

## LATIN AMERICA'S INTERRUPTED PRESIDENCIES

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Almost 25 years have passed since Latin America began what has turned out to be the fullest and most enduring experience it has ever had with constitutional democracy. While dictatorships were the norm in the 1960s and 1970s—only Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela avoided authoritarian rule during those decades—today an elected government rules in every Latin America country except Cuba and Haiti. As David Scott Palmer notes, between 1930 and 1980, the 37 countries that make up Latin America underwent 277 changes of government, 104 of which (or 37.5 percent) took place via military coup. From 1980 to 1990, by contrast, only 7 of the 37 changes of government in the region took place through military interventions, just two of which can be fairly described as clearly antidemocratic in intent. The overall number of coups was the lowest for any single decade in Latin American history since independence in the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The coups of the 1980s were confined to just four countries: Bolivia, Haiti, Guatemala, and Paraguay. Since 1990, only Haiti and Peru have seen elected constitutional governments successfully replaced by force. In 1989, Argentines witnessed their country's first transfer of power from one civilian chief executive to another in more than sixty years. In 2000, Mexico marked its emergence as a multiparty democracy after more than seven decades of one-party

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<sup>1</sup>David Scott Palmer, "Peru: Collectively Defending Democracy in the Western Hemisphere," in Tom Farer, ed., *Beyond Sovereignty: Collectively Defending Democracy in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 258.

rule. Most Latin states have never had so many successive elected governments come to power without authoritarian reversals.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, the euphoria that accompanied democracy's rise has begun to wane. Opinion polls show that Latin Americans still broadly support democracy and prefer it to dictatorship by a better than four-to-one margin. Yet the same surveys reveal a growing dissatisfaction with democracy and a readiness to question the benefits and the performance of democratic governments.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly troubling is a continuing pattern of instability that affects governance at the highest levels. In country after country, presidents have seen their job-approval ratings plummet while those of legislators and party leaders have tumbled even more steeply. Many a president has left office trailing dashed hopes and enfeebled institutions, but at least has left according to schedule. Fourteen presidents, however, have not. This group has suffered the indignity of early removal through impeachment or forced resignation, sometimes under circumstances of instability that have threatened constitutional democracy itself. A fifteenth chief executive interrupted the constitutional order by closing congress.

In the past, the military was at the heart of the problem. Ambition-driven generals might eject an elected president from office or bar the implementation of policies that the soldiers and their allies did not like. New figures and forces might gain admission to the military-run "game" of politics if they took care not to advocate anything that sounded too radical or populist. Officers would arbitrate among factions and decide when to call for new elections to restore

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<sup>2</sup>For background, see Jonathan Hartlyn and Arturo Valenzuela, "Democracy in Latin America Since 1930," in Leslie Bethel, ed., *Latin America Since 1930: Economy, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

<sup>3</sup>Marta Lagos, "A Road With No Return? Latin America's Lost Illusions," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (April 2003): 161–73.

civilian rule, and coups in turn always enjoyed the complicity of civilian elites.<sup>4</sup> After Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba and set up a revolutionary-communist regime on the island in 1959, polarization intensified throughout the region and military juntas increasingly began to leave behind political refereeing in favor of full-blown “bureaucratic-authoritarian” dictatorship.<sup>5</sup>

Latin American democracy no longer faces threats from U.S.-supported local elites that fear any reform movement as a possible Soviet front. Military governments failed overwhelmingly to cope with the economic and social crises of the 1970s and 1980s. Toward the end of that period, U.S. foreign policy reacted to the winding-down of the Cold War by shifting from support for authoritarian regimes as necessary if distasteful bulwarks against communism to recognition that authoritarianism was thwarting the consolidation of legitimate governments. The United States joined other Western Hemispheric nations in creating mechanisms to stop any forcible disruptions of constitutional democracy.<sup>6</sup> In what has been a sea change since the Cold War, Latin American militaries no longer mix openly in politics.

