply; Alvarez et al. understate the subjectivity involved in their own assessments of whether elections are free and fair. Regimes should be classified according to ‘observables’, but ultimately social scientists must make somewhat subjective judgments about whether an infringement is sufficiently serious as to regard a regime a less than democratic. Moreover, relying on observables need not restrict a definition of democracy to the electoral sphere. The state of human rights and civil liberties, the breadth of participation, and the degree to which nondemocratic actors have veto power over government policy are all observables. It is often more difficult to get reliable data on the human rights situation and on whether the elected government really has the power to govern than on the fairness of elections. It is a mistake, however, to classify political

regimes without making judgments about respect for civil liberties and whether the elected officials really govern, even if these judgments are partly subjective.

As Karl (1986) has argued, ‘electoralism’—the equating of competitive elections with democracy—misses fundamental dimensions of democracy. Competitive elections without broad adult suffrage can exist in an oligarchic predemocratic regime or in a racially or ethnically exclusive regime that excludes the majority of the population (e.g., South Africa before the end of apartheid). But if a contemporary government is elected in contests that exclude most of the adult population, it violates the root meaning of democracy—rule by the people. However far our definition of contemporary representative democracy has strayed from this original root meaning, it is essential to preserve the idea that democratic governments are elected by the people. While this is a real issue for some countries in the first half of the time period our cases cover, in practical terms this second criterion is not very discriminating in the post-1974 wave of democratization because almost every country that sponsors free and fair competitive elections also has a broadly inclusive franchise.

Alvarez et al. explicitly reject using subjective judgments about civil liberties in classifying regimes. Yet without respect for the core civil liberties traditionally associated with democracy, a regime is not democratic as we understand that word today. Without some measure of respect for civil liberties, the electoral process itself is vitiated. Elections are not free and fair if the opposition risks reprisals for criticizing the government, opposing points of view are not permitted any outlet or dissemination, political parties are not permitted to form or meet, journalists are not permitted to publish freely, candidates are not permitted to travel, and so on. And an electoral regime is not a liberal democracy if it does not safeguard the core rights of the individual.

Alvarez et al. (1996, 10–13) attempt to correct for this shortcoming in their definition by counting as democratic only those regimes in which there has been at least one alternation in power, thus evaluating the effectiveness of the electoral process in retrospect. “[W]henever a ruling party eventually suffered an electoral defeat and allowed the opposition to assume office, the regime is classified as democratic for the entire period this party was in power under the same rules” (11). But this criterion is both over and under inclusive. The violations of civil liberties or political rights may be directed at one political viewpoint—even a dominant one—but still leave the electorate some other choices, thus producing the required alternation in office without ever permitting free and fair elections. Something like this occurred in Argentina between 1958 and 1966, when the Peronist party was proscribed, denying people the opportunity to vote for the most popular party.

In addition, even if alternation in power showed that elections are free and fair at time t , it would hardly be an indicator of the nature of elections at $t-1$. Consider, for

instance, the case of Jamaica. Given the alternation in power in 1989, Alvarez et al. coded Jamaica retroactively as a democracy for the whole 1962–90 period even though the ruling Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) manipulated the electoral calendar and ran virtually unopposed in the 1983 election. The JLP controlled all seats in parliament between 1984 and 1989. This problem is important in some Latin American countries as well. Under these coding rules, given the alternation in power in 2000, Mexico's elections would presumably be considered free and fair during the late twentieth century and perhaps even earlier. Yet the fact that the 2000 elections permitted an alternation in power says nothing about the fairness of previous elections.

The rule sometimes generates the opposite problem by excluding from the democratic category those countries in which all the liberties that underlie free and fair elections are present but the electorate is satisfied with the party in power. Japan was a democracy for decades before there was any alternation in power. But under the alternation rule, it is unclear whether Japan would have qualified as a free parliamentary regime had Alvarez et al. coded this case a few years earlier. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) never left power between 1955 (when the party was born) and 1990 (the last year in the Alvarez et al. dataset). The presence of a dominant party that consistently wins elections for a few decades is not inherently incompatible with democracy.

Nor is the significance of civil rights limited to its impact on the electoral process per se. Alvarez et al. (20) claim that we should empirically investigate whether freedom from arbitrary violence is associated with democracy rather than include such a freedom in the definition. But one of the defining characteristics of modern representative democracy is its liberal dimension: limited government and adherence to some core values about the sanctity of the individual.

Some competitively elected governments have seriously infringed upon such rights. In the early Hitler years the competitively elected government was already beginning its systematic campaign to deny basic rights to certain groups. Similarly, in some parts of Colombia (1980s to the present) and Peru (1980s and early 1990s) governmental or paramilitary campaigns against guerrillas and drug trafficking have meant a less than democratic experience for peasants caught in the middle. When these conditions are generalized, affecting a large portion of the population, the country should not be labeled a democracy. In short, it is important to distinguish between illiberal elected governments and liberal democracies.

The fourth element of our definition of democracy (the elected government must govern) is just as important. Alvarez et al. explicitly reject this criterion and maintain that social science should not make subjective judgments about the actual exercise of power: "In

some democracies—Honduras or Thailand are prototypes—civilian rule is but a thin veneer over military power, exercised by defrocked generals. Yet as long as office holders are elected in elections which someone else has some chance to win and as long as they do not use the incumbency to eliminate the opposition, the fact that the chief executive is a general or a lackey of general does not add any relevant information” (19–20).

We are skeptical about this argument when “civilian rule is but a thin veneer over military power.” If the government elected by the people does not actually govern, it is not democratic. The contrary argument appears to be premised on the assumption that there is an option, that people can choose between the lackey of a general and someone who is not a lackey. But in some cases all the candidates are not so much lackeys as hostages. In these cases decision-making in fundamental areas is constrained by the threat of military intervention or by a lack of control over the military, no matter what the result of the elections.

In Latin America examples abound of freely elected governments constrained by a military ‘guardianship’. In Argentina from 1955 to 1973 certain electoral outcomes were ruled out *a priori* because the military proscribed the party that enjoyed most popular support. Guatemala’s military played a *de facto* guardian role in the 1980s and early 1990s. About two years after winning in the largely free and fair 1985 elections, President Cerezo admitted that at the time he took office, the military permitted him to exercise only an estimated 30% of his constitutional powers. He claimed that the situation improved thereafter, while another local observer estimated that the percentage of power he was permitted to exercise actually decreased to 10% or 15% by 1988.³ A similar situation prevailed in El Salvador from 1982 until shortly before the 1994 elections. The military and the paramilitary were not only beyond the control of the civilian government but ruthlessly killed tens of thousands of leftists and purported leftist sympathizers. Electoral outcomes unacceptable to the military were ruled out.

