

Book Review: Peter Smith, *Democracy in Latin America: Political Change in Comparative Perspective* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 380 pages.

Dissatisfaction with Democracy in Latin America

Joy Langston

Peter Smith's new book is an extraordinary effort at summarizing and synthesizing several decades of work done by scholars from many methodological viewpoints in several different areas that all connect to matters of democracy. The central question of the book comes at a very timely moment: while Latin American militaries appear to be safely ensconced in their barracks, civilian politicians do not seem to be able to promote economic growth, alleviate poverty, or perhaps most worrying, stay in office (witness recent events in Bolivia, Ecuador, the pressures on the executive in Peru, and the scandals affecting the PT, the governing Workers Party, in Brazil). The book by Smith offers us several different paths to understanding this problem: if neoliberal policies have been undertaken in almost every Latin American nation over the past fifteen years, and if the military is uninvolved in politics, why are the region's economies so lackluster, and why do citizens appear unsatisfied with their respective (illiberal) democracies?

The author achieves the task of introducing and clarifying both definitional claims and empirical tests while adding his own original research to the central question of the book: What is democracy like today in Latin America, and how has this changed since the first democratizing wave to hit the shores of the Americas (below the Rio Grande) in the early part of the twentieth century? I believe the book is an excellent teaching tool for undergraduates and should be incorporated into many curricula as a well-written introduction to some of the most vexing problems currently facing Latin America. By presenting historical and statistical elements to the study of Latin American democracies over one hundred years, Smith has shown the reader how successive "waves" of democratization arrive under different economic and social conditions.

In reading this book, one is struck by the breadth of knowledge shown by the author as he covers an extraordinary number of issues that are either not seen together in a single scholarly piece, or are studied in only the most cursory

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of fashions. For example, the book begins with a well-considered statement that, while institutions may well be the fashion in the study of Latin American politics, history and social relations among classes, as well as ideology, are important factors that must be taken into account if one hopes to understand the fate of democracy in this area. Chapters 1 through 4 introduce the reader to traditional topics of Latin American politics, such as “the rise and fall of electoral democracy from 1900 to 2000,” followed by a discussion of the political fate of the region’s armed forces, and the importance of U.S. foreign policy. The second set of chapters discusses political institutions and some of their consequences, while Part III examines the ability of democratic states to implement effective economic and social policies.

Each of these chapters (or combinations of more than one) can be taken as a separate introduction to the topic it treats, so the book can be used as a whole or in parts. (While it is understandable that the author did not want to inundate the reader with scholarly citations, it is a pity that more were not included so that the advanced student could use the book as a gateway to further study a specific set of topics, such as the different strategies democracies have used to combat poverty.) The chapters on the quality of democracy are especially interesting and informative for nonspecialists: the arguments are clear and many of the tests, convincing. For example, the author writes that nondemocratic regimes might be expected to be more successful in promoting economic growth because they can “engage in coherent planning, they can impose taxes as needed, and they can shift emphasis or course as changing conditions might require (p. 219). Smith next asserts the counterargument of why democratic regimes would be better at managing macroeconomic policy. The argument is then tested at the aggregate level. While this is only one example, one should note that the book presents a score of similar side-by-side tests of very complicated scholarly debates that have been simplified and clarified. I believe this is one of the greatest strengths of the work as it allows students to grasp these ideas at an early stage of their education.

Even with such admirable and strenuous synthesizing efforts, this volume still leaves one puzzling the question: Why don’t politicians, if only for selfish reasons (per James Madison), make a more serious effort to strengthen the region’s judicial systems, reduce corruption, and reform certain institutions that are simply dysfunctional for their own regime’s health? One of the main reasons is that there is a fundamental lack of accountability of elected representatives and political executives to voters. It has been exceedingly difficult to force elected officials to become faithful agents of their voters. Yet, in resolving these issues, each nation faces such different challenges that what might work for Peru would certainly not help Argentina, and vice versa. In this sense, although Latin American nations share a similar historical trajectory, there are now so many differences among them that it might make more sense to compare, for example, Mexico with Taiwan, rather than with Argentina and Brazil, respectively.

Furthermore, it is difficult to know whether the central problem, for example, in alleviating poverty or promoting economic growth, is whether the Latin American “state” is simply incapable or whether politicians (for whatever reason) do not find it in their interests to resolve problems. For these issues, it would be helpful to find successes either among nations, or disaggregate within individual regimes, to determine when and how the myriad of problems identified by the author can begin to be resolved. Perhaps it is asking too much of a single book to answer the question of how the business of winning elections and representing voters is related to programmatic policymaking, but these were the questions this reader was left with after finishing an otherwise excellent work.