### **Failed Presidencies**

The ratcheting-down of polarization and the military’s withdrawal to the barracks have not, however, ushered in an era of uniformly successful presidential governments. Instability remains a persistent problem, and sometimes proceeds along lines that are eerily reminiscent of the unhappy past. For two decades—from Bolivian president Hernán Siles Suazo’s 1985 ouster amid hyperinflation to Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s 2004 flight before a wave of

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<sup>4</sup> A classic study is Charles W. Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J., 1967). See also John J. Johnson, *The Military and Society in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964) and Edwin Lieuwen, *Generals vs. Presidents: Neomilitarism in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). Guillermo O’Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> See Farer, *Beyond Sovereignty*, passim.

thugs—a lengthy list of presidents failed to complete their constitutionally prescribed terms (for a complete listing of these “interrupted” chief executives, see Table I attached).

Three cases differ enough from the others to merit special mention. Aristide has actually been toppled twice. The first coup against him came in August 1991, nine months after he had won a resounding victory in a December 1990 popular election. This was a “classic” military putsch carried out with strong support from a tiny civilian elite fearful of the former radical priest’s populism. Restored after a 1994 U.S. military intervention, Aristide hung on through a nonconsecutive second term that began in 2001 while the overwhelming problems of his country (the Western Hemisphere’s poorest) festered. They continued to do so even after brigand gangs and disgruntled ex-soldiers descended on Port-au-Prince and forced him—under disputed circumstances—to flee in a U.S.-furnished plane to the Central African Republic on 29 February 2004.

In Peru, President Alberto Fujimori (a political outsider who had won a runoff election after garnering just 25 percent of the vote in the November 1990 first round) executed an *autogolpe* (self-coup). Chafing at the prospect of having to cut deals with a legislature dominated by his foes, he recruited military support and shuttered Congress in April 1992. International condemnation was swift and widespread, but Fujimori’s decisive actions (including victories over the Shining Path terrorist movement) helped him to secure both congressional-election victories for his allies and his own reelection to a second term in 1995.

The third unusual case involves the Dominican Republic, where the decision to cut short the final term of longtime president Joaquín Balaguer came before his actual inauguration. In 1994, the aged Balaguer had won a sixth term by a tiny margin, edging an old rival in a bitter race marked by widespread fraud charges and continuing civil unrest. Acting under the strong

coaxing of the U.S. State Department (in which I was then serving), Balaguer helped to defuse the situation by letting his term be cut from five years to two and agreeing never to run again.

In the remaining twelve cases, each president left office early amid severe economic, political, and social turmoil that the president's own immediate departure was widely seen as essential to resolving. Some presidents found themselves forced out after they took actions deliberately intended to suspend or undermine democracy. Others found that their position faced erosion not only due to flagging public confidence and surging unrest, but also because military leaders could no longer guarantee order and support. A final group left under less dramatic circumstances that came down to abysmal performance and nose-diving public support.

On 25 May 1993 Guatemala's President Jorge Serrano tried to break a perceived stalemate with the 116-member legislature (in which his party held only 18 seats) by means of a Fujimori-style self-coup. He arrested congressional leaders, Supreme Court judges, and the national ombudsman, and then announced elections for a constituent assembly to be held within six months. It all soon went sour, however, as the international community, party leaders, business groups, the armed forces, and thousands of student and civic-group demonstrators lined up against him. On June 1, senior officers who had been in touch with the opposition told Serrano that he and his supportive vice-president would have to go. Congress chose the former human rights ombudsman to fill the presidency.

In Ecuador seven years later, it was also high-ranking soldiers who pressured President Jamil Mahuad out of office after indigenous protestors and rebellious troops occupied Congress to show their anger at the austerity measures that he had proposed to deal with economic stagnation and a ballooning deficit. Mahuad's ouster was part of the deal that the high command had made in order to end the takeover. Mahuad, who had garnered only 35 percent in the first

round of the 1998 presidential race and whose party held only 35 out of 121 congressional seats, had lurched from crisis to crisis with scant support.

Ironically, one of the most recent failed presidents turned out to be Fujimori. Riding his early successes in fighting terrorism and boosting Peru's economy, the former agronomics professor leaned heavily on military and secret-police allies and never bothered much with serious party-building or congressional relations. After his 1995 reelection, he began pressing the courts for a constitutional interpretation that would allow him to run for a third term. His public support waned and his hard-line, autocratic style caught up with him when his efforts to rig the April 2000 election sparked mass protests and strong international condemnation. Facing likely impeachment and criminal charges after his spy chief was caught offering bribes, Fujimori went to Japan and sent in his resignation in November 2000. Congress passed over his vice-president and chose its own presiding officer as temporary chief executive pending fresh balloting.