Governments in these countries were chosen in elections that were reasonably though not completely free and fair. But the military and paramilitary effectively controlled a wide range of policy choices, including the range of permissible political opinion (the military violently repressed the left), human rights policy, the means to be employed in fighting the civil war, important aspects of labor policy (labor unions were brutally repressed), agrarian policy, and many other policies. Under these conditions the governments chosen by the people did not effectively govern in important policy areas. In many key policy areas the ruler was the military and/or paramilitary, and none of the

³ Statements reported in the International Human Rights Law Group and Washington Office on Latin America (1988, 11–12 and n. 10).

options on the ballot provided an alternative to it. To call such a government ‘democratic’ does not do justice to the word (Karl 1986; Valenzuela 1992). If an elected government cannot govern because the military or some other actor dominates the political system, it is not democratic.

To sum up, all four elements of our definition are necessary and must be included even if doing so requires making subjective judgments about regimes. This definition meets the test of being minimal but complete if a) all four criteria are necessary components of democracy, without which a regime should be not considered democratic; and b) no other discrete features are necessary to characterize a democracy. We believe that this definition meets both conditions, while some recent definitions fail the second by neglecting some essential characteristics of a democracy.

Finally, it is useful to make explicit two points that our definition of democracy does not include. First, it leaves out substantive results such as social equality. It is important to limit the definition of democracy to the procedural issues outlined here and to leave as an empirical question the relationship between democracy and equality. It muddles the picture to include social equality in the definition of democracy, even though high levels of inequality might well work against democracy (Alvarez et al. 1996; Lamounier 1989). Second, our definition deliberately says nothing about accountability,⁴ defects in the rule of law except those that impinge on civil liberties and political rights, and instances of ‘decretismo’. Adding such criteria that are not inherent in the nature of democracy leads to a nonminimal definition.

Coding and Aggregation Rules

In this section we present our coding and aggregation rules for classifying political regimes. Explicit and sound coding and aggregation rules form an important building block of regime classifications (Munck and Verkuilen 2000). Such rules promote evenness of assessments across cases and times, thus reducing the degree of subjectivity and measurement errors that affect regime classification (Bollen 1993; Bollen and Paxton 2000)—unless one relies exclusively on strictly objective criteria, as Vanhanen (1990) does

⁴ Schmitter and Karl (1991, 40), for example, make accountability central to their definition, but this definition is difficult to operationalize. In a similar vein, Jagers and Gurr (1995) include institutional constraints on executive power as one of their defining dimensions of democracy. Although democracies generally have far greater constraints on executive power than nondemocracies, among democracies there is a wide variation in how constrained executive power is. See O’Donnell (1999a, 1999b) on the relationship between accountability and the definition of democracy.

but with considerable loss of conceptual soundness. They also make it far easier for other scholars to assess criteria and actual classifications.

Our coding rules assess to what extent the four defining criteria for democracy are violated. They typify possible violations of these democratic principles and rank them as major failures or partial ones. The coding scheme follows:

1) Elections for legislature and executive.

Has the head of government (in Latin America, the president) been freely and fairly elected or is he/she a constitutionally designed replacement for a head of government who died, resigned, or was impeached? By ‘elected’ we mean, as did Alvarez et al. (1996), that he/she was chosen in fair direct elections or elected by a body that was itself mostly chosen in direct elections. In a similar vein, is there a legislative body in which the vast majority of the members have been fairly elected? With very few exceptions, in the post-1945 period elections for the national congress have been direct, though on rare occasions, as in Argentina’s upper chamber until the 1994 constitutional reform, some members were elected indirectly but in obviously free and fair elections.

In a *democracy* the head of government and the legislature are chosen in free and fair elections. A *major violation* of this democratic principle occurs if:

- a) The head of government or the legislature is not elected.
- b) The government uses its resources (patronage, repression, or a combination of both) to ensure electoral victory—i.e., there are systematic complaints about fraud or repression, and there is virtual certainty about the outcome of presidential elections (e.g., Mexico 1945–88, Argentina 1952–55, El Salvador 1952–63, Paraguay 1960–89).

A *partial violation* occurs if:

- a) There are systematic complaints of rigged elections and/or harassment of the opposition but there is still uncertainty about electoral outcomes and the government fails to capture large majorities in the legislature.
- b) The military vetoed a few ‘unacceptable’ but important presidential candidates (e.g., Argentina 1958–73);⁵ fraud affected but did not thoroughly skew electoral results; or the elections were conducted under substantially unequal playing rules (e.g., Nicaragua in 1984, because the Sandinistas dominated the media and pressured opposition groups, and El Salvador in the 1980s, because the left faced massive repression).

⁵ We did not automatically consider all proscriptions a partial violation. In the late 1940s and 1950s many Latin American countries proscribed communist parties. Provided that a wide range of other electoral options existed, we did not code this proscription as a partial failure. The case of the Peronism is different because it was Argentina’s largest party. Few of the communist parties proscribed in the 1940s and 1950s were electorally significant.

2) Is the franchise inclusive?

In a *democracy* the franchise is broad compared to other countries in the same historical period, and disenfranchised social categories (e.g., children) are not seen as politically excluded groups with distinctive electoral preferences.

A *major violation* of this democratic principle occurs if a large part of the adult population is disenfranchised on ethnic, class, gender, or educational grounds in ways that:

- a) likely prevent very different electoral outcomes (or so is widely believed); or
- b) are unusually exclusionary for that historical period; or
- c) trigger mass social protests.

A *partial violation* occurs if disenfranchisement of some social groups occurs in ways that are not likely to significantly shape electoral outcomes.

These criteria for inclusion involve complex judgments, but the obvious and simple criterion—universal adult suffrage—is misleading and unrealistic. Even today, few if any countries observe universal adult suffrage. Some countries that are widely and properly seen as democracies exclude the insane, convicts, permanent residents, nonresident citizens, or members of the armed forces. In addition, we overlooked the disenfranchisement of women and the illiterate for the early part of the time period under consideration. These earlier exclusions were cultural artifacts of a time past; this criterion of democracy has changed over time.

3) Are civil liberties respected?

In a *democracy* violations of human rights are uncommon, parties are free to organize, and the government respects constitutional guarantees.

A *major violation* of democratic principles occurs if:

- a) Gross human rights violations or censorship against opposition media occur systematically.
- b) Political parties are not free to organize—i.e., most major parties are banned, just a single party is allowed to exist, or a few parties are tightly controlled by the government (e.g., Panama 1968–80, Paraguay 1947–59, Brazil 1965–79).

A *partial violation* occurs if:

- a) Violations of human rights are less widespread but still serious enough to affect the opposition's capacity to organize in some geographic areas or some social sectors.
- b) There is intermittent censorship of the opposition media or regular prohibition of one major party or candidate.

4) Do the elected rulers enjoy real governing capacity?

In a *democracy* major military leaders and the military as an institution have negligible or minor influence in policies other than military policy, and their preferences do not substantively affect the chances of presidential candidates.

