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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Polity: Demystifying Democracy in Latin America and Beyond* by Joe Foweraker

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None of these omissions, I should add, undermine Corrales's central argument. The symmetry or asymmetry of power shapes the ebb and flow of the executive's power. But discussions of key court rulings and constitutional amendments would have dispelled doubts about the validity of his thesis. And they would have supplied a comprehensive portrait of executive power in Latin America. Nonetheless, in a relatively short (238 pages of text, tables, and figures) and well-organized book, readers will learn that a favorable balance of power explains why most constitutional assemblies have strengthened executive power in Latin America since the mid-1980s.

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Joe Foweraker, *Polity: Demystifying Democracy in Latin America and Beyond*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2018. Bibliography, index, 224 pp.; hardcover \$67, ebook \$67.

Following the hopeful democratic transitions of the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America, there was a debate about what elements were necessary for democratic consolidation in the region. However, unfolding events shifted attention away from thinking of transition as leading easily to consolidation. Scholars have focused instead on topics ranging from how and why electoral democracy has survived, eroded, or slipped into authoritarianism to the implications of extended, if still uneven, democratic rule for social policy. They have discussed frequent and sometimes dramatic changes in constitutional and electoral rules of the game and have analyzed why populism has emerged or re-emerged, why a weak rule of law and corruption have persisted, and why weaknesses in political party systems and political representation have continued.

In this theoretically wide-ranging, erudite book, Joe Foweraker advances a new concept and approach in order to provide a comprehensive framework that can make sense of these and other complex and sometimes contradictory patterns. For him, much of the scholarly literature is too focused on democracy's deficiencies and why it does not work as well as it should, leading to democracy's being "recurrently defined by what it lacks or fails to be rather than what it is in fact" (17). He argues that it is not just that the ideal of political democracy is unattainable, but that even the criteria for what Robert Dahl called polyarchy, what we might term "real-existing procedural democracy," are typically not fulfilled in contemporary Latin America (or many other regions of the world). Thus, Foweraker's ambition is to "define and describe a new and different object of inquiry" (2) more than just to serve as a counterweight to scholarship excessively focused on democratic institutions.

The concept at the core of his book is polity, drawing on Aristotle appropriately more "as inspiration than as model," given differences in how Aristotle deployed the term. In shorthand, Foweraker defines polity as a political system that encompasses both oligarchy and democracy. The concept and the analytical framework he advances through the chapters of the book are intended to provide a "tool set" for comprehensive and realistic analyses of contemporary Latin American politics. In

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addition, because democratic theory largely misses the importance of oligarchic power and its impact on state autonomy and organization in advanced democracies, as well as peripheral ones, he believes the framework might serve outside Latin America as well. This is because the performance differences across well-established and newer democracies are “more of degree than of kind” (31).

Polity comprises “the state, the democratic regime, and assorted organizations and associations of civil society” (1), and its analysis requires historical and contextual analysis. To develop the concept and associated analytical reflections, Foweraker provides the reader with pithy, critical analyses of central ideas of a host of scholars, on which he builds to generate his argument while also explaining his differences with them. The scholars discussed include Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl on the inherent limitations to procedural democracy and the continuing influence of powerful economic interests, as well as Guillermo O'Donnell and others on unexplored assumptions regarding the importance of state coherence and the rule of law for the emergence of democratic regimes. Also reviewed are key ideas of historical sociologists, such as Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, Barrington Moore, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol. And the pessimistic views regarding the inevitability of elite control or a political ruling class of Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels are also discussed.

In line with several of these and other scholars, he argues that in Latin America, in contrast to established democracies, weak and delayed state formation led to a state formed in negotiation with powerful private regional, sectoral, and corporate groups (oligarchies), combining public purpose with private interests. The result, with continuing impact today, is a patrimonial state, with porous, shifting boundaries between the public and private spheres, routinely penetrated by oligarchic interests, impacted by cronyism, corruption, and clientelism (74). Thus, contemporary political systems are better analyzed as *polities* than simply as democracies.

As does Aristotle, Foweraker insists there should not be a presumption that democracy is all good and oligarchy all bad (12). As he notes, oligarchies may sometimes pursue reasonable objectives and may vary in the extent that they advance republican values. However, the book also repeatedly makes clear that oligarchic penetration of the state and regime frequently enhances political and socioeconomic inequality, weakens the rule of law, and limits democratic accountability. Thus, private property inevitably plays an ambivalent role in democratic theory. For liberal constitutionalism, it serves as a bulwark against “unbridled majority control,” preserving democratic freedom; yet it also protects oligarchic power, which gains further influence by its penetration of the patrimonial state.

For the author, the contradictions of polity also help to explain both the recurring emergence of populism and its inherent limits. Populism is a recurring part of normal politics within polity, resulting from frustration with oligarchic power. Viewed in this way, he notes, the polity framework also helps to explain the populist resurgence in more established democracies. Yet Foweraker is not sanguine about the consequences of populism. Especially when linked to electoral majorities, populism can do extensive damage to checks and balances and accountability. And it

typically provides only transitory and frequently illusory gains to the populace, leading more to readjustments across democratic and oligarchic domains than to durable democratic advances.

