

U.S. POLICY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICA

Howard J. Wiarda

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Joyce Hoebing
CSIS Americas Program
1800 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: (202) 775-3299
Fax: (202) 466-4739

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Preface

Latin America and the Caribbean, in part because of their proximity to the United States, are inherently linked to this country. U.S. policy attention, however, has historically only been intermittently focused on the Caribbean, and then generally in times of crises. In the post-cold war period, there is a danger that the region will fade from policy attention—precisely at the moment when it must adjust to global economic trends, strengthen its democratic traditions, and cope with a myriad of potential stresses such as drug trafficking and environmental pressures.

The Center's interest in the Caribbean CSIS dates back to 1965, when it issued a report on the Dominican crisis. Since then, the Center has focused attention on the U.S.-Caribbean relationship, particularly in the areas of the regional trade agenda, governance, and security issues.

In this Policy Paper on the Americas, Howard Wiarda analyzes democracy as an objective of U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America. This report is one of a series of special studies of the region, including *U.S.-Caribbean Relations into the 21st Century: Policy Considerations*, *Democracy in the Caribbean: A Cause for Concern*, *Caribbean Integration into the World Economic System*, and a CSIS Report, *Haitian Frustrations: Dilemmas for U.S. Policy*.

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Georges A. Fauriol
Director and Senior Fellow
CSIS Americas Program

Introduction

Since the early 1980s the United States has been engaged in a vigorous campaign to support democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean. The specific tool employed has been support for free and fair elections. Elections have been seen as the “entering wedge” propelling a country toward democracy; in some formulations, elections have been viewed as the sine qua non or virtually the sole criteria determining whether a country is democratic.

The United States has in fact had a long history of supporting democracy in the region, going back into the nineteenth century, as Tony Smith’s new book on the subject makes clear.¹ At times, such as the Woodrow Wilson era and again during the 1991-1994 crisis in Haiti, U.S. support for democracy came at the point of a bayonet; the sincerity of Presidents Wilson’s and Clinton’s desire for democracy for the region, however, should not be doubted. Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Jimmy Carter all had pro-democracy programs in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Carter’s intervention to secure a democratic outcome in the Dominican Republic in 1978 is often cited as the beginning of U.S. support for a wave of democratic openings in the region. A manifest *campaign* in favor of elections, however, with all its institutional paraphernalia and trappings, did not begin until the 1980s.

Now, in the 1990s, these “paraphernalia” and “trappings” are a considerable growth industry. Both the U.S. Department of State and the Agency for International Development (AID) maintain offices to support elections in Latin America and elsewhere. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its subsidiary organizations (the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute) support elections and democracy abroad. A cottage industry of election observers, voting technicians, computer experts, and specialists in electoral laws and party organization has grown up in support of this effort. There is bipartisan consensus on the democracy policy, which is seen as both idealistic (Carter) and hard-headed (Reagan). Moreover, the enthusiasm in the United States for Latin American and Caribbean elections and democracy appears to be matched, for one of the few times in U.S.-Latin American history, by the region itself. Everyone agrees that elections and democracy are good for Latin America and the Caribbean and good for the United States, not only intrinsically but also in helping to solve U.S. foreign policy problems in the area.

It is not the purpose of this report to cast doubts on the fundamental assumptions of U.S. policy. Elections and democracy are desirable, and it is a positive development that U.S. interests and Latin American and Caribbean aspirations are, for once, in

¹ Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, A Twentieth Century Fund Book, 1994).

considerable agreement. It is now time, however, to review and reassess the policy—it is over ten years old, both the cold war and the crises-of-the-moment (the right wing and guerrilla challenges in Central America) have passed, and, in countries as diverse as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Guatemala, and Mexico, flaws have begun to appear in it. In addition to a review of the elections in these specific cases, it is useful to focus on any emerging general patterns that might require new thinking on the part of U.S. policy.

It is time for some reservations and qualifications to be introduced into the democracy and elections policy.

Payne on Democracy in the Caribbean

In the excellent survey of Caribbean democracy, significantly subtitled “a cause for concern,” that serves as a companion piece to this essay,² Douglas W. Payne hints at some of the issues and problems that lie at the heart of this study’s discussion.

Democratic Systems—Formal versus Truly Free

Payne’s analysis focuses on 16 Caribbean countries.³ He finds that of the 16, 15 (all except Cuba) have formal democratic systems. However, of the 15, only 11 are free in the sense that Freedom House defines freedom, encompassing not just democratic elections but also political and civil liberties, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. The first step in deconstructing the democracy and elections issue, therefore, is to distinguish between those countries that have “formal” democratic systems and those that are “truly free.” While holding formal elections is obviously a good start, it cannot be used as the only criteria for classifying a country as fully democratic.

Levels of Democratic Stability

Of the 11 free countries analyzed by Payne, only 6 are viewed as having secure and stable democratic institutions. Five are viewed

² Douglas W. Payne, *Democracy in the Caribbean: A Cause for Concern* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 1995).

³ Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

as wobbly or insecure, where democracy could still be upset or undermined. It is also necessary, therefore, to measure degrees or levels of democratic stability, even between the countries classified as free. When this second qualification is introduced, the proportion of free *and* democratically stable countries is reduced to 37.5% of those studied.