A *major violation* of this democratic principle occurs if:

a) Military leaders, or the military as an institution, openly and visibly dominate the legislative agenda in major policy areas not strictly related to the armed forces.

b) The elected head of government is a puppet, such that the electoral process does not really determine who governs.

A *partial violation* occurs if major military leaders, or the military as an institution, are able to veto important policies in a few areas not related to the armed forces (e.g., Ecuador 1961–62).

Munck and Verkuilen (2000) have pointed out the importance of explicit and sensible rules for moving from a disaggregated notion of regimes to an aggregated regime classification. Our aggregation rule is simple. We used these four dimensions to construct a trichotomous measure of democracy in Latin America. We classify governments as democratic, semidemocratic, or authoritarian for the period 1945–99. When governments commit no violation of any of the four criteria they are coded as democratic. Otherwise, they rank as authoritarian (if they present one or more major violations) or as semidemocratic (if they display only partial failures in one or more categories).

The criteria in our definition of democracy involve some discretionary coding—i.e., subjective assessments. But we prefer a more complete definition, even if it requires some subjective assessments, to one that is subminimal. It is small comfort that a classification is based on objective data if it does not include enough criteria to distinguish between democracies and nondemocracies. Social scientists should not ignore major components of the definition of democracy simply because they are hard to measure. Informed judgment oriented by well-specified coding rules is better than no measurement at all.

We do not reject in principle the use of continuous scales, and we are aware that we could have followed an additive aggregation principle and simply added up points on the four dimensions—thus yielding a nine point scale from zero to eight. Although we may undertake an additive scale for future research purposes, at this stage we have conceptual and practical reasons for preferring a trichotomy to a more differentiated scale. Conceptually, simply adding points along the four dimensions could produce distortions because it assumes that a strong score on some dimensions can offset a weak score on others. Yet all four dimensions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for

democracy. Systematic and egregious violations along one dimension cannot be compensated by adherence to democratic principles on the others. In addition, our four dimensions are coded along ordinal scales (major violation, partial violation, no violation) and mathematical aggregation might be misleading because the distances between ordinal categories are not necessarily uniform.

Our method of aggregation also offers a practical advantage. An additive aggregation process would require careful evaluation of each dimension of democracy for every regime in every year. In contrast, our aggregation procedure allows us to limit data collection to cases in which there is no major violation at the electoral level. The electoral criterion filters governments that are overtly authoritarian, restricting the gathering of more costly and detailed information to democracies, semidemocracies, or disguised forms of authoritarian rule. If a regime does not have reasonably free and fair elections, then we do not need to collect additional data. Since information for the first criterion is easier to obtain, this aggregation rule reduces the information costs.

A Classification of Regimes in Latin America

Table 1 shows our classifications for 19 Latin American countries for the 1945–99 period. This trichotomous classification is ordinal in the sense of moving from more to less democratic.⁶ Our scale does not distinguish among different types of patently nondemocratic regimes. For some purposes, the distinctions among different kinds of nondemocratic regimes are highly relevant (Linz 1975; Linz and Stepan 1996, 38–54). But here we are concerned primarily with the continuum from democratic to nondemocratic regimes; we do not distinguish among patently nondemocratic types. We use the term ‘authoritarian’ loosely, to embrace all clearly nondemocratic regimes. The intermediate category includes a variety of regimes that sponsor competitive elections but still fail to measure up to democracy. We could have classified semidemocracies into various subcategories, but in all these cases reasonably fair and free competitive elections take place while other elements of democracy are impaired in some fundamental way. The formally democratic institutions do not function in the way of a democracy.

⁶ Because these categories go from more to less democratic, our coding is not merely nominal. An ordinal scale classifies cases into ordered categories (e.g., military ranks). Distance between categories has no particular meaning in ordinal scales. The distance between a democracy and a semidemocracy is not necessarily the same as the distance between a semidemocracy and an authoritarian regime. In contrast, in interval or ratio variables the difference between two points has a clear interpretation. For example, the growth rate of one country might be 2% higher than that of another, or the per capita income might be twice as high in one country as in another.

In this section and the next one we discuss in greater detail our choice of the measurement level. Why have we built a categorical scale instead of developing a continuous index of democracy? And why is this scale trichotomous (and ordinal) rather than simply dichotomous?

In addition to the problems of aggregation discussed in the previous section, the reason for choosing a categorical measure is twofold. First, notwithstanding the virtues of continuous measures for some research purposes, it remains important for other purposes to label political regimes. For some research purposes it makes eminent sense to conceptualize democracy as a continuous variable. As Dahl (1971) argued in his classic work, democracy can exist to varying degrees (see also Bollen 1980; Bollen and Jackman 1989, 612; Coppedge and Reinecke 1990; Hadenius 1992, 36–71; Diamond 1999; Vanhanen 1990). Moreover, Elkins (2000) finds that in most cases, a more continuous measure better detects substantively meaningful incremental causal effects, reduces the danger of conclusions that are driven by the selection of a cut-point, and reduces measurement error. Interval or continuous measures allow for finer gradations and are better suited for quantitative analyses that do not focus on regime transitions or breakdowns. More continuous measures can also evaluate fluctuations in openness or liberalization within what social scientists would conventionally consider the same regime.

However, both continuous and ordinal measures may serve important research goals, so there is room for both approaches. As Collier and Adcock (1999) argue, for some purposes an interval or continuous measure is most useful, while for others a trichotomous or otherwise more parsimonious set of regime labels is best. Regime labels are essential for analyzing comparative historical processes, for describing regimes, and for studying regime breakdowns and transitions.

Second, given our current cost and time constraints, it would have been difficult to construct a more fine-grained measure for each country and each year since 1945, even when the exercise is limited to Latin America. We may not know whether a country should be scored as a 6 or a 7 on an interval scale, but we can be confident it is a semidemocracy. By constructing a trichotomous scale with a modest information demand, we can reduce the number of coding errors significantly and thus achieve greater reliability than would be possible under a more demanding classification scheme. Our scheme has enough categories to avoid forcing cases into classes where they violate our common sense understanding yet has few enough that we do not need to draw fine distinctions among regimes.

