

## **Subnational Democracy: Lessons from Latin America**

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Social and political processes rarely unfold evenly across a territory. Rather, they occur in geographically uneven patterns and are likely to produce within-country variation. Democracy and democratization are not exceptions. Indeed, as Robert Dahl and Guillermo O'Donnell noted years ago, the unfolding of democracy in different regions of the world over time has been territorially uneven both across levels of government and subnational units.<sup>1</sup> Precisely for this reason, the study of democracy requires us to take issues of space seriously.

Echoing this claim, recent works by comparativists around the world have focused increasing attention on how territoriality shapes democratic development. In particular, these works have centered on the limited territorial reach of national democracy in subnational jurisdictions, challenging in important ways our previous understanding of national democratization processes. This essay focuses on Latin America, a region of the world that due to the prevalence of “regime juxtaposition”<sup>2</sup>-- i.e., the existence of subnational undemocratic regimes<sup>3</sup> (SURs) alongside a democratic national government-- has produced a wealth of novel and insightful studies on subnational democracy (SD) (see footnote 5).<sup>4</sup> The essay argues that while Latin Americanists have made key contributions that advance our knowledge on SD, important theoretical, conceptual, and methodological voids still need to be filled. By highlighting these shortcomings, this essay also seeks to chart new paths for future research on territorial democracy in Latin America and beyond.

### **Contributions from Latin America**

During the past three decades a growing number of Latin American countries have moved away from autocracy and military dictatorship towards democracy. Still, despite the progressive consolidation of national democracy, at the subnational level elections are still severely

manipulated, the civic liberties of the local populations are partially suppressed, and varying degrees of harassment and violence, which usually result from the capture of subnational governments by organized crime, skew the playing field in favor of incumbents. Additionally, in various lower-tier governments, ruling officials exert a tight grip over the legislative branch, local agencies of control, subnational party organizations, the local media, as well as local civic organizations.

One of the major contributions of Latin Americanists to the study of territoriality and SD has been the systematic documentation of instances of regime juxtaposition. These new studies, which range from in-depth, qualitative single case-studies to medium-N, within-country studies have provided detailed descriptions of SURs in countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, thus empirically confirming that democratic advancement in Latin America has been territorially uneven both across levels of government and subnational units.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, and as importantly, scholars have identified and documented the specific tactics employed by subnational undemocratic incumbents in nationally democratic countries to entrench their position in power. We now know that undemocratic governors and mayors engage in strategies of institutional engineering that deeply affect the distribution of provincial and local power in favor of incumbents by limiting the number of entrants in the electoral arena and reducing intraparty factionalism. Gerrymandering to overrepresent rural districts against the more competitive capital districts and changes in electoral rules that alter district magnitudes, are only some examples of the institutional reforms carried out by incumbents to consolidate their ruling position. Other examples include the frequent and arbitrary reshuffling of provincial/state-level supreme courts, the capricious removal of opposition mayors from office, the denial of funding to municipalities controlled by the opposition, the arbitrary commission of provincial/state-level audits to investigate contrived financial misdeeds of opposition mayors, and the co-optation or division of local organized groups, such as small unions, social movements, and street vendors, that could potentially exert societal control over undemocratic incumbents.

Another important contribution of the Latin American scholarship on SD has been the identification of the causes that underpin the continuity and change of undemocratic regimes in nationally democratic countries. Interestingly, most studies conducted in this region implicitly build on the idea that subnational democratic continuity and change are shaped by, and thus should