Cultural Practices

A third factor, not addressed by Payne, is cultural-political. All the countries certified as free in his analysis are products of the British Empire, and hence of the British Westminster model of democracy. This is not to say that the British colonial legacy was always or necessarily more conducive of democracy than was French or Spanish colonialism. But there is no doubt that there is a correlation in the Caribbean between the British colonial tradition and the institutions it bequeathed *and* the existence or persistence of democratic institutions. The correlation is not perfect, but it is important, and historians and sociologists are increasingly convinced that there is a significant relationship between the legacy of British culture (including its political institutions) and the existence of democracy.⁴ Freedom House surveys over the last two decades, for example, show that democracy in the *English-speaking* Caribbean has been more effective and durable than in any other subregion in the developing world.⁵ Had Payne included in his study the broader circum-Caribbean, including the Hispanic mainland of Central America, the number of countries that were “formally free” but not “fully free” would have been considerably higher, and the percentage of democratic *and* stable countries considerably lower.

Systems of Government

The system of government—parliamentary versus presidential—is a fourth factor in assessing democracy in the Caribbean, although it requires significantly more research than is possible here. Most of the countries addressed in Payne’s survey have parliamentary systems. In addition, they have often incorporated systems of proportional representation as distinct from the “first-past-the-post” or “winner-take-all” system of the United States. There are strong arguments on both sides of the presidential versus parliamentary systems debate, and on both sides of the proportional representation versus winner-take-all controversy. This issue is addressed later in this report in the context of several recent Latin American and Caribbean elections (Nicaragua, Dominican

⁴ Anthony Maingot, *Small Country Development and International Labor Flows: Experiences in the Caribbean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

⁵ Freedom House, *Comparative Survey of Freedom in the World* (New York: Freedom House, annual).

Republic, Mexico) where there has been a call for "governments of national reconciliation," or pacts agreed to either before or after the elections to share power as a better way of securing democratic stability than the winner-take-all-systems. But are such pacts democratic? What is the purpose of holding elections if a system of shared power is agreed to beforehand? This contradiction has not yet been adequately answered in the U.S. elections/democracy policy, but should be addressed, especially because such calls for unity governments are becoming increasingly widespread.

Commitment to Democracy

A fifth worrisome factor is the apparent weakening of the successor generations' commitment to democracy. It is plain that in the islands, as on the mainland, the early euphoria over a restored or reinvigorated democracy has passed and considerable disillusionment has set in. The new democracies have not delivered much in the way of goods, services, jobs, and prosperity. Some are simply disillusioned with democracy's unfulfilled hopes, but others are *blaming* democracy for their troubles. This latter sentiment is a more troubling feature—if an entire successor generation has a weak commitment to democracy or is prepared to give up on democracy's future, then U.S. policies and strategies in support of democracy must be reconsidered. Payne himself concludes that "the survival of even the strongest democracies in the Caribbean cannot be taken for granted."

Economics and Politics

A final consideration is the connection between economics and politics. Most of the Caribbean, especially the former British colonies, remain committed to the democratic ideal. But most of these democracies are very small states that lack resources, are often committed to central planning and statist policies, have limited capacities to operate effectively abroad, and perhaps, unfortunately, are not viable as nation-states in the long run. At some point, the United States will have to deal in a policy sense with these tougher questions: not just the problem of still-shaky democracies but also the relationships in these states between economic and political issues and, ultimately, the problem of viability itself.

These preliminary comments suggest that Caribbean democracy may not be as secure or as well institutionalized as sometimes thought. There are weaknesses in political leadership and governance, and even greater worries concerning the future leadership and its continuing commitment to democratic values and institutions. The institutional infrastructure in support of democracy remains fragile, and the area overall is considerably behind Mexico and South America in adjusting its economies to the requirements of a new, interdependent, more market-oriented trading system. Moreover, these problems are compounded if Central America and the larger

circum-Caribbean region are included. Finally, it may be that the United States needs to rethink the very concept of democracy itself as it applies to the region, to introduce greater nuance and variability into the concept of democracy, and to adjust U.S. policy away from its previously ethnocentric perspective on this issue.⁶

The Origins of the Democracy Program

Although there will be other claimants for the honor, it was really the Reagan administration that began the Democracy Program as an official action in the early 1980s. Earlier there had been a variety of private and quasi-private efforts, centered in political groups and think tanks as well as public activities sponsored initially by the CIA, AID, and the Department of State. The AFL-CIO, the Free Trade Union Institute, the Chamber of Commerce, Congressman Dante Fascell's office, and party leaders Bill Brock and Charles Manatt were also involved in these early pro-democracy efforts. In 1982 these varied private and public efforts came together: the Reagan administration was persuaded to support the program, AID put up the initial \$400,000 in seed money, and the Democracy Program (the predecessor of the NED) was organized. The Democracy Program initially held conferences on democracy, free elections, and constitution-writing, and issued a report urging the establishment of an institution (later developed as the NED) to promote democracy abroad.

⁶ Howard J. Wiarda, *Ethnocentrism in Foreign Policy: Can We Understand the Third World?* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1985).