Table 1

Classification of Latin American Governments, 1945–99

Argentina	1945	A	Guatemala	1945–53	S
	1946–50	S		1954–85	A
	1951–57	A		1986–99	S
	1958–61	S	Haiti	1945–99	A
	1962	A	Honduras	1945–56	A
	1963–65	S		1957–62	S
	1966–72	A		1963–81	A
	1973–74	D		1982–99	S
	1975	S	Mexico	1945–87	A
	1976–82	A		1988–99	S
1983–99	D	Nicaragua	1945–83	A	
Bolivia	1945–51	A		1984–99	S
	1952–63	S	Panama	1945–47	S
	1964–81	A		1948–55	A
1982–99	D		1956–67	S	
Brazil	1945	A		1968–89	A
	1946–63	D		1990–93	S
	1964–84	A		1994–99	D
	1985–99	D	Paraguay	1945–88	A
Chile	1945–72	D		1989–99	S
	1973–89	A	Peru	1945–47	S
	1990–99	D		1948–55	A
Colombia	1945–48	S		1956–61	S
	1949–57	A		1962	A
	1958–73	S		1963–67	D
	1974–89	D		1968–79	A
	1990–99	S		1980–82	D
Costa Rica	1945–48	S		1983–84	S
	1949–99	D		1985–87	D
Dominican Republic	1945–65	A		1988–91	S
	1966–73	S		1992–94	A
	1974–77	A		1995–99	S
	1978–93	D	Uruguay	1945–72	D
	1994–95	S		1973–84	A
Ecuador	1996–99	D		1985–99	D
	1945–47	A	Venezuela	1945	A
	1948–62	S		1946	S
	1963–67	A		1947	D
	1968–69	S		1948–57	A
	1970–78	A		1958–99	D
	1979–99	D			
1992–99	D				

D = democratic

S = semidemocratic

A = authoritarian

Note: We coded the year of a regime transition as belonging to the new regime. For example, although the Argentine military dictatorship lasted from 1976 to 1983, we coded 1983 as democratic because the new regime was inaugurated in December of that year.

The facts that the secondary data generated by country experts are available to many and the coding standards are explicit and relatively simple make it easier for other scholars to check our coding of cases. Feedback from colleagues has helped us to improve the scoring. Because this coding is qualitative and historical in nature, it involves some degree of subjective judgment. But with explicit coding rules, even if some judgments are inevitably subjective, the four dimensions that are being judged are uniform and the *general* parameters for making those judgments clear.

Of course, even with explicit coding rules some cases present difficult borderline judgments. Should Brazil 1946–63 be coded as a semidemocracy because of the restrictions on participation and competition or as a democracy because competition at the national level was vigorous and participation fairly broad? A reasonable case can be made either way.

In sum, our ordinal trichotomous classification summarizes a lot of information, is descriptively and conceptually richer than quantitative codings, and permits us to map actual regimes onto the continuous scale of political practices in a way that matches an intuitive understanding of the nature of regimes and regime change. The categories proposed here are readily comprehensible in ordinary social science parlance. This trichotomous scale allows for a meaningful range of variance without losing parsimony in the construction of regime types. Finally, our ordinal, trichotomous approach is consistent with the continuous nature of democratic practice. It imposes theoretically driven cut-points on a more continuous range of practices. Our regime types assume this underlying continuous construct, a certain range of which we name dictatorship, another semidemocracy, and still another democracy.⁷

On Dichotomous vs. Trichotomous Measures of Democracy

Two of the most distinguished political scientists of recent decades, Adam Przeworski (and his collaborators: Alvarez et al. 1996, Przeworski et al. 1996) and Giovanni Sartori (1987, 182–85; 1991), have argued that democracy should be conceived as a dichotomous phenomenon: a government is either democratic or it is not. We opt for a trichotomous measure and hence come close to Przeworski and Sartori, but we nevertheless have reservations about a dichotomy.

⁷ Our assumption that these ordered categories map intervals of a continuous, latent variable is an accepted assumption in logistic regression analysis (Long 1997, 116–22).

Alvarez et al. (1996) code as democracies countries in which the president and the legislature are elected, more than one party exists, and alternation in power proves (in retrospect) to be possible. There is no middle ground; all other countries are dictatorships. They concede that *within* the democratic or authoritarian categories it is possible to differentiate, but they claim that it confuses the issue to equate movements in degree within the set of authoritarian regimes with movements in degrees of democracy. Sartori does not rule out a continuous measure of what makes ‘democracy more democratic’ (1987, 156), but he argues that regimes must first be classified as democracies before it makes any sense to explore the degree to which they are democratic. Similarly, Alvarez et al. (1996, 21) say that, “while democracy can be more or less advanced, one cannot be half-democratic: there is a natural zero point.” Less authoritarian may be a good thing but it is not, in this conception, more democratic.

Part of their argument is compelling: it is sometimes necessary to go beyond a merely continuous measure of regimes and assign them a qualitative label. Many regimes are unabashedly nondemocratic, and it makes sense to label them as such. Political regimes sometimes change abruptly: a transition to democracy occurs, or a democracy breaks down. Interval measures can capture such events, but it is useful to establish some cut-points that indicate that a regime change has taken place. For indicating when a regime change has occurred, an explicitly or implicitly (established on the basis of cut-points from an interval measure) categorical classification is useful. Also, a regime that is clearly democratic should be labeled as such, as should a regime that is unequivocally authoritarian. Alvarez et al. and Sartori thus keep intact a necessary distinction between democracy and nondemocracy. Labels are powerful and carry implicit value judgments that social scientists ignore at their peril; we should not abandon all efforts to categorize regimes and simply give them a quantitative score.

Alvarez et al. (1996, 21–22) explicitly reject the idea that there are borderline regimes between democracy and dictatorship, but this excessively parsimonious argument ignores the realities of many regimes in the contemporary world, especially outside the Western industrialized countries. Many competitively elected regimes fall well short of democracy, yet to call them authoritarian is also misleading. This problem is acute with respect to many post-1978 regimes in Latin America. As Diamond (1996, 1999), Hartlyn (1998), Karl (1995), O’Donnell (1994, 1999a, 1999b), Valenzuela (1992), and others have argued, many Latin American regimes in the post-1978 period have satisfied the requirements of fair competitive elections but on other important dimensions have fallen short of being democratic. A dichotomy is too parsimonious; it loses too much information about regimes.

We come to this conclusion first inductively, by witnessing the historical experience of regimes that do not clearly approximate the ideal types of either democracy or authoritarianism and thus do not fit well in either camp. But this observation is based on two more theoretical foundations. The first is the fact that attributes of both authoritarianism and democracy coexist in many regimes that fall between the two poles. The second is that this intermixing of attributes places some regimes in a ‘gray area’, an intermediate category in the space of properties between democracy and authoritarian rule.

Sartori and Alvarez et al. acknowledge that there are gradations among democracies: some are more democratic than others. Their argument is not that there are no degrees of democracy, but that there is a ‘natural zero point’ for democracies. Regimes above a certain point are democratic and can be so to differing degrees, while all others are not and are qualitatively different. This position forces analysts to make very sharp distinctions among regimes when the reality may not justify them. Dichotomous classifications force the large number of intermediate cases into one of two categories, both of which may be misfits. Of course one needs to draw lines somewhere, and these lines may sometimes be arbitrary—but a dichotomous classification is neither conceptually necessary nor for most research purposes empirically an optimal choice.

