



Journal of Politics in Latin America

Gibson, Edward L. (2010),
Politics of the Periphery: An Introduction to Subnational Authoritarianism and Democratization in Latin America, in: *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 2, 2, 3-12.
ISSN: 1868-4890 (online), ISSN: 1866-802X (print)

The online version of this article can be found at: <www.jpla.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Latin American Studies
and Hamburg University Press.

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Politics of the Periphery: An Introduction to Subnational Authoritarianism and Democratization in Latin America

Edward L. Gibson

Why feature the topic “subnational authoritarianism and democratization” in the *Journal of Politics in Latin America*? Because despite widespread agreement that subnational jurisdictions in Latin America vary considerably in the democratic character of their politics, political scientists are still largely in the dark about how to conceptualize and measure this situation, and have scant knowledge about mechanisms that sustain and undermine it. This collection of articles makes major headway toward clearing our methodological and theoretical ignorance of these topics.

There has been a long and gradual recognition among Latin Americanists that local politics in many Latin American countries differs from national politics not only in scale, but in the fact that the political rights and civil liberties afforded to local populations by local governments differ frequently from those guaranteed by national governments.¹ In another work I labeled these as situations of “regime juxtaposition,” where two levels of government with jurisdiction over the same territory operate under different regimes, understood as the set of norms, rules, and practices that govern the selection and behavior of state leaders (Gibson 2005). These regime differences can be slight or they can be dramatic, but they raise important normative and theoretical questions about the nature of democratic politics in Latin America, and they pose a number of puzzles about the political processes that render national democratic regimes hospitable to the endurance of local authoritarianism. A whole new frontier in the study of regime dynamics is presenting itself in Latin American studies, and the collection of articles in this issue, all carried out by young scholars with a deep engagement in the politics of the region, mark an important step in the opening of this field of intellectual inquiry.

The articles in this special edition address two broad questions: First, how do we measure and conceptualize variations in democracy across jurisdictions of the nation-state? Second, what are key mechanisms of continuity and change in subnational authoritarianism in nationally democratic countries? These are, of course, big questions, and it would be foolhardy to ex-

1 Early discoverers of this situation included Fox (1994); O'Donnell (1993); Cornelius, Eisenstadt, and Hindley (1999).

pect them to be answered in all their dimensions. However, the articles provide responses that will be of interest to a broad range of observers, and will move research in intriguing new directions.

Measuring and Classifying Variations in Subnational Democracy:

The articles by Carlos Gervasoni and Agustina Giraudy make major advances in the measurement of subnational democracy within countries. Their articles also highlight the complications in measuring regime characteristics at the subnational level, especially when the regime governing the national government can be comfortably classified as a “polyarchy.” This does raise particular challenges. First, in a national polyarchy parties are institutional currencies of politics, and while these will tend to apply to election for *national* offices (presidents, representatives to national legislatures, etc.), they will invariably frame the institutional context of subnational politics. Local authoritarian politics will thus be affected significantly by the democratic nature of national politics. Subnational authoritarian leaders will be constrained in how visibly they can exercise authoritarian rule. Local authoritarianism must, in some way, be rendered institutionally compatible with national democratic politics. In such contexts, provincial military regimes obviously cannot exist.

This poses unique challenges to the classification of subnational political systems. Detecting the undercurrents of power beneath the layers of democratic institutions that coat provincial politics is the core challenge to the classifier of subnational political regimes. Provincial politics, whether democratic or not, will be formally organized by democratic institutions. Constitutions specifying democratic rules of the game will be in place, and political parties, legislatures, and judiciaries, will be active. These institutions will also intermediate between local and national politics, and will be important channels of influence for local politicians. Scholars attempting to assess the level of democracy in a province, or to measure variations in democracy across subnational units of a country, must thus look beyond the formal institutional structure and measure the actual power dynamics at work in subnational political systems. Dynamics of party politics must be judged not only from their outcomes, but also by such less observable factors as the intent behind the design of electoral laws, the wielding of material resources (public and private) by political incumbents, and a variety of qualitative indicators that capture the power relations between actors in local institutional contexts. Evaluation via quantitative indicators similarly requires going the extra mile to detect patterns of political competition and domination over

time and space that are repeated across years of duly scheduled elections, transfers of power, and local legislative calendars. And in most cases this must be done for dozens of unique political systems that since time immemorial have existed in seclusion, shielded from scrutiny by the ignorance or indifference of national observers as well as the unreliability of data. It is a daunting task indeed.