The details of this early history are described elsewhere.⁷ It is important to remember the cold war and the international context in which the Democracy Program was developed and that shaped its earliest assumptions. Specifically, a good part of the initiative began in response to U.S. policy needs in El Salvador. Are the assumptions and conditions that shaped the program at that time still relevant in the changed circumstances of today?

In El Salvador in 1981-1982, the United States faced a policy dilemma. El Salvador was governed by a violent, abusive, human rights-violating junta. That junta and its supporters had recently been responsible for the rape and murder of four American nuns and religious laywomen, as well as scores (and probably hundreds or even thousands) of others whose human rights had been violated. The public outcry in the United States was such that it was proving impossible in terms of U.S domestic politics to continue supporting such a brutal, albeit anti-communist, regime. The alternative to this unacceptable regime, however, seemed to be a triumph by the at least equally unacceptable Marxist and Marxist-Leninist guerrillas.

At that time, a third alternative—moderate, middle-of-the-road democracy—was either nonexistent, in hiding, or being squeezed out of existence by more radical forces on both the left and right. It appeared that the Nicaraguan experience of only three years earlier—when an outmoded dictatorship was pitted against a popular, Marxist-led guerrilla revolution, and where the guerrillas eventually triumphed—was about to be repeated in El Salvador.⁸

⁷ Howard J. Wiarda, *The Democratic Revolution in Latin America: History, Politics, and U.S. Policy* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, Holmes and Meier, 1990).

⁸ A fascinating comparative study of this dilemma is Daniel Pipes and Adam Garfinkle (eds.), *Friendly Tyrants: An American Dilemma* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

With neither a rapacious military nor a triumph of Marxism-Leninism as acceptable alternatives, a desperate Reagan administration (this was the time of Jeane Kirkpatrick's trip to Central America and her depressingly pessimistic report to President Reagan that led to the creation of the Kissinger Commission) sought to find a third option. The agency of this creation was to be democratic elections, accompanied by a host of other overt and covert programs.⁹ The United States engineered a series of elections—first for a constituent assembly, then for local officials, and eventually for national office. It assisted, cajoled, persuaded, poured in immense amounts of aid, and used virtually every bit of leverage imaginable, in all stages of the electoral process, and ultimately succeeded in electing José Napoleon Duarte to the presidency and his Christian Democrats to numerous congressional and local posts. As a skilled leader and politician, Duarte began to restore some order, hope, and justice in El Salvador, and also saved the U.S. foreign policy chestnuts at home by defusing the domestic debate and providing a moderate, acceptable third alternative on which most congressional factions and domestic interest groups could agree. The policy rescued the Reagan administration from the two ugly and unacceptable choices mentioned earlier.

The success of the El Salvador policy encouraged, even emboldened, the Reagan administration to expand its policy of encouraging, pressuring for, and assisting elections in other countries. El Salvador even became a model for other electoral efforts. Honduras, Guatemala, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and eventually Poland, Russia, Nicaragua, and South Africa were among the many countries where the elections strategy was used to reduce polarization, create a healthy outlet for popular movements, and increase the chances for moderate outcomes. Meanwhile, over the course of the 1980s, a vast array of institutions committed to the elections/democracy agenda had flourished—either born of foreign policy considerations or of democratic idealism, which in this case happily coincided: the NED, the Democrat and Republican Institutes, offices for democracy and elections in the Department of State and AID, various private groups, initiatives in think tanks, cadres of election specialists and observers, etc.

But the El Salvador elections initiative was born of an almost desperate and certainly cold war-driven foreign policy crisis, the aid to Poland's Solidarity and other Eastern Bloc democratic groups emerged from a plan to undermine and destabilize the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, and the nudging and pressure the United States exerted in Chile and other countries was derived from the immediate

⁹ Mark Falcoff and Robert Royal (eds.), *The Continuing Crisis: U.S. Policy in Central America and the Caribbean* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987); Robert S. Leiken and Barry Rubin (eds.), *The Central American Crisis Reader* (New York: Summit Books, 1987).

need to assist the removal of authoritarianism from power. But foreign policy desperation, the cold war, and the bloody excesses of repressive authoritarianism no longer exist—the entire context has changed. The policy that was devised in response to immediate threat and cold war conditions should now be revisited and injected with greater nuance, sophistication, and distinctions. In the early 1980s there were good reasons for proceeding quickly with the policy, but those pressing reasons have vanished. The United States should now “return to basics” in order to better understand the forces (democracy, elections, social and political pressures) it has set, or helped set, in motion, and to get its policy hats screwed on correctly. This will require challenging some firmly held beliefs that have built up over the preceding decade, but the cost of not doing so may well be a failed policy and the ruination of the very countries the policy meant to assist.

Democracy, Elections, and Political Processes

The Democracy Program is over ten years old. Now that the cold war is over, it is a good time to reflect and reassess the actions taken to promote elections and democracy. An understanding—largely lacking in the early initiatives—of Latin American and Caribbean culture and political processes needs to be introduced into the U.S. model of democracy, because these influences have a powerful shaping and sometimes even determining effect on elections and democracy. Democracy has several different forms and is of several distinct types, elections are not viewed the same in all societies, and political processes often respond to particular rather than universalistic norms. There is no need to undermine the policy that supports democracy and elections, but rather to make the policy better by attuning it to local realities. The universal norms of democracy and its institutions need to be blended with the more particular political patterns of Latin America and the Caribbean—and other areas. And to do that, it will be necessary to both build the region’s political realities into the model of democracy and to go beyond the Westminster Model countries of Douglas Payne’s survey to encompass the broader Hispanic circum Caribbean as well. When considering democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, five main points should be emphasized.