Bolivia's Siles Suazo had been his country's president from 1956 to 1960. He returned to office in 1982 after years of coups and countercoups, only to face massive economic problems including hyperinflation. With no majority in either house of Congress and a fiercely restive labor movement on his hands, he saw his economic-stabilization policies repeatedly collapse as he strove in vain to bridge the gap between the standards set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the demands of domestic groups.

Nothing seemed to work. Rule by decree, efforts to lobby Congress, and the appointment of a technocratic cabinet proved similarly fruitless as the indecisive Siles Suazo wavered from one approach to another, finally resorting to a hunger strike as a desperate way to gain public sympathy. With his support crumbling and coup rumors abounding, the president at last agreed

to a Catholic Church–brokered agreement under which Congress moved the presidential election forward by a year, cutting his mandate short.

In 1989, observers of Brazilian politics were surprised when an obscure provincial governor named Fernando Collor de Mello managed to parlay charm, good looks, and a media-savvy “antipolitics” message into 28.5 percent of the first-round vote and an eventual presidential-runoff win. Collor, whose ad hoc party held just 5 percent of the seats in Congress, soon alienated the older parties. Congressional moves to limit his powers, plus a faltering, inflation-wracked economy, forced him to move grudgingly toward expanding his legislative coalition. Before he got very far, however, a corruption scandal brought about his impeachment and resignation in 1992.

Venezuela’s Carlos Andres Pérez (1989–93) was exceptional in that both he and his party had won electoral majorities. Pérez had overseen a strong economy during a previous turn as president in the late 1970s, and people reeling from the effects of declining oil prices on the petroleum-dependent Venezuelan economy hoped that he would turn things around. Facing soaring budget deficits and inflationary pressures, Pérez moved swiftly to implement an IMF-approved austerity package that included fuel-price hikes. The result was unrest violent and widespread enough to drive Pérez to declare martial law. His governing style did not help him win support for his policies even among his own partisans. His own party’s leaders, many of whom had resisted his candidacy, resented him for not adequately informing them of his initiatives and for ignoring their reform proposals. In October 1991, Pérez lost ground in internal party elections. The year following, two unprecedented military uprisings (army colonel and future president Hugo Chávez led the first) left 120 people dead. As Pérez’s own party abandoned him amid charges that he had misused secret presidential funds, his efforts to recruit

support from a dissident wing of the main opposition party fell short, and he found himself impeached and removed from office in December 1993.

### **A Flawed System?**

How to account for this list of failures? Scholars point out that establishing democracy is one thing, while consolidating it is something else entirely. As Dankwart A. Rustow put it, democracy needs time to “habituate” itself.<sup>7</sup> Reformers have stressed the need for time to strengthen state institutions, develop rules and procedures for greater transparency and the rule of law, create and improve political parties and civil society organizations, and build effective working relations between the executive and legislative branches of government. Democratic governments must cope with daunting economic and social challenges, and need improved state capacity, accountability, and representativeness in order to meet the stern tests of governance. Donor agencies and international financial institutions have generated long lists of goals, from strengthening local governments to creating more transparent methods for handling legal matters.

Peter Hakim has aptly described the multiple hurdles now facing Latin America’s nascent democracies.<sup>8</sup> While he stressed his belief that there is “no single cause or common set of causes that can explain Latin American malaise,” he also singled out stronger political parties and better leadership as necessary preconditions for successful governance. From a methodological point of view, it is unclear why the strengthening of particular institutions or sets of institutions should improve the overall rate at which democracies succeed in establishing themselves and remaining functional. Much more work will be needed to enable us to distinguish the truly essential factors from those that are helpful but not crucial.

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<sup>7</sup> Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Towards a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 337–63. See also Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hakim, “Latin America’s Lost Illusions: Dispirited Politics,” *Journal of Democracy* 14 (April 2003): 121.