The presence of authoritarian elements in competitively elected regimes is well established (Diamond 1996; Karl 1995; O’Donnell 1993, 1994, 1999b; Valenzuela 1992); the existence of electoral institutions does not preclude the presence of authoritarian restraints on the use of those institutions. These regimes are what Collier and Levitsky (1997) call ‘diminished subtypes’ of democracy. In Latin America, many competitively elected governments have failed to respect the civil and political liberties that enable free and fair elections to take place. Moreover, the holding of free and fair elections is no guarantee of the other three defining criteria of democracy; neither does the absence or malfunction of these institutions make all cases equally authoritarian. Elements of authoritarianism are present to varying degrees in many regimes based on reasonably free and fair elections without completely destroying their effectiveness in expressing popular choice. This fact justifies an intermediate category of ‘semidemocracies’.

The concept of semidemocracy is particularly relevant in the Latin American context because it allows us to identify the many regimes in which imperfections in democratic practice impair—but do not completely destroy—the effectiveness of electoral institutions. By incorporating the category of semidemocracies, our scale gains in discrimination (presumably reducing measurement error), but still allows us to think of regimes in conceptually rich, categorical terms.

Comparing Measures of Democracy in Latin America

In this section we compare three existing measures of democracy with ours and assess their validity and reliability in the Latin American context. We evaluate two interval and one dichotomous indicator of democracy for Latin America: Freedom House scores (Gastil 1991), the Polity III scale (Gurr, Jagers, and Moore 1990), and the Alvarez-Cheibub-Limongi-Przeworski (1996) dichotomous measure. The Freedom House and Polity indices are the two most widely used measures that cover a long historical time span and hence merit close consideration. We also discuss Alvarez et al. because their path-breaking project covers a long period of time for all of the countries in our classification. We more briefly analyze a few other continuous measures of democracy.

As shown in Table 2, the four measures of democracy are highly correlated.⁸ The strong correlations, however, do not mean that the choice of one measure over the others has no substantive implications. A strong correlation would exist even if one measure systematically overrated the degree of democratization in every country. And many of the differences are not random but the result of the choice of a subminimal definition (Alvarez et al. 1996), a change in coding standards (Freedom House), or a political bias that worked against leftist governments (Freedom House).

Table 2

	Freedom House (1972–96)	Polity III (1945–94)	Alvarez et al. (1950–90)
Mainwaring et al.	.82	.86	.83*
Freedom House		.86	.80
Polity III			.80

* Spearman rho. All other correlations are indicated by Pearson r values. All correlations are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Freedom House

Beginning in 1972, every year Freedom House has ranked all independent countries from 1 (the best score) to 7 on both civil liberties and political rights (Gastil

⁸ In this section, for the sake of simplicity in presenting results, we assume interval properties for our trichotomous measure (e.g., when we run Pearson correlations with other measures, estimate means, and so on).

1991).⁹ For ease of comparison with other measures, we combined the two scores and inverted the measure (by subtracting it from 14) so that it runs from 0 (least democratic) to 12 (most democratic). Freedom House's readily available scores have the advantage of a reasonably differentiated measure of democracy. They implicitly incorporate at least three of our four dimensions of democracy: free and fair competition, broad participation, and civil liberties and human rights.

Freedom House's measurements contain two systematic biases: scores for leftist governments were tainted by political considerations, and changes in scores are sometimes driven by changes in how stringently they apply their criteria rather than changes in real conditions. The first of these shortcomings is manifest in the harsh treatment of Nicaragua under Sandinista rule (1979–90) as compared to El Salvador for the same period.

Freedom House scores suggest a markedly more democratic government in El Salvador (a combined score of 6) than in Nicaragua (a combined score of 4) in 1984. Yet at the time of the 1984 elections the military in El Salvador was carrying out widespread political and labor repression and was violently suppressing the leftist opposition. In Nicaragua three parties to the right and three to the left of the ruling Sandinista regime participated in elections in the same year, and these elections were certified by most European observers as fair and free of outright fraud and manipulation. Political violence outside the area of Sandinista-Contra conflict was limited. Despite occasional harassment of political opponents, the Sandinista regime did not murder, imprison, or torture large numbers of opposition leaders. One of the main opposition groups abstained from the elections, claiming (probably reasonably) government control of the media, and the United States government insisted that the elections were undemocratic. But most observers agree that these elections and their surrounding circumstances were more democratic than those in El Salvador. This misclassification is not an isolated incident. Freedom House's systematic bias against leftist governments is underscored by Bollen and Paxton (2000, 77) in a statistical analysis.

Second, many scores of the 1970s and early 1980s are too lenient compared to scores in the 1990s. For example, Mexico received scores ranging from 6 to 8 throughout the authoritarian 1970s and 1980s. Yet during this time, political competition was very restricted. The PRI won every single gubernatorial and senate seat from the 1930s until the late 1980s; there was absolutely no chance of an alternation in power at the national or even the state level; and the opposition was harassed. Colombia also received a 10 in the early

⁹ Freedom House scores are labeled with two consecutive years, 1972–73, 1973–74, and so on. We use a single year as the label; we identified the Freedom House scores with the first year of the pair, which most closely reflects the year for which the conditions are reported.

seventies when competition was still quite restricted (1972–74). The National Front agreement of 1958 established that regardless of election results, congressional seats would be equally divided between Liberals and Conservatives, and the traditional parties colluded to alternate in power with every presidential election. The Dominican Republic (1972–73) and El Salvador (1972–75) were coded 9 during semidemocratic and authoritarian periods, respectively. And the aggregate scores for Guatemala were 9 in 1972 and 10 in 1973 during an authoritarian regime.

Freedom House scoring became more stringent in the 1990s and does not reflect the improvements that actually took place. For example, Mexico's political system was more democratic after 1988 than it had been previously. The 1988 presidential election, though vitiated by fraud, was easily the most competitive Mexico had experienced since the foundation of the PRI/state regime in the 1929. By 1990 the opposition had become a serious political contender in many states. Yet Freedom House's 1980 combined score (7) is slightly better than the 1990 score (6). Political rights improved substantially in Brazil between 1984, when the military was still in power, and the early 1990s, but Freedom House scores indicate the opposite. In 1984 the last of the military presidents was still in office; citizens in state capitals and scores of other cities were not able to elect their own mayor; one-third of the federal senate had been elected indirectly in rules designed to guarantee majorities for the military government; communist parties were outlawed; and the left still faced sporadic repression. By 1990 all of these vestiges of authoritarian rule had been eliminated.

In Central America the human rights situation improved substantially in El Salvador between the grizzly mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, but Freedom House scores reflect no change. A large UN-sponsored mission monitored and guaranteed human rights, the military scaled back its repressive activity, and the paramilitaries were brought more or less under control. The left began to speak out without immediate violent reprisals, and new political parties started to come out into the open. By 1994 the formerly insurrectional FMLN, the object of brutal repression throughout the 1980s, felt secure enough to participate in the electoral process, and it won a substantial portion of the vote. None of this would have been possible ten years earlier, and a scoring of democratic practice should reflect this improvement.