1. Elections are one, among several, routes to power.¹⁰ Historically, elections have been only one of several routes to power. Other methods included skillfully-executed revolutions, heroic guerilla struggles, well-run general strikes to bring down a

¹⁰ The classic statement is Charles W. Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America: The Governing of Restless Nations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1967).

corrupt or obstreperous minister or even government, and street actions that mobilized large numbers, often created martyrs, and affected government policy. In this complex political process, elections, while valued, did not carry complete or definitive legitimacy; other paths remained open.

By the 1990s, elections have acquired considerably greater legitimacy in Latin America and the Caribbean, and, obviously, as a matter of policy, the United States wants and needs to support elections and democratic outcomes. It must be recognized, however, that elections are still not the only form of acquiring or influencing power. Haiti is only one of many examples. Violence, street demonstrations, marches, purposeful provocation (of U.S. forces as well as Haitian officials), and military maneuvering (including both the internal politics of the several military institutions and overlapping civil-military factions) are also important—perhaps as important as the original election won by Jean-Bertrand Aristide—in the political process. The United States may prefer that elections be the only route to power, but the reality is that other processes are still present in varying degrees in the Haitian and other Latin American and Caribbean political systems. Elections as the only legitimate route to power can be the ultimate policy goal, but in the meantime the United States must operate on a realistic plain, not a wishful one.

2. Elections convey tentative, rather than definitive, legitimacy. Once in office, an elected official cannot be sure that the actual mandate will be for the time specified in the constitution. Instead, the political process is more informal and involves virtually constant negotiation and renegotiation of power relationships.¹¹

This may involve negotiations with the armed forces chiefs, various elite groups, the general population, and clientelistic groups. Power is seen as fragile and dynamic, and may ebb and flow as these negotiations continue. If a president allows his power base to deteriorate, loses control of the negotiation process, or loses the confidence of main power groups, he may be asked to leave office before his constitutional term is complete. This occurs not by some formal impeachment process, but by an emerging consensus that his time has come and gone.

In this sense, Latin American countries are closer to the European continental parliamentary systems than to the fixed-term presidentialism of the United States. Latin America has a formal system of presidentialism, but the president is always subject to a vote of “no-confidence,” as reflected both in public opinion and in his relations with major interest groups. If the president loses public confidence, he should leave office; if he refuses to leave voluntarily, he may be forced out—even if his term is not yet over.

The closest analog in the United States is the case of Richard Nixon in 1974: a discredited president, whom most Americans agreed

¹¹ Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America*; also Howard J. Wiarda, *Latin American Politics: A New World of Possibilities* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Press, 1994).

should leave office, recognized the loss of confidence and, though not formally impeached, voluntarily went into retirement. In Latin America this semi-parliamentary understanding is strongly present: elections carry a tentative mandate that is subject to renegotiation. Hence, when there are "extra-constitutional" rumblings in the streets or barracks in Latin America, the United States needs to be cognizant that elections in the region convey only a tentative mandate, and U.S. policy may need to be adjusted accordingly.

3. Democratic legitimacy may come from several sources. The United States believes that democratic legitimacy, defined as the "right to rule," can emerge only from free and fair elections. This sentiment is also growing in Latin America, which should be acknowledged and celebrated. Historically, however, and continuing today in the tradition and consciousness in many Latin American nations, democratic legitimacy could be acquired *after* the taking of power, even if the route to power was not via democratic elections.

For example, such military presidents as René Barrientos in Bolivia and Omar Torrijos in Panama were considered democratic even though they came to power through coups d'état. That is because, once in power, they ruled as populists, nationalists, and reformers who devised and implemented programs for the poor. They acquired democratic legitimacy not because they were elected democratically but because they carried out what their own populations viewed as democratic programs *after* they seized power. Even Fidel Castro in Cuba was long considered by many Latin Americans as having democratic legitimacy because of the vast social reforms—education, medical, housing—carried out during his rule, regardless of the fact that he came to power by non-electoral means. Democratic legitimacy does not result only from an electoral mandate (although that also helps), but may also be built up and *acquired* once in office. By the same token, a president who is elected in fair and honest elections may lose his democratic legitimacy and be forced to leave, as in the case of Fernando Collor of Brazil, if he fails to carry out democratic programs or rules inappropriately or with too much corruption once in office.

4. Distinct types of elections. In the United States, elections are elections and there is and can be only one type: fair, free, open, and competitive. But in Latin America and the Caribbean the nomenclature allows for many types of elections of which fair, free, and competitive elections are only one form (although they are increasingly the only type acceptable). The United States must recognize and come to grips with these distinct types of elections, which are again closer to the European continental tradition than to the North American one. It should be willing to adjust policy in recognition of the plurality of types of elections even while favoring the democratic and free kind.