Studying the failed presidencies described in this paper may help us make that distinction. Two dynamics are particularly noteworthy. The first flows from the heat that the president and other officials can feel from protest movements seeking concrete solutions to real problems. This is hardly something new in Latin America, where the state—and at its head the president—tends to be seen as the source of all power and the final bearer of responsibility. In many cases, the political costs that came attached to IMF-compliant policies form a prominent theme. Indeed, not only presidents Mahuad and Pérez, but also Argentina's Fernando de la Rúa (driven from office in December 2001) and Bolivia's Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (forced out by violent demonstrators in October 2003) felt the sting of protests against austerity measures that each had adopted in order to stabilize a troubled national economy. And yet it is also true that presidents who avoided strong steps for fear of public outcry—this group includes Collor de Mello, Siles Suazo, and Serrano as well as Argentina's Raúl Alfonsín and Ecuador's Abdullah Bucaram—have paid a price for their relative inaction as national currencies have collapsed and inflation has spiraled out of control.

Protests can face a president with a quandary. Unchecked demonstrations may rage beyond bounds, but the use of force against them can backfire. The personalization of authority in the figure of the president adds a particularly vexing dimension. Failures of government are viewed not as failures of a party or movement, but failures of the chief executive himself. The heavy symbolic trappings carried by the head of state, combined with often-overblown folk memories concerning powerful and non-democratic past presidents, lead citizens to expect that a leader must fix the country's problems or face bitter charges of incompetence and corruption.

In presidential systems, a crisis will often cease to be primarily about specific grievances and their redress, and become instead a question of whether the chief executive himself should

go. The police and military, fearing association with an unpopular or discredited leader, may under-react to threats against public order. If unrest mounts, the fixed-term president may find his position growing untenable, with no ready-made exit strategy available to match the dissolution of parliament and call for new elections that would be the solution in a prime-ministerial regime. Pressure from the street (including the worrisome possibility of violence) and congressional actions that push the limits of constitutional propriety may be what it takes to make a failing president face his fate. In the meantime, the political confrontations and turbulence caused by the issue of his removal can threaten to transform a government crisis into a full-blown crisis of the constitutional order itself.

The second dynamic dovetails with the first and helps to explain it. Although the citizenry expects a head of state to resolve deep-seated problems, Latin American democratic presidents are for the most part extraordinarily weak—they “reign” rather than “rule.” The weakness of state institutions is usually less at fault than the sheer difficulty of building and maintaining support in a political environment of fragmented parties with little or no internal discipline. Compounding this problem is a lack of institutional incentives to prevent unchecked party splits, floor crossings, and the like. In the absence of majorities in Congress presidents struggle to generate legislative support—only to find that legislators, often of the president’s own party—are uninterested in collaborating either with a weak chief executive--- or contributing to the success of a stronger one. Rather than generating a logic of cooperation presidential regimes seem to generate a logic of confrontation precisely because presidential opponents see the success of a president as inimical to their own interests and a failed president as someone to avoid.

The need for a solid capacity to practice the “politics of addition” and build governing coalitions becomes especially apparent when one realizes how many failed Latin presidents have been bereft of *prima facie* majority support. Among the 14 discussed in this essay, only Haiti’s Aristide, Venezuela’s Pérez, and Paraguay’s Raúl Cubas were elected by absolute majorities. Alfonsín and de la Rúa of Argentina each topped 48 percent, while the remaining nine presidents were runoff winners who came in well short of that in the first round. Bucaram, Fujimori, and Sánchez de Lozada each initially won less than 25 percent of the vote.

At the same time, only Pérez and Cubas (who was Paraguay’s chief executive for less than a year in 1998–99) commanded legislative majorities. One study covering all presidential elections in 18 Latin American countries from 1978 to 2000 found that presidents averaged more than 50 percent of the vote in only half of the countries. Majority legislative support for the president was even rarer, occurring in only about one out of every four presidential terms covered by the study.<sup>9</sup>

The more fragmented the opposition and the smaller the president’s own party, the greater becomes the challenge of cobbling together a majority ruling coalition. Legislators may ignore programmatic considerations entirely and seek instead to gain as many advantages as possible for specific constituency interests. Coalitions will then be short-lived and ad hoc, aimed at grabbing the main chance or weathering the crisis of the moment rather than representing a stable majority of legislators. Even majority coalitions may have little to do with adopting a common program across a range of policy matters. Opposition parties will often stand to get no credit for successful policies but risk blame for failures, giving such parties scant reason to rally to the president, even if promised cabinet posts. Should opposition forces come to think that they

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<sup>9</sup> J. Mark Payne et al., *Democracies in Development: Politics and Reform in Latin America* (Washington, D.C: Inter-American Development Bank, 2002), 74, 211.