Gervasoni and Giraudy apply national-level concepts to subnational contexts, treating each provincial unit as an independent political system. However, their conceptualizations and measurement methodologies differ. Gervasoni limits his measurement scope territorially to one country, Argentina but he extends its conceptual scope beyond objective indicators by incorporating subjective evaluations by local experts of provincial democracy in each of Argentina's 24 provinces. Gervasoni's "survey of experts" is a valuable tool for overcoming the inferential problems that can arise in large-N studies from incomplete knowledge of local contexts. Gervasoni also adopts a "thick" definition of democracy, one that includes contestation features, but also incorporates other civil and political rights and institutional guarantees. This approach offers a fine-grained view of regime variability across territorial jurisdictions. We can judge not only whether jurisdictions are more or less democratic according to one dimension, but also the ways in which subnational political regimes vary across several dimensions. This is an important step forward for the study of subnational politics, one that may show the way for future scholars seeking to bring light to the informational shadows of the periphery of democratic countries.

Giraudy employs a "minimalist" electoral definition of democracy that focuses on the "contestation" dimension of polyarchies developed by Robert Dahl (1971). Here democracy is operationalized as a system in which elections are contested fully, they are clean, and in which there is regular office turnover of elected authorities. Giraudy's assessments are based mostly on objective indicators constructed from electoral datasets as well as by the author's analysis of newspaper accounts of local events. She thus creates a parsimonious set of indicators that permits her to compare cases in a large pool of cases within countries and across countries. Every state/province in Argentina and Mexico is included in her dataset, and she captures annual variations from the onset of each country's transition to democracy to the present.

Both articles reveal considerable variation in the levels of democracy of the jurisdictions they study. They thus confirm the basic premise of this volume – that the territorial reach of democracy in Latin America can be strikingly uneven, and this fact constitutes a significant ongoing problem in today's national democratic regimes. However, each author has his and her

own take on how to classify local democracy. These differences highlight how the integration of subnational with national political systems creates difficulties for classifiers of the former systems. Giraudy shows no hesitation to label several subnational political systems “undemocratic” (five provinces in Argentina and ten states in Mexico). She also puts several subnational political systems in a category of “high and sustained levels of democracy,” while others move backwards and forwards in a middle range in the continuum between non-democracy and democracy. Giraudy thus uses the full range of the authoritarian-democratic continuum in her classifications of subnational political regimes in nationally democratic countries, regardless of the nature of the national political regime.

Gervasoni, on the other hand, considers even those subnational political systems at the lowest end of the continuum to be “hybrid” political regimes. Gervasoni notes that all provincial systems, even the most problematic, contain some key democratic attributes. None, for instance, engage in systematic disenfranchisement. In addition, most provinces have basic levels of rule of law, and party politics are well organized in the governing structure of provincial political life. Gervasoni also notes that in a democratic country it is to be expected that the national political regime will impose limits on just how authoritarian a local government can be, and that variations in the level of democracy will tend to run from different combinations of “hybridity” to complete polyarchy. Full blown authoritarianism in a nationally democratic country is both untenable and rare. Given these premises, theoretical classifications that incorporate hybridity notions in the national democratization literatures, can be very useful to the study of subnational democracy and democratization.

There is an implicit debate in these approaches, and it is a debate worth paying attention to. How we classify subnational political regimes has implications for how we analyze local political processes. In Gervasoni’s work we see that “hybrid” regimes exist in a category that is distinct from “authoritarian” regimes. “Hybridization” is thus a state that exists independently of authoritarianism, and this is meaningful definitionally and theoretically for understanding what is taking place politically in a jurisdiction. In another article in this issue, however, Julián Durazo Herrmann sees “hybridization” differently. It is a process that changes the institutional structure of the subnational polity without putting its “authoritarian character into question” (2010 in this issue: 105). Hybridization is thus a stabilizing process internal to subnational authoritarianism. A hybrid regime is an authoritarian regime,

and this is meaningful for the interpretation of its internal causal mechanisms and for how we characterize their outcomes.²

Another question raised by these articles is whether we can or should judge subnational political regimes differently from the way we judge national political regimes. Can we conceive of full-blown subnational authoritarian regimes in a national democratic polity? Are national dynamics so different from subnational dynamics that a national political regime we would label as “authoritarian” might, with the same internal characteristics, be classified as “hybrid” because it is embedded in a larger democratic system? If so, this could be a helpful perspective for grasping one thing that sets subnational political regimes apart from national political regimes. Their systemic interactions with the national polity *do* affect the way we should categorize and study them.

This insight may alert us to unique subnational processes and shed light on undiscovered dynamics of democratization. On the other hand, it may also generate assumptions about local politics that play down its authoritarian character and thus obscure important causal processes at work. In any case, this is the beginning of an important debate, and the theoretical and empirical results of future research may go a long way toward settling it.