Mark Ruhl and Ronald H. McDonald have identified ten distinct types of Latin American elections ranging from those that are stolen or thoroughly corrupt to fully democratic ones.¹² The polar extremes

¹² Ronald H. McDonald and J. Mark Ruhl, *Party Politics and Election in Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).

are obvious and do not warrant lengthy attention in this analysis. Some of the intermediary types, however, are still quite common in Latin America, and interesting from a policy perspective.

“Plebiscitary elections” are, as the name implies, similar to a plebiscite, in which the public is asked to vote “yes” or “no” on a regime already in power or on its programs. President Charles De Gaulle in France used such plebiscitary elections in the 1960s in seeking citizen approval for his policies: those who call such elections usually assume that the citizens will vote in favor of the regime. They may vote “no,” however, which is equivalent to a parliamentary vote of no confidence and may lead to the toppling of the regime. Several of the transfers away from military-authoritarian rule and toward democracy in Latin America in the 1980s (Brazil, Chile) were initiated by plebiscitary elections in which the citizens voted against the continuation of military rule, thereby unleashing a dynamic process and a renegotiation of power relations that led eventually to genuinely competitive elections and democracy. Democracy may thus come gradually, in stages, rather than all at once.

Another type of election is called a “ratificatory election.” The population is asked to ratify an existing regime in power rather than to choose among real alternatives. The Mexican political system for many years ran, in part, on this basis: the Party of Revolutionary Institutions (PRI) largely monopolized political power, and every six years it was “ratified” in power through the popular vote. The opposition was either token or did not participate at all. The elections of 1970 and 1974 in the Dominican Republic were also ratificatory: President Joaquín Balaguer sought to retain his democratic legitimacy, and elections were held regularly even though the opposition, claiming repression, opted not to participate. Every four years Balaguer was returned to office with a huge electoral mandate—but not necessarily one achieved in a genuinely competitive context.

Circumstances are now different. First, Latin America, including the Caribbean, is itself more democratic than before and demands free and competitive elections; second, scores of international observers, as well as chiefly U.S. television cameras, are looking over their shoulders to ensure their elections are free and democratic. It is thus difficult to carry out the purely ratificatory type of election in the historical way, and compromises must be made. Two examples are the 1994 Mexican and Dominican Republic elections,¹³ which were both ratificatory and competitive.

In the Dominican Republic, President Balaguer viewed the vote as a referendum on his rule, and proceeded to campaign as if he were the only issue, and the only choice for the voter was to confirm or deny his continuation in office. He allowed for an opposition (although he treated it roughly and as if it had no legitimacy) so

¹³ These elections are analyzed in Howard J. Wiarda, *The Dominican Republic Elections of 1994*, CSIS Western Hemisphere Election Study Series, Vol. XII, Study 9 (August 1994), and John Bailey, *The 1994 Mexican Presidential Election: Post-Election Report*, CSIS Western Hemisphere Election Study Series, Vol. XII, Study 13 (October 1994).

that it would appear, both domestically and to the foreign observer teams, as if it were a competitive, democratic election. But Balaguer had no intention of allowing the opposition to win, or, if it did win, of assuming office. The protracted controversy over the final results and Balaguer's continuance in office made this point clearly.

The situation in Mexico was similar. A long-time (even longer than Balaguer!) quasi-authoritarian regime that desired to stay in power, at all costs, was faced for the first time by serious opposition. Because of NAFTA, close connections with the United States, and the need to demonstrate the country's democratic legitimacy, the ruling party also needed to impress foreign and domestic observers that its elections were "democratic." Indeed, the inconceivable at first seemed conceivable—that the PRI might actually lose. The PRI, however, cranked up its considerable media and propaganda machinery, its vast patronage mechanisms, and its considerable coercive power—for example, in dealing harshly at first with the rebellion in Chiapas. The result from the government's perspective was the best of all possible worlds—the PRI had its referendum which overwhelmingly returned it to power, the opposition had their campaign, and the foreign observers came away testifying that the election was "democratic." In both countries, in short, two processes were under way at once: the government achieved ratification of its continuance in office, and the opposition had a fair and democratic election. Everyone emerged more or less happy.

5. Distinct meanings of democracy. Not only do elections often imply different things in North and South America, but even the term "democracy" carries different connotations. To the United States, democracy implies fair, free, and competitive elections, as well as checks and balances, the familiar three-part division of power, civil liberties, social and political pluralism, and perhaps now social and welfare programs as well. This conception of democracy derives from Locke, Jefferson, and maybe even John Rawls.¹⁴

The Latin American conception,¹⁵ in contrast, stemmed originally from Augustine, Aquinas, and Suárez (a strong state, centralized authority, group rights over individual rights) and found modern, or post-independence, expression mainly in the writings of the 18th century philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau,¹⁶ rather than Locke or Jefferson. Rousseau stressed organic unity over separation of powers; heroic, even revolutionary, leadership over Locke's seemingly prosaic procedures; and the "general will" over regular

¹⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971). This book had a major impact on academic writing in the 1970s.

¹⁵ This refers mainly to Hispanic Latin America rather than the English-speaking Caribbean.