Both of these problems with Freedom House scores are systematic rather than the result of different idiosyncratic judgments. If the flaws were simply the result of random disagreements on particular cases, the differences would have a smaller substantive impact. Freedom House might fare better in some of its judgments than we do; this would offset cases where our judgments are better. Random errors might create some noise in the

analysis but would not necessarily skew the conclusions. But a systematic bias in measurement can lead to mistaken conclusions that are immune from correction through statistical means. Consequently, one must exercise caution in using Freedom House scores. Some conclusions that could be drawn from Freedom House scores are driven by these two systematic biases.

Not surprisingly in view of these systematic biases, there are some significant differences between our measure and the Freedom House scores. For the 1972–96 period, of 475 cases (19 countries times 25 years), 89 Freedom House scores (18.7%) diverged from our assessments.¹⁰ Most of the divergences (56) resulted from cases we coded as authoritarian but that had inverted Freedom House scores of 6 or more (e.g., Brazil 1979–84, Dominican Republic 1974–77, El Salvador 1972–77, Guatemala 1972–76, Honduras 1980–81, Mexico 1973–75, 1979–84).

Polity III

A second continuous measure of democracy is provided by the Polity III dataset (Gurr, Jagers, and Moore 1990; Jagers and Gurr 1995), which covers 177 countries for the period 1800–1994. The Polity project presents several interesting features. It covers a longer period than Freedom House scores, and it is based on rich historical information. For Latin America, Polity III appears to have fewer systematic problems than Freedom House.

Gurr and his collaborators created eight ordinal scales with a total of 35 categories in order to typify patterns of participation, the constraints on executive power, the recruitment of the chief executive, and the complexity of power structures in different societies (Gurr et al. 1990; Jagers and Gurr 1996). Noting that some categories reflected traits of a democratic polity (e.g., competitive political participation) while others reflected autocracy (e.g., suppressed participation), they selected 24 categories—corresponding to five dimensions—weighed them, and integrated them in two scales (*institutionalized democracy* and *institutionalized autocracy*) ranging from 0 to 10.

The Polity project therefore created a scale of democracy that assumes a ‘zero point’ (the democracy index is a ratio scale) and is continuous. The democracy scale reflects the degree of competitiveness in political participation and in the selection of the chief executive, the openness of the executive recruitment process, and the political and

¹⁰ A divergence occurred if a regime we coded as a democracy had a combined inverted Freedom House score of 7 or less; if a regime we coded as a semidemocracy had a combined Freedom House of more than 8 or less than 6; or if a regime we coded as authoritarian had a Freedom House score of 6 or more. The intentional overlap of the democratic and semidemocratic categories makes this a lenient test for divergence.

constitutional constraints on the executive. The autocracy index reflects the extent to which participation is suppressed or regulated, the degree of competitiveness or restrictions in the executive recruitment process, and the absence of checks on and balances to executive powers. Following Jagers and Gurr (1996), we subtracted the autocracy score from the democracy score, building an interval scale of democracy ranging between -10 and 10.

Despite its merits, the Polity scale presents some disadvantages for the study of contemporary Latin America. First, some categories shaping the Polity coding are of little relevance for studying modern Latin American politics. For example, one dimension reflects whether the chief executive is 'determined by hereditary succession' (Gurr et al. 1990, 81-2). Second, because Polity was designed to cover a large number of countries over a long period, some dimensions operate at a high level of abstraction. It is hard to infer violations to human rights or the presence of reserved domains from broader concepts such as 'regulation of participation' or 'constraints on the chief executive'. Third, although the initial coding is based on rich, ordinal categories, the final measure is a continuous index for which values have no substantive meaning.

Gleditsch and Ward (1997) noted that just two dimensions (constraints on the chief executive and, to a lesser extent, competitiveness of executive recruitment) account for most variance in the democracy and the autocracy scales. Therefore, the other dimensions related to participation have less leverage on the Polity measure: "The extent and character of popular participation in selection of leaders is either totally absent or relatively unimportant in determining the degree of democracy" (Gleditsch and Ward 1997, 376). We replicated those findings for the sample of Latin American countries, reaching a similar conclusion.¹¹ This creates a potential problem of validity since democracy includes some elements (such as fair elections and universal enfranchisement) that do not appear to be measured by the two dimensions related to executive power.

¹¹ An OLS model predicting the Polity score (democracy minus autocracy) based on all five dimensions yielded greater standardized coefficients for the Executive Constraints dimension (.47) and the Executive Recruitment Competition dimension (.40). All other components, Competitiveness of Participation (.29), Recruitment Openness (-.20), and Regulation of Participation (-.11), showed lower beta coefficients. All t-tests significant at .001 level, R-square = .97 (n = 918).

As is the case with Freedom House scores, disagreements between our trichotomous classification and the Polity measure emerge mainly from cases that Polity codes as democratic but we believe should be coded as semidemocratic or authoritarian regimes. Of the 344 Polity III cases ranging between -10 and -4, 99 percent (340) were classified as authoritarian regimes in our scale. In contrast to this near unanimity about the authoritarian cases, there is substantially more disagreement about the democracies. Polity scores between 5 and 10 (336 cases) were mostly coded as democracies (75%) or semidemocracies (23%).

Individual cases reveal the same pattern. For example, the Polity indicator gave a score of 8 to Haiti in 1990–91 even though President Pascal-Trouillot, who took office in March of 1990 after a period of military rule, was an appointed caretaker, there was no directly elected legislative body, and the electoral context was violent. In addition, President Aristide, who took office in February 1991, was deposed by a coup in late September. Despite the constitutionally sanctioned constraints against effective competition, Colombia received a score of 7 for 1958–74. El Salvador also ranked as a 7 for 1984–91 even though this regime was (barely) semidemocratic because of massive repression. The maximum value of 10 was given to Costa Rica between 1945 and 1948, yet electoral fraud was a common practice in the 1940s and democracy was not really established until after the 1948 civil war.

Other Continuous Measures

The Polity and Freedom House indicators are not the only interval measures of democracy available, but they have advantages in terms of historical coverage and conceptual validity. Some thoughtful continuous measures of democracy are not readily available for long periods of time. For example, Bollen (1980), Bollen and Paxton (2000), Coppedge and Reineke (1990) and Hadenius (1992, 36–71) constructed multidimensional indicators of democracy.¹² But their indicators require substantial qualitative information that is costly to collect for a long time span and large number of countries. Not coincidentally, they restricted their measure to a single year (1985 for Coppedge and Reineke, 1988 for Hadenius) or three time-points (1960, 1965, and 1980 for Bollen). In

¹² Coppedge and Reineke focus on four criteria: fairness of elections, freedom of organization, freedom of expression, and alternatives to official sources of power. Hadenius bases his measure on whether suffrage restrictions exist whether elections were open and fair, whether elected officials really held power; and whether citizens and political organizations enjoyed organizational freedoms, freedom of opinion, and freedom from political violence and oppression. Bollen developed his measure based on six indicators reflecting political liberties and popular sovereignty.

theory, these interval measures could be refined and perhaps extended to cover a longer time period, but the cost of doing so would be enormous, especially for earlier years.