will get more out of causing a president to fail than helping him to succeed, the presidency in question may go into a death spiral. With no prospect of fresh elections to resolve impasses and generate working majorities, executive-legislative relations will wind up bitterly deadlocked in what Juan J. Linz has called the “zero-sum game” of presidentialism.<sup>10</sup>

On the president’s side, the travails of coalition-building may result from a simple unwillingness to surrender cabinet authority and executive freedom of action to often-amorphous and potentially antagonistic partners. Thus for presidents, too, the costs of power-sharing may exceed its perceived benefits, leading to the perverse situation of a president who lets his administration remain weak and politically isolated rather than bend his prerogatives to the demands of allies.

Although “minority presidents” are more likely to face difficulties than those backed by clear legislative majorities, strong party representation in congress is no guarantee of presidential success. Both Pérez and Cubas disdained dealing with their own parties and faced political revolts (the former’s attempt to make up for this by recruiting opposition legislators into a new coalition fell flat, as we have seen). A president may find defeated rivals (perhaps including figures within his own party whom he bested for the nomination) becoming his harshest congressional critics. Making the problem worse may be former presidents eager to return to office and unafraid to pull their old parties apart in the process.<sup>11</sup> When the going gets rough,

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<sup>10</sup> Juan J. Linz, “Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does It Make a Difference?” in Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela, eds., *The Failure of Presidential Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 18–19. A first draft of this classic essay was written for a conference held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Rafael Caldera, a former president of Venezuela (1969–73) and an architect of the elite agreements that ended authoritarian rule, had an even more negative effect on his party when he succeeded Pérez after the latter’s impeachment. Having failed to win the nomination of the party that he had founded, Caldera insisted on running as an independent. Repeat candidacies of former presidents are the stuff of legend in Latin American history. The pattern has continued into recent decades with not only Caldera and Fujimori but also figures as dissimilar as Balaguer, Fernández of the Dominican Republic, Eduardo Frei of Chile, Alan García of Peru, Hipólito Mejía of the Dominican Republic, Carlos Saúl Menem of Argentina, and Julio María Sanguinetti of Uruguay.

allies will desert to save their viability in future elections. In contrast to the situation that obtains in a parliamentary system, legislators can defect without either risking their own seats or affecting the president's ability to remain in office.

To make all this worse, chief executives often find it tempting to attack congress while trying to bypass it with decrees. The precipitous drop in the credibility of legislatures, parties, and politicians—often quite rightly cited as a serious problem in Latin democracies—is due not merely to sensationalist journalism and critical NGOs, but also to the deliberate rhetoric of presidents who seek to boost their own standing at the legislature's expense. Typically, the more decree powers a president possesses, the worse will be his relations with congress. The increasing exertion of such executive prerogatives risks turning the legislature from an arena of compromise and “getting to yes” into a forum for saying no to executive plans. By resorting to decree powers presidents may become stronger, but the presidential system becomes weaker and more brittle encouraging confrontation rather than accommodation.

The paradox of Latin American politics is that democratically elected chief executives are undermining democratic institutions in the very act of trying to shore up their own weaknesses as presidents. Even those who do not fail outright all too often leave behind a legacy of missed opportunities. The plebiscitarian temptations that come with presidentialism, combined with the popularity of rhetorical assaults on “politics as usual,” can occasionally lead to the concentration and even abuse of power in the leader's hands. The cautionary tales of Fujimori, Aristide, and most recently Chávez in Venezuela, show how presidentialism can occasionally be perverted into quasi-authoritarianism or even dictatorship, although political instability and absence of authority is a far more prevalent pattern.

### Is Parliamentarism the Answer?

These observations suggest that the problem of governance in Latin America may be due to more than just the episodic weaknesses of particular parties, leaders, or institutions. Can it be that presidentialism by its very nature makes confrontations sharper, cooperation more elusive, party discipline harder to achieve, and party fragmentation easier and more reasonable-seeming? Is it time for reformers in the region to think once again about the wisdom of shifting from presidentialism to parliamentary government?<sup>12</sup>