¹⁶ Claudio Veliz, *The Centralist Tradition in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); Glen Dealy, *The Latin Americans: Spirit and Ethos* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); also the several essays collected in Howard J. Wiarda (ed.), *Politics and Social Change in Latin America: Still a Distinct Tradition?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 3rd ed., 1992).

and democratic elections. It is not coincidental that Rousseau has been viewed as a heroic figure in Latin American constitutional history whereas the founding fathers of the United States are seldom mentioned. Rousseau countenanced, even applauded, a degree of authoritarianism, centralization, and corporatism that would never be permitted in the U.S. context. And it is from this centralized, group- or community-oriented, and democratic-Caesarist or quasi-authoritarian conception that the idea of Latin American democracy derived—albeit now updated and with many overlaps and influences from the U.S. conception. Nevertheless, the Rousseauian legacy remains strong in all the Latin American countries, and again policy prudence demands that the United States recognize these distinct forms of democracy realistically rather than attempting to wish them away.

Even today, in the many constitutions written in Latin America since the return to democracy began in the late 1970s, the legacy of Rousseau and of the earlier Hispanic-medieval tradition is strong. The Roman Catholic Church and economic elite groups in many cases continue to enjoy special privileges, group rights still often take precedence over individual rights, and the executive authority remains far more important than the legislative or judicial. Perhaps the most obvious undemocratic feature of these constitutions and the supposedly democratic regimes ushered in with them concerns the special role of the armed forces. The military in Latin America still has special privileges as almost a fourth branch of government, it serves as the protector and guardian of democracy, there is explicit constitutional provision for the internal security and political roles of the armed forces, and “regimes of exception” are still incorporated as basic elements in the Latin American constitutions.¹⁷ These provisions and many others imply that the “transitions to democracy” in Latin America, notable though they have been in many respects, are still partial, guided, and tutelary democracies—democracies, in essence, that retain many features from their traditional and not-very-democratic past. Of course, for policy purposes, democratic transitions should be applauded, and their undemocratic features glossed over, but for serious policy analysis a deeper and more guarded assessment of Latin American democracy is necessary.

Elections as Destabilizing Instruments

The Democracy Program was based on the assumptions that competitive elections are the only route to power and that only a political system that is cast more or less closely on the U.S. model is democratic and has the possibilities for reform and stability. This view has emerged either from a lack of understanding of the Latin American and Caribbean political process or a profound hostility to

¹⁷ Brian Loveman, *The Constitution of Tyranny: Regimes of Exception in Spanish America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

it (implying that the United States should reconstruct the region's political systems or that, for policy purposes, it is too difficult for the U.S. public or Congress to deal with distinct forms of democracy).

Recent events in Latin America and the Caribbean force a closer look at these assumptions. In several recent cases, elections, and even democracy itself, may be promoting instability rather than stability and causing democratic unravelling rather than consolidation. A few of many possible examples are cited below.

Haiti

The most obvious, clear-cut, and dramatic case is Haiti. Jean-Bertrand Aristide's initial electoral victory, even after garnering 67.5 percent of the popular vote, clearly did not guarantee definitive legitimacy, a full term of office, or democratic stability in the country. Instead, it ushered in instability, fragmentation, polarization, and ultimately national collapse and breakdown. Part of the responsibility for Haiti's sad state of political affairs obviously lay with the rapacious military regime and its allies who overthrew Aristide and began a reign of terror and brutality. But part of the responsibility lay with Aristide, who polarized the country and refused to abide by the rules of the Haitian political game—that power is tentative and must be constantly renegotiated, and that it is necessary to bring *all* groups (including the military and economic elites) into the political process rather than excluding and antagonizing them. Aristide violated Rousseau's principle of ruling through unity rather than confrontation, and short-sightedly antagonized the very groups in the country that had the power to overthrow him.

This is by no means a brief for the successor military regime, which may be viewed as far worse than Aristide's, but it is a plea for a realistic understanding of the Haitian political process. In this sense the efforts of Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo (special advisor on Haiti to the U.S. secretary of state) to try to push both the military regime and Aristide into a broad-based government of national unity and reconstruction, with greater shared powers and with all groups participating in the political process, was closer to the realities of the Haitian situation than the winner-take-all, Aristide-as-the-only-basis-of-democratic-legitimacy policy of the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus, Randall Robinson's TransAfrica, and, after Pezzullo's ouster, the Clinton administration. Aristide was, of course, returned to power on the shoulders of U.S. military forces, and it remains to be seen if a truly democratic system can be established and maintained.

Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic the U.S. goal was not to reverse a coup d'état but to preserve a democratic political process—even if that meant clinging to a conception of democracy so pristine that it

would not apply in the United States itself. In 1994, President Balaguer sought to perpetuate himself in office for another term while the opposition Dominican Revolutionary Party and Dominican Liberation Party sought to oust him from it. To help ensure his reelection (Balaguer initially trailed in the polls, but later the gap closed to the vanishing point), Balaguer's henchmen apparently installed what they called "cushions" at various levels in the electoral system, the most notorious being the omission from the final electoral list of a disproportionate share of voters thought to support the opposition. The irony is that while the "fix" was in, Balaguer might well have won the election fairly and honestly; as it turned out, no matter how long he stays in office and whether he won fairly or not, his legitimacy will always be tainted because of the charges of fraud raised by the opposition and supported by the United States.