Some continuous measures that use less burdensome information present insurmountable problems of validity. Following Dahl (1971), Vanhanen (1990) argued that democracy has two dimensions: competition and participation. His measures involve objective quantitative information that could be extended for a long historical period, but they are conceptually flawed. He measured competition by subtracting the largest parties' share of the vote from 100 and participation by taking the percentage of the total population that voted. He then multiplied these two indicators to derive an index of democracy. But the measure of competition is flawed because it is too highly correlated with party system fragmentation. Contrary to what the index suggests, a system in which the largest party wins 50% is not necessarily less democratic than one in which the largest wins 35%. The measure of participation—voter turnout—is also flawed. Greater electoral participation does not say much about how democratic a regime is. Voter turnout depends too much on the age structure of the society; it discriminates against countries with youthful populations in which a large share of the population have not yet reached voting age. Higher rates of electoral participation may reflect compulsory voting laws rather than a more participatory environment. Moreover, for democracy the crucial point is that legal barriers and civil rights conditions be such that the adult population *can* participate, not that it actually does so. Most importantly, Vanhanen's measure fails to incorporate any assessment of civil liberties and political rights.

Alvarez et al. Project

In other sections of this paper we discussed two problems of the Alvarez et al. (1996) classification: the use of a subminimal definition of democracy and the decision to dichotomize democracy. Those choices lead to many coding differences with our classification. Spearman's rho between Alvarez et al.'s (1996) and our categorical measures is .83, but this association is stronger for the set of democracies than for the set of authoritarian regimes. All but one of the cases coded as democratic in our classification (217/218) are also democracies in the Alvarez et al. dataset. But only 90 percent (391/433) of our authoritarian cases are coded as dictatorships by Alvarez et al. This divergence underscores again that these authors' operational definition of democracy is more lenient than ours. They classify 83 percent (107/128) of our semidemocracies as democratic regimes. Alvarez et al. (1996, 10–13) state that when in doubt they prefer to err on the side of counting a regime as nondemocratic, but—demonstrating that their definition is

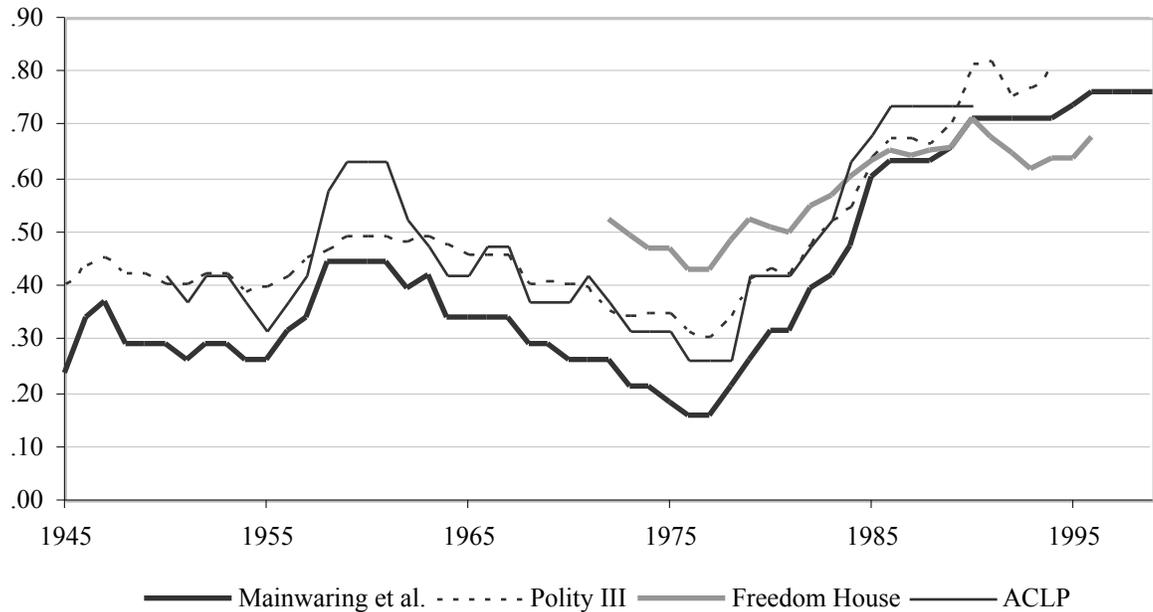
subminimal—they include scores of cases as democratic that we regard as authoritarian or semidemocratic.

For example, they consider Brazil during the waning years of military rule (1979–85) a democracy even though the head of government was chosen by the military and ratified by an electoral college designed to ensure subservience to the military's choice, governors were not democratically elected until 1982, and the leftist opposition and rural social movements were still subjected to frequent repression. They label Guatemala after the 1954 military intervention and from 1966 to 1981 a democracy even though gross violations of civil and political liberties and the proscription of certain points of view make these elections un-free at best, if not a total sham. Parties of the left were excluded from competition, and the army and paramilitary carried out widespread killing of suspected leftists and labor leaders. Elections were attended by waves of state-sponsored terrorism and tainted by widespread fraud. They also regard even the late stage of the first Peronist government in Argentina (1952–55) as democratic, though by then Perón had restricted the dissemination of opposing viewpoints and was silencing dissent and persecuting the opposition (Viola 1982). None of these cases should be called democracies, but the presence of elections and the prior or eventual alternation in office lead Alvarez et al. to misclassify them as such.

Figure 1 graphs the annual mean scores for the region for the four measures of democracy under discussion. For comparability, we normalized the values so all the scores run from 0 to 1 and inverted where necessary so that higher scores denote greater democracy. All four measures show a dramatic process of democratization in the region between 1978 and 1989. Despite this convergence, the four measures produce different perceptions about the process of democratization in Latin America, with Freedom House being the outlier.

Both our measure and the Freedom House scores show the region's worst years to be 1976–77. From then until 1990 both measures show a marked improvement in levels of democracy, with a slight discrepancy thereafter. To this extent, the two measures tell a similar story. But Freedom House begins with a much higher estimation of the levels of democracy in the region than the other measures and ends with a lower one, so the slope of the line is flatter than it should be. In the 1970s, when Freedom House coders used more lenient standards, Latin America was dominated by right-wing regimes. As a result of tightened coding standards, the Freedom House mean line gradually approaches our evaluation (and the other two), crossing our line in 1989 and ending below all the other estimates by the mid-nineties. In short, Freedom House scores suggest a less dramatic improvement in democracy than the others.