Although “presidentialism” and “parliamentarism” are types that admit of considerable internal variation, and although there are mixed forms of government that combine elements of both, for expository purposes the two systems can be sharply differentiated on several key dimensions.<sup>13</sup> Presidential regimes feature “competing legitimacies.” The executive and the legislature can each claim its own electoral mandate to exercise its distinct, though occasionally overlapping powers. Presidents or congresses may choose cooperation or confrontation; the rules of the system (whether formal or informal) fail to require either. Under parliamentary government, by contrast, the legislature generates the executive, which then serves at the pleasure of the legislative majority, whether as a majority or a minority government. Cabinet government means that members of parliament hold responsible executive posts. This not only requires that senior party leaders and would-be ministers must run for legislative office, but also provides a means by which legislators can gain serious executive-branch experience and a more

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to Linz and Valenzuela, *Failure of Presidential Democracy*, see Juan J. Linz, “The Perils of Presidentialism” *Journal of Democracy* 1 (Winter 1990): 51–69 and Arturo Valenzuela, “Latin America: Presidentialism in Crisis,” *Journal of Democracy* 4 (October 1993): 3–16. Critics of these views, while acknowledging the problems with presidentialism, tended to overstate the success of presidential regimes in the early years of democratic transition. See the essays in Scott Mainwaring et al., eds., *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> An essential work in the field is Matthew Soberg Shugart and John Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

strongly felt stake in how the country's affairs are run, thereby encouraging more skilled and sober leadership.

Under presidentialism, moreover, the chief executive is both head of state and head of government. In the former capacity, the president receives ambassadors and potentates, travels to official funerals, and embodies the nation in times of triumph and tragedy. As head of government, the president enjoys wide latitude in naming cabinet and sub-cabinet officials, although some of these may need legislative consent or be subject to congressional oversight. In parliamentary regimes, the "ceremonial" and "effective" roles are divided, with the head of state (whether a constitutional monarch or a president) filling a symbolic function and perhaps acting as a moderating force at times of crisis. Prime ministers as executives run collegial governments that reflect party and coalition imperatives. Although in the media age prime ministers have become more visible as chiefs of government and enjoy considerable authority and prominence in their own right, their post by its very nature still demands that they lead by maintaining the trust of their parties and ultimately a majority of parliament.

Third, the direct election of presidents means that someone may reach the highest office in the land without strong party or governmental experience or support, propelled by direct media appeals in races crowded with candidates. To be successful, a president must work with congress—despite the sometimes-overwhelming temptation to bash it—and must achieve this cooperation mostly by using political rather than statutory or constitutional powers. The leadership of the president's own party will be split among congress, the higher levels of the executive branch, and those attached to the party organization. Each of these three groups will often have its own goals and incentives as its members make their various calculations about how best to position themselves for future political success. Prime ministers in cabinet

governments are typically not media-driven political amateurs, but rather veteran party leaders with substantial ministerial experience and every incentive to stay close to rather than “run against” their own parties and coalition partners in the legislature.

Fourth and finally, presidents and congresses are elected for fixed, often staggered terms, which can lead to a situation where the legislative majority changes hands even while the president has years left in office. In parliamentary regimes, the government can change either when the prime minister’s party loses a majority (whether through general-election defeat or a coalition breakup) or when the prime minister’s party rebels and calls for new leadership. Any crisis of leadership or government, in other words, trips automatic institutional “safety valves” such as ministerial resignations, parliamentary dissolution, and fresh elections. Crises of government, therefore, rarely become crises of regime. This suppleness of parliamentarism stands in sharp contrast with the intrinsic rigidity of presidentialism, under which a defect in leadership or failure of policy can quickly tailspin into institutional and even mass confrontations with a frightening potential for violent instability and all the human and political costs it portends.

In sum, parliamentary regimes are based on a political logic that urges cooperation and consensus within the context of coherent policies. The unification of legislative and executive power places a high premium on working together to maximize success and avoid new elections. The underlying logic of presidentialism is far more conflict-prone, meaning that miscalculations or other personal failures of leadership can more easily set loose the perverse logic that leads legislators to hope for the president’s failure, particularly late in a term or at a time of special difficulty when citizens become peculiarly eager for a savior—or failing that, a scapegoat.