In the days following the election, in the context of Balaguer's razor-thin margin of victory and charges and counter-charges of fraud, both Balaguer and the opposition took actions to negotiate a solution. In this context Dominican politicians are masterful, wheeling and dealing, trading off a congressional seat here, a senate seat there, finding negotiable "irregularities" rather than outright (and non-negotiable) "fraud," and ultimately arriving at a compromise—Balaguer agreed to a term of two years instead of the normal four, and he was prohibited from seeking reelection. U.S. policy eventually bowed to the inevitable and accepted the compromise, but for a long time at least some U.S. officials insisted that the elections had to be absolutely pure and that no compromise with *that* principle was possible. In the process, U.S. policy came perilously close to destabilizing the Dominican Republic—one of the last countries in the world, given the administration's preoccupation with the Haiti crisis and the need for Dominican cooperation in solving it, the United States should want to see destabilized. There was such a "true believer" mentality operating on the free elections issue, such tunnel vision on this one aspect of policy, that the United States came close to losing sight of the bigger picture of U.S.-Dominican relations. A democratic and freely-elected government in Santo Domingo is obviously desirable, but there is also the need for a stable, functioning regime with which the United States will be able to deal on a host of issues, including Haiti.

Mexico

In Mexico the PRI candidate in 1994 appeared lackluster and possibly beatable in the summer leading up to the election, and the National Action Party (PAN) candidate initially appeared confident and ascendant. The PRI began to speak of a government of national unity, which was obviously aimed at guaranteeing it a share of power and a "place at the table" even if it should lose in the electoral arena. Later, as the polls showed the PRI forging ahead and the two main opposition groups falling behind, the PRI's talk of a

government of national unity faded away. But, simultaneously, a call for such a power-sharing arrangement began to come from the PAN and the left opposition Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD).

In both the Dominican Republic and Mexico in 1994 there was a great deal of talk about the need for a national unity government. Indeed, given the divisiveness and fractionness of democratic politics, the cry for governments of national unity are being heard throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The logic is obvious: in deeply divided states, national unity governments help provide stability, hold out the promise of an end to divisiveness and fragmentation, enable both winners and losers to share the spoils of office, and help maintain continuity. The preference for national unity governments is quite understandable and very much in accord with Rousseauian principles, but by U.S. standards it is not very democratic. It suggests an arrangement, sometimes even a conspiracy, arrived at either before or after an election, that has the practical result of either denying the importance of a democratic vote or of modifying the results after the fact. If the United States is going to be consistent in pushing hard for democracy in Latin America, then it also needs to worry about this trend toward governments of national unity that have the practical effect of denying a democratic outcome. This is not to say that national unity governments are undesirable, only that it should be recognized that such outcomes may at times conflict with the desire for democratic purity.

There is often a pattern and dynamic to these calls for national unity governments. The parties and groups that stand to lose from a democratic election tend to call for national unity governments that would give them a share of the power, while winning coalitions, naturally enough, tend to have a winner-take-all attitude. But what if the winning coalition feels threatened by a disruptive or violent opposition, or what if the losers hint at or threaten to use violence to prevent the winners from carrying out their program—as in the Mexican Chiapas revolt or the opposition's threat in the Dominican Republic to “burn every corner of the country” if it were denied electoral victory? Such threats raise the stakes in the political game, leaving the front-runners the options of coopting the opposition by, possibly, giving it cabinet or other posts (thus fulfilling the demand for a government of national unity), repressing it, or—most likely—some combination of both. Both these options—a national unity government and the use of coercion against the opposition—are profoundly undemocratic acts in the sense that they either negate the vote count or put in place processes for achieving or exercising power that are other than the electoral route. Yet both are very much a part of the Rousseauian style of politics practiced in Latin America.¹⁸ And for U.S. policy, this means that at some point it will have to decide how much to insist on the purity and consistency of U.S.-like democratic principles, and when and to what degree it will need to accommodate

¹⁸ Again, the point applies more in the Hispanic countries than in the English-speaking Caribbean.

the realities of the Latin American political process.

In this exercise only the examples of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico have been used, because they are the most recent and vivid examples, and have received the greatest publicity.

But in recent elections and political events in Colombia, Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala, Argentina, Panama, Brazil, and other countries, these same trends are under way. That is, there are calls for national unity, orchestrated threats to use (or the actual use of) violence by the opposition or some elements of it, coercive strategies employed by the government, and very often a combination of cooptation and coercion. None of these are very democratic acts, but all are integral parts of the general Latin American political process. They may be lamentable, but they also force a rethinking of some of the simplistic categories, such as "democracy" versus "dictatorship" from the 1970s and 1980s, and a concentration instead on the gradations and various mixed forms that lie between these polar points. It is in these mixed forms that most Latin American and Caribbean politics takes place, and it behooves U.S. policy to begin to move away from the overly-simple categories of the 1980s and to deal with the region's politics on a more complex and realistic basis.