be understood by looking at the dynamics taking place between the center and the peripheral units of the political system.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, Snyder shows that events occurring at the federal level of government, such as the implementation of neoliberal (market) reforms, can contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of SURs. These reforms, as occurred in Mexico, triggered reregulation projects in the states through which undemocratic incumbents generated rents and resources to consolidate their ruling position.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Cornelius, and Montero and Samuels argue that the processes of decentralization that swept the region during the late 1980s and 1990s, and which shifted political, fiscal, and administrative power away from the national government toward subnational units, gave undemocratic state-level rulers greater autonomy, resources, and leverage to maintain SURs in power.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, Gibson demonstrates that authoritarian incumbents and regimes prevail when the scope of conflict is localized and opposition groups are cut off from allies and resources in the national polity. By contrast, they are threatened and overthrown when provincial conflict becomes nationalized.<sup>9</sup> Gervasoni's analysis of Argentina shows that the institutions of fiscal federalism shape the prospects for democratization in subnational arenas, as provinces that are highly dependent on federal transfers are better equipped to maintain SURs in place.<sup>10</sup> Montero's study of Brazil reveals that the building of national-local alliances between the national ruling Worker's Party and urban-based opposition forces in undemocratic states, are critical to challenge the hegemony of long-standing authoritarian caudillos.<sup>11</sup> Finally, analyzing Mexico and Argentina, Giraudy shows that the uneven territorial reach of the nation-state determines national incumbents' capacity and incentives to either strengthen or weaken SURs "from above."<sup>12</sup>

In sum, three of the contributions of Latin Americanists to the study of SD have been the systematic and detailed documentation of instances of regime juxtaposition in a variety of countries of the region, the identification of the specific tactics employed by subnational incumbents to entrench their ruling position, and the careful specification of the structural, strategic, and institutional sub-systemic interactions across levels of government that shape the continuity and change of SD. Despite these achievements, scholars of Latin American SD have left important theoretical, conceptual, and methodological issues unattended.

### **Shortcomings of the Literature**

Recent scholarship on SD in Eastern Europe has shown that internal structural factors, such as levels of capitalist development and economic autonomy, or external variables, such as patterns of international aid, are key factors in shaping the prospects of SD in several post-communist countries.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, due to their predominant focus on the effects of sub-systemic interactions on SD, scholars from Latin America still know very little about whether internal structural variables or external (international) factors undermine or aid the continuity of Latin American SURs. Future works exploring the effects of these variables on SD are needed to expand our knowledge about the causes that determine subnational political regime continuity and change in Latin America. Still, more importantly, these new works can trigger a new and much needed scholarly debate on whether SD and subnational democratization should be theorized from a “sub-systemic interaction” perspective (as proposed by Gibson) or whether they should be assessed by focusing on internal or external variables that are usually stressed in theories of national democracy and democratization.

The vast majority of Latin American studies on regime juxtaposition focus on the post-third wave democratization period and are spatially limited to provincial/state-level, second-tier governments. While entirely justified, these temporal and spatial demarcations may pose at least two important limitations for our understanding of subnational political regime dynamics. First, as the literature on temporal politics notes, a variety of aspects of time may be relevant to understanding important political outcomes. Subnational democratization may be a slow-moving process that takes a long time to unfold. Hence, it is very likely that the causal mechanisms that are responsible for its emergence are rooted in past events and follow a path-dependant pattern. Unfortunately, due to the short-time span of extant studies and databases, our understanding of how these mechanisms may (or may not) shape subnational regime dynamics is still very limited. A first step to help fill this gap is to dig into historical archives to assess the evolution of SD over longer periods of time. Doing so would allow one to produce longer time-series, which could be used to pin down the historical factors that may contribute to SUR resilience.

Second, the predominant focus on provincial/state-level governments may mask important aspects of territorial democracy in Latin America, thus further limiting our understanding of regime juxtaposition in the region. For instance, the absence of studies on democracy conducted at the local, i.e., municipal level of government, has prevented scholars from assessing the actual territorial reach of this type of political regime.<sup>14</sup> Subnational

undemocratic enclaves may be far more ubiquitous at the municipal than at provincial/state levels of government, thereby revealing that the territorial unevenness of democracy may be more severe than it is often thought to be. Until new studies and data on municipal democracy are produced, scholars of regime juxtaposition will lack the tools necessary to increase their descriptive accuracy and assess the magnitude of the phenomenon they are studying.