Figure 1



According to Freedom House, levels of democracy peaked in 1990, with a subsequent decline and a gradual recovery in 1994–96, though never reaching the 1990 level. This dip in the curve provides the empirical basis for Diamond’s (1996, 1999, 24–34) argument that democracy suffered a decline in Latin America in the 1990s. In contrast, our measure shows levels of democracy as improving slightly in the 1990s. This difference may be an artifact of the limited range of our three-point scale. But the marked improvement in region-wide median Freedom House scores from 5.16 in 1976 and 1977 to an all time high of 8.53 in 1990 understates the improvement, and the decline after 1990 overstates the deterioration.

If we accept Freedom House’s measure, region-wide levels of democracy were slightly worse in 1991–96 than in 1985–89. But a look at nearly every corner of the region requires a different conclusion. In the second half of the 1980s Central America was still extricating itself from civil wars. Guatemala in 1985 was not a democracy by any measure, though things improved in 1986. El Salvador was still bogged down in a horrific civil war with massive human rights violations, and Panama was ruled by Noriega. South America also showed pockets of authoritarianism in the 1980s that were gone after 1990. Chile was

governed by Pinochet, Brazil was under military rule until 1985, and Paraguay had a dictatorship until 1989. Finally, Mexico was more firmly in the grip of one-party rule in the 1980s than in the 1990s. The only countries where the outlook for democracy was worse in the 1990s were Peru after Fujimori's 1992 'autogolpe'; Colombia, where paramilitary and guerrilla violence increasingly constrained democratic practice beginning in the 1980s; and Venezuela. If we think about levels of democracy in terms of regime change and transitions to democracy, the picture improved from the last half of the 1980s to the 1990s. The Freedom House scores from those two periods lead to a mistaken conclusion.

In a similar vein, note the brief period of democratization in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The two less differentiated codings, Alvarez et al.'s dichotomy and our trichotomy, strongly register this trend, but the more continuous Polity index barely records it. An analysis that depended on Polity's indicator would miss this earlier 'mini-wave' of democratization. In sum, despite the high correlations among the four measures of democracy, the choices of regime classification have important implications for the substantive understanding of politics.

Conclusions

In this paper, we present an alternative categorization of political regimes in Latin America since 1945. We began this endeavor because of our partial dissatisfaction with the three main existing regime classifications that cover a substantial time period for Latin America in much of the post-1945 period: Alvarez et al. (1996), Freedom House, and Polity III. Our attempt to construct a new classification pushed us to rethink five broader issues regarding regime classification.

First, regime classification should rest on sound concepts and definitions. A classification of the extent to which regimes are democratic should be based on a procedural, minimalist but not subminimal definition of democracy.

Second, regime classification should be based on explicit and sensible coding and aggregation rules (Munck and Verkuilen 2000). Such explicit rules enable other scholars to more easily evaluate our classifications and also promote evenness of judgments.

Third, although social science is generally well advised to rely on objective and clearly measurable concepts, a distinction between 'observables' and subjective judgments is not useful for classifying political regimes. Regime classification must rest on empirically observable phenomena, but judgments about whether a violation of a particular dimension of democracy warrants classifying a certain regime as less than democratic are inevitably partly subjective. All four dimensions of democracy discussed in this paper require an

evaluation of observable phenomena, though the civil rights component, for example, is often harder to assess reliably than the mere presence of competitive elections. Moreover, subjective judgments are unavoidable if we are to retain a conceptually valid definition of democracy. We rely on informed judgment and knowledge of the cases to make the coding decisions reliable while retaining essential aspects of the definition of democracy to make them valid.

Fourth, the debate about dichotomous versus continuous measures of democracy creates a false dilemma (see Collier and Adcock 1999). Neither democratic theory, nor coding requirements, nor the reality underlying democratic practice compel either a dichotomous or a continuous approach in all cases. The problem is operational rather than theoretical. Notwithstanding the advantages of continuous measures, the traditional discourse on political regimes is categorical. Labels communicate normative meanings. Our trichotomous measure based on regime types can efficiently capture key conceptual distinctions that are important to comparative social scientists and make them evident at a glance. In addition, continuous measures usually fail to convey the rich theoretical implications that more conceptually grounded categories do. They also demand a level of information that may not be available or may be very costly to develop, so that coding decisions are unduly prone to error simply because coders lack the requisite knowledge to make such a fine-grained decision.

Fifth, for most purposes, we reject the use of a dichotomy for classifying regimes. Dichotomous measures fail to capture intermediate regime types, obscuring variation that is essential for studying many political regimes in what Huntington (1991) called the ‘third wave of democratization’. Acknowledging this trade-off between using meaningful regime labels and fine measurement, we have proposed a trichotomous ordinal scale, coding regimes as democratic, semidemocratic, or authoritarian. The idea of semidemocracy allows us to conceptualize historical regimes that do not fit neatly in a dichotomous classification, such the first Perón administration in Argentina (1946–51), the MNR government in Bolivia after the revolution (1952–64), the Frente Nacional period in Colombia (1958–74), and the Arévalo and Arbenz administrations in Guatemala (1945–54). It also serves to describe the many incomplete processes of democratization during the third wave—e.g., Mexico until the July 2000 presidential election, Nicaragua, and Paraguay—and cases of democratic erosion in the 1990s (e.g., Colombia).

Our trichotomous measure is based on a more stringent definition of democracy than Schumpeter’s and Alvarez et al.’s, and yet is designed to minimize information costs and ensure reliability. It attempts to strike a balance between the inadequate differentiation of dichotomous measures and the huge information demands of continuous measures. It is

based on enough knowledge of the nineteen countries to make reasoned judgments about the less easily observable dimensions of the regimes in question. Its combination of a thick conceptual grounding and a parsimonious coding demand is well suited for a medium-sized N study in which a research team is able to make informed judgments about cases.

In addition to addressing the current debate about the measurement of democracy and regime classifications, we hope that our regime classification makes a contribution to comparative scholarship on democracy and on Latin America. Much of the comparative research into the conditions for, or the causes and consequences of democracy, or the differences among countries on regime characteristics ultimately rests on regime classifications undertaken by other scholars. If, as we argue, the main existing classifications are flawed by political considerations, subminimal definitions, invalid measures, or other sources of systematic bias, conclusions about political regimes may be affected.

Despite the attractiveness of continuous measures of democracy, for Latin America the available continuous measures pose validity and reliability problems. In fact, it was partly dissatisfaction with the existing measures that prompted the decision to build our own classification. Although our trichotomous classification should not supercede efforts to construct more fine-grained measures, we believe it has fewer serious coding errors than the two widely used interval scales (Freedom House and Polity) that are available for a long historical period.

In short, we offer a new classification of 19 Latin American regimes from 1945 to 1999, labeling them on an annual basis as democracies, semidemocracies or authoritarian regimes. We defend our classification on methodological, theoretical, and empirical grounds. The other available measures can lead to mistaken conclusions about existing levels of democracy in the region and could also affect conclusions about causes and consequences of democracy.

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