### What's Stopping Parliamentarism?

While the case for adopting parliamentarism might seem compelling to political scientists, the idea of such a shift is plainly anathema to most Latin American citizens. The overwhelming symbolic authority attributed to presidentialism leaps out from the pages of the region's history and bestrides its politics like a colossus. Even if successful democratic presidents have been few and far between, there have been enough legends such as Mexico's Benito Juárez (1861–63, 1867–72) to keep Latin America the continent of presidentialism *par excellence*. Brazil, which is unique in the region for having remained officially a monarchy from the time of its independence in 1822 until 1889, decisively defeated a 1993 referendum on shifting to parliamentarism. The compelling reason seems to have been a fear that doing away with presidentialism would strip citizens of vital representation.

Aside from the potent appeal to tradition, the argument against ditching presidentialism most heard in the region is that parliamentary government would fail precisely because of weak leaders, parties, and legislatures, thereby provoking greater instability. This argument ignores how the political incentive structure based on separation of powers aggravates party fragmentation and indiscipline and encourages weak leadership. It also ignores the substantial evolution in parliamentary governments that has taken place since the wobbliest days of the French Third and Fourth Republics (1870–1940, 1946–58) or the “musical-chairs” cabinets of Italy in the years following World War II.

It is noteworthy that all of the new, post-Soviet democracies of Eastern Europe rejected presidential forms of government, opting instead for semi-presidential systems (based on the French Fifth Republic) where popularly elected presidents with specific powers, including authority in foreign and security matters, coexist with prime ministers whose governments must

enjoy the support of parliament to survive.<sup>14</sup> Given Latin Americans' reluctance to abandon the presidential system, semi-presidential formulas might be considered a more realistic alternative. The problem is that semi-presidentialism may not solve some of the inherent problems of presidentialism, and indeed could make them worse by reifying the conflict between the two state powers and personalizing them in the figure of the president and the prime minister.<sup>15</sup>

Preferable to semi-presidentialism would be a parliamentary system with a popularly elected but somewhat less powerful president—something closer to the Portuguese rather than the French system. The power of the president would be limited to a crisis-intervention role, when governments need to be formed or parliaments dissolved. The president would not be able to compete with the prime minister in designing or implementing policy. But a parliamentary government in Latin America should adopt two measures that Portuguese voters have yet to approve: 1) the constructive vote of no confidence, whereby any vote to bring down a government requires proposing a new one; and 2) the option under which the prime minister can declare any legislative proposals a matter of confidence, to be approved automatically unless parliament votes to dismiss the government.<sup>16</sup>

If presidentialism cannot be replaced, can we list elements that might at least promote stability while providing safety valves for failed presidents? Such measures could include concurrent elections for all elective legislative and executive posts; closed or even straight party-list electoral systems; and a presidential prerogative to dismiss one congress and schedule the

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<sup>14</sup> Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 276–82.

<sup>15</sup> Arend Lijphart makes this argument in signaling a preference for parliamentary government. See his “Constitutional Design for Divided Societies,” *Journal of Democracy* 15 (April 2004): 102. Linz also has expressed skepticism with semi-presidential formulae.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to former Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterrez for relaying these insights to me in personal conversation. Arend Lijphart notes that this combination of rules from the German and French parliamentary systems would protect cabinet effectiveness, while assuring the parliament's prerogatives to replace the government with another or force elections. See Lijphart, “Constitutional Design for Divided Societies,” 104.

election of a new one. An additional step might require the president to resign upon failure to command a majority in any new congress, which would then be charged with naming a new president to finish out the existing term. These measures, however, would not change the basic confrontational logic that prevails in presidential regimes, nor would they encourage the creation of collegial forms of government based on strong parties and a different form of governmental leadership.

The record of failure displayed by Latin American presidentialism is grave and deeply worrying. It is no exaggeration to say that this sad record is among the reasons why democracy's future now hangs in the balance across a huge swath of the Western Hemisphere. What better moment could there be for citizens across Latin America to ask themselves whether their Presidentialism traditions are so dear that they must be conserved even at the expense of hopes for democracy's consolidation? The visionary framers who laid down the U.S. Constitution—the model for all pure presidential regimes ever since—had a supreme sense of the peculiarities and even the idiosyncrasies of the particular case for which they were writing a prescription. In their own varying circumstances more than two centuries later, perhaps Latin Americans would do better to imitate the spirit of prudence that actuated the U.S. framers, rather than cling to the letter of the system that those framers created. If Latin Americans were to choose such a course, they might also reflect that Europe, in 1787 a haven of autocracy, today can boast models of democratic and predominantly parliamentary governance that deserve at least a fair hearing without *a priori* dismissal merely on the grounds of custom.