Despite the proliferation of works on regime juxtaposition, scarce attention has been devoted to issues of conceptualization and measurement.<sup>15</sup> Most works on SD in Latin America do not offer clear conceptual definitions of how they conceive political regimes, much less a discussion of their dimensions, sub-dimensions, and indicators. Moreover, they only rarely provide rules for coding democratic versus undemocratic subnational units, and perhaps more worryingly, only some of them measure the degree or level of democracy across *all* subnational units of a given country and *over time*. Complicating things further, Latin American analysts of regime juxtaposition use a variety of conceptual forms, such as hybrid, authoritarian, neopatrimonial, or ‘closed-game’ to refer to subnational political regimes that are not democratic. Each of these labels, in turn, is employed to denote a different set of empirical cases.

One of the major drawbacks of this conceptual murkiness for the study of SD is that scholars are severely prevented from specifying the domain of empirical cases for analysis. This in turn is problematic because the identification of the universe of cases is essential for crafting theories, testing hypotheses, and assessing causal relations.<sup>16</sup> The current lack of agreement among Latin American scholars of SD about what constitutes the proper domain of empirical cases for analysis is thus worrying as it may prevent them from making further progress toward theory testing and theory refinement. In effect, because researchers are unable to assess the same object of study, explanations cannot be considered as competing, making it impossible to adjudicate among them. A necessary step to help expand knowledge accumulation in the subfield of regime juxtaposition is thus to promote a more self-conscious and careful use of concepts and measurement strategies among scholars.

Another important step towards expanding our knowledge on SD is to move past current works that assume unit homogeneity across SURs. Much writing on territorial democracy has taken for granted that SURs within countries are homogenous or uniform entities, all deemed to be analyzed and treated as equivalents, especially with regard to the relation they maintain with national rulers or national institutions. However, while sharing important political features, these

regimes vary considerably among each other with these differences being crucial to explain regime continuity and change. For instance, subnational regimes can be differentiated in terms of the power bases of incumbents within states as well as rulers' distinct styles of leadership. Alternatively, they can be distinguishable by their levels of financial dependency on the central government and the intrinsic characteristics of subnational state-administrations.<sup>17</sup> These provincial/state-level differences are critical for determining undemocratic incumbents' clout in their dealing with central state elites, and play a decisive role in explaining how, and under what conditions, undemocratic subnational regimes continue to survive. Future research on SD will have to acknowledge how cross-subnational differences among undemocratic regimes shape the prospects of SUR resilience and change.

Finally, as noted earlier, Latin Americanists have, for the most part, carried out within-country comparisons of subnational undemocratic units in single countries while paying little to no attention to cross-national comparisons among countries where democracy is territorially uneven. This can have important implications for knowledge accumulation because we are prevented from assessing whether the uneven territorialization of democracy is more or less pronounced in, say, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia, Peru or Argentina. As a result, little theoretical progress can be made to evaluate how levels of subnational democratic territorial unevenness are affecting the viability of *national* democracy.

In sum, the Latin American scholarship on SD has made major contributions to the study of regime juxtaposition, thus helping in important and novel ways to push the research agenda on territorial democracy forward. Despite this progress, important theoretical, conceptual, and empirical gaps still need to be filled. The issues raised in this essay are only some of the topics that will need to be addressed in the future in order to advance our knowledge about how space and territory shape democracy and democratization.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Guillermo O'Donnell, *Counterpoints. Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Gibson, "Boundary Control. Subnational Authoritarianism in Democratic Countries" *World Politics* 58 (October 2005): 101-132.

<sup>3</sup> The term "undemocratic" is employed to refer to regimes that are neither democratic nor authoritarian – after all, the "bounded" character of these regimes (embedded within a nationally democratic regime) forces subnational units to be minimally democratic. For the sake of clarity, these regimes are not referred to as "hybrid" because this is a generic term usually employed to denote different regime types, such as electoral authoritarianisms, competitive authoritarianisms, semi-democracies, or semi-authoritarianisms, among others.

<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of studies on SD has also been spurred by the methodological advantages associated with the "subnational comparative method," among which are the possibility of increasing the number of observations for analysis, and constructing controlled comparisons (see Richard Snyder, "Scaling Down: The Subnational Comparative Method" *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36 (March 2001): 93-110).