Conclusion

The concept of elections as an *imperfect* symbol of democracy, and the necessity of being forced at times to accept outcomes that are not fully democratic, are very difficult issues, both intellectually and from a policy viewpoint. On the one hand, the United States wants and needs to stand for democracy, human rights, and fair and honest elections. There is widespread and bipartisan consensus both in Washington and the nation as a whole that has built up since the 1970s on this issue. Not only do all groups and virtually all citizens support this agenda, but it provides coherence to the bureaucracy and helps the United States to carry out a successful foreign policy. Moreover, in contrast to the Carter and Reagan administrations when there was a great deal of conflict associated with many aspects of U.S. foreign policy, the democracy agenda provides a consensus on which virtually all parties and bureaucratic elements can agree. It is a long and difficult process to build a foreign policy consensus on virtually anything in Washington, and it is understandable why the administration would be reluctant to sacrifice the very consensus that was so hard to achieve. In short, it is inconceivable that the United States can or would stand for anything *other* than democracy in its relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, or other parts of the globe.

But the United States must also deal with the region's realities. There has been an enormously impressive movement toward democracy in recent years. That journey, however, is still incomplete in most countries in the region and the legacy of the

past is still powerful. Institutional processes and ways of doing things in Latin America and the Caribbean simply are not fully in accord, by history, culture, and tradition, with U.S. ways. As much as the United States may wish away military machinations, electoral irregularities, non-electoral routes to power, patronage politics, or the governments of national unity that may result from the post facto renegotiation of electoral outcomes, these are often the realities of Latin American politics and at some level must be dealt with realistically. Moreover—and this is particularly galling to policy reformers of the true believer stripe—even as Latin America has modernized and continues to modernize, its institutions and processes will likely never be in exact conformity with U.S. practices. Latin America is, for the most part, a part of the West,¹⁹ but it is also a distinctive tradition or fragment within the West.

In this sense the comments offered here have wider applicability—they are relevant for Asia, Africa, and Islamic societies as well. All these societies are modernizing and Westernizing in various particulars, but they are also—like Latin America and the Caribbean—modernizing in their own ways, through their own institutions (i.e., clans, patronage networks, caste associations, and mullahs), and in ways that often represent fuses and overlaps of Western ways with local practices.

The issue, therefore, is how the United States can both encourage democracy and free elections in the world and at the same time deal realistically with the existing local conditions in many, especially Third World, countries. Another imperative is to view this not as a static balance, but as one in which U.S. policy can continue to nudge countries in the direction of greater democracy. This requires a delicate balance, sensitivity to political systems not cast in the U.S. mold, and, at the same time, perseverance and sometimes hard-nosed politics. Herewith some suggestions; the United States must:

1. Stand tall publicly and rhetorically for democracy, human rights, and free elections throughout the world—there is a consensus on the issue, and the U.S. government has no choice in the matter.

2. Continue to support financially and in other ways the NED, the international affairs institutes of both parties, the election observer organizations, and the various democracy support groups. At the same time, it must be prepared to reign in some of their over-zealous representatives.

3. Recognize that there are many and numerous half-way houses, intermediate stages, and crazy-quilt patterns en route to democracy.

In Latin America and the Caribbean the situation is no longer so much the narrow and dichotomous one of dictatorship versus democracy, but one of various stages between these two polar points.

These may include broadly based juntas, democratic regimes that may sometimes have to resort temporarily to emergency laws, popular unity governments, power sharing, and so on. Obviously it is

¹⁹ Louis Hartz. (ed.), *The Founding of New Societies* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1964).

desirable to encourage these countries toward greater democracy, and to continue to nudge and push them in that direction, but sensitivity to what these diverse political systems, at different levels of development and institutionalization, can bear and sustain, is equally important. Compromise and accommodation between lofty principles and realistic expectations will be necessary. U.S. policy must distinguish between what is desirable (obviously democracy) and what is feasible (often something short of that).

4. Avoid tunnel vision. Certainly the United States wishes to promote democracy and free elections in Latin America and the Caribbean. But there are other issues in U.S. relations with the region. These include increasingly important economic interests, political interests, some remaining security interests, immigration, the environment, investment, trade, tourism, and a host of others. The role of the ambassador or policymaker is to see this bigger picture, or, as respected former Assistant Secretary Viron "Pete" Vaky once put it, to recognize the "inter-connectedness of things"—not to focus on one aspect of policy (elections) to the exclusion of all others.

5. Understand Latin America and the Caribbean. Even with all our efforts in the democracy/elections area, the region will never be the mirror image of the United States. The Rousseauian tradition tends toward organic unity, centralized authority, and a preference for group rights or a corporatist polity over the U.S.-style individualistic one. Even as it modernizes, Latin America and the Caribbean (as well as Japan, China, and other newly developed areas) will always be different from the United States. Such diversity is not to be lamented, although it does complicate U.S. policy. Policymaking would be much simpler if all societies developed in the same direction and along the same route as the United States, but that is unrealistic, and may not even be desirable. So instead of lamenting that Latin America and the Caribbean do not always follow the U.S. lead, there should be some room to celebrate the diversity, meanwhile continuing to prod and push in the direction of the norm that is universal: democracy itself, in its several manifestations.

About the Author

Howard J. Wiarda is a Senior Associate with the CSIS Americas Program and a visiting professor at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. He has had a distinguished teaching career at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and as a researcher at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is the author of many books, most recently *The Democratic Revolution in Latin America* and the third edition of his textbook *Latin American Politics and Development* (with Harvey F. Kline).