The discussion of populism in the book points to an issue in the analysis of polity and patrimonialism that could have benefited from more extensive discussion. For Foweraker, patrimonialism is the invasion of the public sphere by oligarchic private interests, thus limiting state autonomy and capacity. I concur that there is little question that oligarchic societal penetration of weak states describes important parts of Latin American reality. Yet the emphasis by most scholars who study patrimonialism, following Max Weber, is on how state rulers use public power for their own private and power-concentrating ends—and through their use of cronyism and other means help other private oligarchic interests. This more clearly executive-led patrimonialism is exactly how electorally majoritarian populism is portrayed by Foweraker, though there are nonpopulist and nonmajoritarian examples of it in the region as well.

Where I found the book's discussion at its strongest was in how it built critically on classic texts to create its concept of polity. This process of critical review and analysis, however, was less evident with regard to some other topics discussed in the book. For example, Foweraker argues, reasonably enough, that constitutions are themselves shaped by structural and political forces, rather than exogenous to political outcomes. But he does not engage with the growing scholarship analyzing the impact of extensive constitutional changes on executive power that have taken place in the region, which also adopts some of these same assumptions. Similarly, there could have been discussion of the growing literature analyzing the interactive dynamics in some countries across new types of formal rights enshrined in constitutional texts, social movements, and more independent judiciaries, leading to the increasing activation of some of these rights. Perhaps because of his perspective regarding the strength of oligarchy and the ephemeral nature of populism, Foweraker also appears oddly agnostic about whether regimes such as those of Hugo Chávez and his successor in Venezuela or of Evo Morales in Bolivia will have any kind of enduring impact.

Foweraker's wide-ranging analytical review and proposed conceptual framework is an intellectual tour de force. His book provides an alternative perspective to excessively reductionist and decontextualized analyses of Latin American political institutions. Let me end, though, by highlighting three areas where I wish the author had expanded and deepened his analysis. One involves the boundary between polity and other types of political systems. Since polity incorporates both democracy and oligarchy, what preceded it when Latin American countries had no democracy? And if a country in contemporary Latin America is deemed to be no longer democratic, is it still a polity? By not engaging with these questions, Foweraker avoids the challenges that scholars employing a more standard democracy framework face in terms of drawing boundaries across democracy, hybrid regimes, and authoritarianism.

Another area involves the topic of subnational variation and the implications for polity of different types of oligarchic and patrimonial subnational power and

control. A third involves the very general level at which the analysis of polity is cast. Though Foweraker articulately discusses the vast differences across Latin America, he does not take the next step of spelling out what a typology or set of possible ideal types within polity might look like. Are certain constellations of features across state, regime, and civil society more likely? How might contrasting bases of private property and oligarchical power differentiate across types of polities? Perhaps the author will take up these and other questions in future analyses.

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Fernando Rosenblatt, *Party Vibrancy and Democracy in Latin America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2018. Illustration, tables, figures, abbreviations, appendix, bibliography, index, 304 pp.; hardcover \$74, ebook.

In this book, Fernando Rosenblatt makes an invaluable contribution to the literature on Latin American political parties and beyond. This work is the result of rigorous research that aims to answer the following questions: what conditions explain party vibrancy? And what explains a given party's ability to remain a vibrant organization over time and across critical junctures? Rosenblatt's work is exemplary in different aspects. First, the research question is substantive and relevant. Second, it introduces a phenomenon and concept that is original and theoretically rich. Third, the study presents a causal argument that combines complementary theoretical approaches. Fourth, the qualitative-based research design guarantees the accumulation of relevant data and primary sources for different cases. These strengths make this book an obligatory reference for students of political parties and comparative politics. In the remainder of this review, I will briefly refer to each of these aspects. At the end, I will suggest some ideas for a future research agenda.

The book's research question is suggestive. According to the Americas Barometer (2017), trust in political parties and levels of partisanship decreased in Latin America in the 2006–16 decade. The lowest level of the two indicators was observed in 2016. In this context, the identification of “vibrant parties,” that is, lively political organizations “that generate intense attachment from an important set of activists over time” (4), is not only surprising but also encouraging for the region's representative democracies. Although the region does not have many of these parties, Rosenblatt shows that some Latin American countries still have enduring political parties that fulfill their functions during and between elections. Other stable parties, he shows, have become ossified or exhausted. They do not contribute to the democratic regimes' good health. Vibrant parties, though, might become irrelevant if the causal factors that explain their liveliness lose relevance. This, in turn, affects the quality of democracies.

Party vibrancy, the study's dependent variable, is an understudied phenomenon. Although political parties have been the units of analysis in other works, only a few researchers have paid attention to the role that activists play in them and to the mechanisms that explain activists' attachment to or disaffection with the organ-

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