<sup>5</sup> Some illustrative works include, Jonathan Fox, "Latin America's Emerging Local Politics" *Journal of Democracy* 5 (April 1994): 105-116; Wayne Cornelius, "Subnational Politics and Democratization: Tensions between Center and Periphery in the Mexican Political System," in Wayne Cornelius, Todd A. Eisenstadt, and Jane Hindley, eds., *Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico* (La Jolla: Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California San Diego, 1999); Richard Snyder, "After the States Withdraws: Neoliberalism and Subnational Authoritarian Regimes in Mexico," in Wayne Cornelius, Todd A. Eisenstadt, and Jane Hindley, eds., *Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico* (La Jolla: Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California San Diego, 1999); Gibson (2005); Alfred Montero, *Uneven Democracy? Subnational Authoritarianism in Democratic Brazil*, Paper delivered at Latin American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, Quebec, Canada 2007; Carlos Gervasoni, "A Rentier Theory of Subnational Regimes: Fiscal Federalism, Democracy, and Authoritarianism in the Argentine Provinces" *World Politics* 62 (April 2010): 302-40; Allyson Benton, "Bottom-Up Challenges to National Democracy: Latin America's (Legal) Subnational Authoritarian Enclaves, the Case of Mexico" *Comparative Politics* (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> This dynamic has been referred to by Tarrow as "territorial politics," and recently by Gibson as "sub-systemic interaction (see Sidney Tarrow, "Introduction," in Peter Katzenstein and L. Graziano, ed., *Territorial Politics in Industrial Nations* (New York and London: Praeger Publishers, 1978); Edward Gibson, *Subnational Authoritarianism and Territorial Politics: Charting the Theoretical Landscape*, Paper delivered at the American Political Science Association Annual Congress, August 30, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Snyder 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius 1999; Alfred Montero and David Samuels, eds. *Decentralization and Democracy in Latin America* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Gibson 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Gervasoni 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Montero, "No Country for Leftists? Clientelist Continuity and the 2006 Vote in the Brazilian Northeast" *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 2 (2010): 113-153.

<sup>12</sup> Agustina Giraudy, *Subnational Undemocratic Regime Continuity after Democratization. Argentina and Mexico in Comparative Perspective* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> See Kelly McMann, *Economic Autonomy and Democracy. Hybrid Regimes in Russia and Kyrgyzstan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Tomila Lankina and Getachew Lullit, "A Geographic Incremental Theory of Democratization. Territory, Aid, and Democracy in Postcommunist Regions" *World Politics* 58 (July 2006): 536-82.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted however, that in the last few years, there has been a boom in comparative studies of cities. While these works do not focus on democracy per se, they shed important light on problems related to SD, such as "participatory policymaking," crime, violence, and "urban governance" (see, for instance, Gianpaolo Baiocchi, *Militants and Citizens: The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Richard Snyder and Angelica Duran-Martinez, "Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets" *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 52 (September 2009): 253-73; Eduardo Moncada, "Counting Bodies: Crime Mapping, Policing and Race in Colombia" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (April 2010): 696-716.

<sup>15</sup> Exceptions are Solt (2003), Gervasoni (2010), and Giraudy (2010). These analysts employ different conceptualizations and strategies to measure SD. Whereas Gervasoni adopts a "thick" definition of democracy that incorporates both electoral and liberal dimensions, Solt and Giraudy subscribe to a Schumpeterian, electoral conception of democracy. In terms of measurement strategies, Gervasoni conducts a Survey of Experts on Provincial Politics that assesses experts' subjective evaluations; Solt and Giraudy, by contrast, employ objective indicators. The three authors measure SD across all districts, although they differ in terms of the number of countries covered. Whereas Solt and Gervasoni limit their measurement to one country (Mexico and Argentina, respectively), Giraudy gauges levels of SD in both Mexico and Argentina. See Frederick Solt, *Explaining the Quality of New Democracies: Actors, Institutions, and Socioeconomic Structure in Mexico's States* (Ph.D. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003); Agustina Giraudy, "The Politics of Subnational Undemocratic Regime Reproduction in Argentina and Mexico" *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 2(2010): 53-84.

<sup>16</sup> Gerardo Munck, "Tools for Qualitative Research," in Henry Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry. Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> See Snyder 1999; Giraudy 2009, 2010.