Another methodological question is whether we need an additional indicator that captures the *subnational* nature of the regime. This could be either an indicator proper to a subnational unit, or one that captures the system’s linkages to the national arena. If so, what would such indicators look like? One might conceive of such a measure as one that captures the local regime’s distance on selected indicators from the national regime, or from other subnational units. Gervasoni compares expert perceptions of subnational democracy with those of particular presidential administrations, and this adds considerable conceptual information to the values attributed to provinces. It would be interesting to see such a variable developed systematically along these lines. As new scholarship poses further questions about the level and quality of subnational democracy it might be sensible to ponder the usefulness of additional indicators that capture the interactions between local and national politics rather than treating subnational political systems entirely as systems unto themselves.

2 This is theoretically similar to the approach taken by Levitsky and Way (2002).

Mechanisms of Change in Subnational Authoritarian Systems

Regime juxtaposition is the analytical starting point for the collection in this issue. There is good reason for this. The situation of regime juxtaposition creates the political and territorial context in which conflicts over subnational authoritarianism unfold. As components of a national territorial system, subnational and national polities are integrated in a variety of institutional and political ways. The existence of a national democratic polity puts clear pressure on subnational incumbents whose regimes or systematic political practices are at variance with national politics. As mentioned earlier, local incumbents must render authoritarian rule institutionally compatible with national democratic politics. Doing so successfully does provide greater opportunities for continuity of authoritarian rule, but it is also a double-edged sword. The successful organization of subnational hegemonic parties and a stable institutional order provides external legitimacy to local incumbents. It also provides key institutional resources for influencing national politics, as well as linkages between local and national political parties and government institutions. However, these very linkages can also operate as sources of pressure on local authoritarian rule. Local incumbents in a hegemonic provincial party, for example, may be vulnerable to internal factionalism when party linkages to the national party provide opportunities for dissidents to enlist outside allies in local conflicts. “Boundary control” in these circumstances, therefore, involves a range of institutional strategies in both local and national arenas. Understanding mechanisms of change in subnational political systems thus requires attention to interactions between national and local politics.

This point is already well understood in the budding scholarship of subnational regime dynamics. Still, most articles in this collection go beyond this abstract proposition and actually specify structural, institutional, and strategic conditions (and combinations of conditions) that undermine local authoritarian rule or aid its continuity. In a major advance in the study of subnational politics, authors in this volume reveal key mechanisms of continuity and change. Each author pays close attention to local conditions, but matches these to national dynamics that, when properly aligned with local realities, spark local political change. What is interesting is that the authors focus on different institutional and social dimensions in their models: bureaucratic (conflict between executive branches at different territorial levels), socioeconomic (local socioeconomic conditions and their effect on national coalitional imperatives), partisan (party conflict between national and subnational actors), and demographic (regional conflict within provinces).

Durazo Herrmann's article peers deep into the socioeconomic and political power structures that have shaped the political evolution of the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The article demonstrates the importance of careful historical study of local political dynamics to understand how an authoritarian state government could survive and prosper in a nationally democratizing Mexico. Durazo Herrmann's exploration into the legacies of patrimonial politics at the state level and its institutional transformations over time are essential for understanding local-national interactions that consolidated authoritarian rule in democratizing Mexico. Durazo Herrmann reveals how political adaptations by Oaxacan elites to local pressures helped to perpetuate patrimonial domination and to national democratic pressures led to the liberalization of local politics. This process of "hybridization" of the local political system allowed the hegemonic state party to respond to local pressures for political reform while also facilitating institutional and political linkages to the democratizing national political system. Political liberalization thus had the effect of stabilizing local authoritarian rule – a dynamic often seen in national authoritarian regimes. However, it also rendered the hybridized political regime more capable of interacting with the national democratic polity, making local authoritarian domination institutionally compatible with national democratic politics. This is a key mechanism behind the continuity of local authoritarian rule in national democracies, and is unique to situations of regime juxtaposition.

Giraudy develops a suggestive model that examines the interests of national executives (presidents) in bolstering or weakening what she labels "SURs" (subnational undemocratic regimes). The model ingeniously identifies specific strategic situations arising from combinations of national fiscal powers and subnational polity characteristics. As these vary so do the strategies national executives are likely to adopt towards undemocratic subnational incumbents. Here Giraudy goes beyond the "democratic presidents support subnational authoritarians" position to provide a theory about the conditions under which democratically elected presidents are likely to strengthen subnational incumbents and when they are likely to seek to undermine them. This provides an important starting point for a model of subnational political change.