**Table I. Interrupted Presidencies in Latin America, 1985-2004**

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- **Raúl Alfonsín** (Argentina, 1983–89) Resigned five months before scheduled transfer of power to newly elected president Carlos Menem with economy spiraling out of control, street demonstrations, and inability to implement policies that were being criticized by successor. Minority president, minority in congress. No military role. Replaced by elected successor.
  - **Jean-Bertrand Aristide [Twice]** (Haiti, 1991; 2001–2004) Elected in 1990, deposed in 1991 by military coup. Clashes between presidential supporters and opponents. Majority president, minority in assembly. Replaced by military junta. Elected again in 2000, resigned 2004 amid uprising by former military and deterioration of authority. Authoritarian style of governance, confrontational politics, allegations of corruption. Replaced by Supreme Court Chief Justice who is designated provisional president by constitution
  - **Joaquín Balaguer** (Dominican Republic, 1994–1996 ) Reelected to the presidency in 1994 in highly contested election marred by fraud. Massive protests paralyzed country. Agreed to support constitutional changes shortening his term in office by two years. Majority president. No military role. Replaced by elected successor.
  - **Abdalá Bucaram** (Ecuador, 1996–97) Elected 1996, resigned six months later in 1997. Economic crisis, allegations of corruption. Minority president, minority in congress. Military withdraws support after congress charges him with “mental incapacity.” Replaced by congressional appointee, as vice-president is by passed.
  - **Fernando Collor de Mello** (Brazil, 1990–92) Elected 1989, resigned 1992. Economic crisis, mass demonstrations, allegations of corruption. Minority president, minority in Congress. No military role. Impeached, replaced by vice-president.
  - **Raúl Cubas** (Paraguay, 1998–99) Elected in 1998, resigned 1999. Resignation triggered by Cuba’s pardon of former army commander, sharp splits in ruling party. Vice-presidential assassination accelerates threat of impeachment amid widespread demonstrations. Congress appoints successor in absence of vice-president.
  - **Alberto Fujimori [Twice]** (Peru, 1990–2000) Elected 1990, shut down Congress in 1992 autogolpe with strong support of the military. Called for constitutional changes and new election to constitutional assembly. Reelected in 1995 and 2000, resigns in 2000 when majority support in Congress crumbles after contested election and widespread accusations of corruption involving his intelligence chief. Chronic demonstrations against illegal elections and corruption. Military plays role in president’s decision to leave office. Replaced by Congressional appointee; first vice-president resigned, second vice-president bypassed.
  - **Jamil Mahuad** (Ecuador, 1998–2000) Elected 1988, resigned 2000. Allegations of corruption, mass demonstrations by indigenous groups, splits in ranks of armed forces, following protests over IMF related austerity measures.. Minority president, minority in Congress. Military plays active role in resignation. Replaced by vice-president.
  - **Carlos Andrés Pérez** (Venezuela, 1989–93) Resigned 1993. Serious economic crisis, two military coup attempts, allegations of corruption. Majority president, near majority in Congress that crumbles. Impeached. Replaced by Congressional appointee.
  - **Fernando de la Rúa** (Argentina, 1999–2001) Elected 1999, resigned 2001. Economic crisis, demonstrations and street violence, civilian deaths, allegations of corruption. Minority president, minority in congress. No military role. Vice-president had resigned. Congress appoints series of successors.
  - **Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada** (Bolivia, 2002–2003) Elected 2002, resigned 2003. Mass demonstrations and civilian deaths. Minority president, majority coalition disintegrates. No overt military role. Replaced by vice-president.
  - **Jorge Serrano** (Guatemala, 1991–93) Elected 1991, resigned 1993 after attempt to close the congress and arrest members of the Supreme Court. Backdrop of economic crisis leads confrontation with legislature. Minority president, minority in Congress. Military plays active role in resignation. Vice-president resigned, replaced by Congressional appointee.
  - **Hernán Siles Zuazo** (Bolivia, 1982–85) Elected 1982, agreed to resign one year early in 1985, after Church-brokered agreement. Hyperinflation, failing economic policies, mass demonstrations, civilian deaths, allegations of corruption. Minority president, minority in congress. Military plays active role in resignation. Succeeded by elected president.