The articles by Alfred Montero and Tracy Fenwick point us to yet another dimension of subnational politics that is critical to understanding how national-subnational interactions help or hinder local authoritarian rule. Rural-urban divides within subnational jurisdictions are structural features that can be manipulated effectively by authoritarian incumbents and oppositions alike in their strategies of boundary control. The manipulation of subnational regional cleavages is a key mechanism of boundary control in strug-

gles between incumbents and oppositions. And it has its local and its national dimensions. Montero's article on Brazil gives us a fascinating view of how these affect national-subnational partisan dynamics – specifically how they shape the capabilities of national parties and local oppositions to challenge the hegemony of conservative clientelistic electoral machines. Fenwick's study of Brazil and Argentina situates this in a broader institutional context – namely how federalism, the territorial regime, grants political powers to municipalities within the federal system. The differential powers granted to municipalities in federal systems influence how effectively local and national political contenders are able to use municipalities as territorial arenas from which to challenge the powers of authoritarian governors and local clientelistic machines.

In Montero's analysis of the 2006 Brazilian elections one major factor stood out – opposition forces (in this case leftist oppositions) were able to challenge local conservative clientelistic machines through partisan alliances with the national ruling Worker's Party (the Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT). This required concerted strategies of “localized party building” by the national party. However, these strategies had a particular characteristic. They were urban-based, focusing on the larger and more diverse urban municipalities of the states. This dynamic conforms to a structural pattern of subnational politics that can be labeled “authoritarian province, plural cities.”³ Conservative governors, supported by local clientelistic party machines, often maintain control of the province through control of rural areas and small towns, while more heterogeneous and larger urban areas are bases of local organized opposition.⁴ Urban politics is often the Achilles' heel of local oligarchic rule. In the Brazilian case, Montero further reveals how, in a political system traditionally dominated by state-based clientelistic parties, the emergence of a national party with strong incentives to engage in local party-building can alter subnational political dynamics. The article also points out the factors that can limit the success of these strategies. Local coalitional dynamics, such as the ability of local oligarchs to stay unified in the face of national challenges can limit challenges by local-national opposition alliances. Similarly, the ability of local oppositions to extend their party building beyond the larger cities is important

3 For a discussion, see Gibson (2005: 131).

4 Gubernatorial control is often enhanced by institutional design, namely the overrepresentation of rural areas in provincial institutions. Key (1949) described this institutional control at length in his classic study of politics in the American “solid south,” where local democratic parties, manipulating “sectional” cleavages in their states, enhanced their hegemony through the overrepresentation of peripheral hinterlands at the expense of cities and more developed areas where oppositions were likely to congregate.

to their chances to gain and hold state-wide office. These insights shed important light on the rural-urban dynamics of “party-led” transitions from subnational authoritarian rule in Brazil and Latin America more generally.

Fenwick’s article confirms that the nature of a country’s territorial regime matters to both the level and the quality of democracy in the subnational jurisdictions of nationally democratic countries.⁵ In her study of Brazil and Argentina, the territorial regime in question, federalism, accords municipalities a very different position in the institutional hierarchy between levels of government. In Brazil, municipalities are recognized as autonomous federal units that are distinct from the states. In Argentina municipalities are seen as institutionally subordinated to the provinces. This institutional variation has significant consequences for the distribution of power between territorially-based political actors (presidents, governors, and mayors) and thus for politics, policy-making, and subnational democratization. Fenwick captures the power dynamic most succinctly, weak governors can become stronger when united with mayors, strong (hegemonic) governors can become weaker when mayors are bolstered by the central government, and mayors can strengthen a central government constrained by governors through direct cooperation (Fenwick 2010 in this issue).

The characteristics of urban societies and polities within provinces provide the structural backdrop to these political dynamics. However, the powers granted to municipalities by federalism shapes the institutional terrain upon which battles over politics and policy-making are fought between political actors. And Fenwick’s theoretical insights give us a multi-layered perspective on these actors’ territorial power bases and coalitional options, allowing us to transcend the “national-subnational” dichotomy that often dominates the study of territorial politics.

In sum, each of these articles tackles unique problems and makes original contributions. Yet, they are linked by shared concerns about the conceptualization and measurement of local political regimes, and by the dynamics of subnational regime change and continuity. They thus come together as a coherent set of articles about subnational authoritarianism and democratization in Latin America. They also chart new paths for the study of subnational political regime dynamics in contemporary democracies around the world.

5 For a discussion of “territorial regimes,” their relationship to democracy, and their effects on territorial politics generally, see Gibson (forthcoming).

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