Is There Such a Thing as Latin America?

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This paper investigates whether Latin America exists as a region beyond geographical proximity. Claims about the uniqueness of Latin America come in different forms, but a number of them have focused on political institutions. Through the study of models of transition to democracy and to dictatorship, we find no evidence that Latin American countries share crucial unobserved characteristics that influence their transition probabilities. This finding invites to reflect on how we think of regional studies and about the appropriateness of employing standard econometric techniques.

Keywords: *regional studies, Latin America, regime transitions*

¿Existe algo llamado América Latina?

Este trabajo investiga si América Latina existe como región, más allá de la proximidad regional. Las afirmaciones sobre la singularidad de América Latina suelen presentarse de diferentes maneras, pero algunas se han centrado en las instituciones políticas. A través del estudio de modelos de transición a la democracia y a la dictadura, no encontramos evidencia de que los países latinoamericanos compartan características cruciales no observadas que influyen en sus probabilidades de transición. Este hallazgo nos invita a reflexionar sobre cómo pensamos en los estudios regionales y sobre la conveniencia de emplear las típicas técnicas econométricas.

Palabras clave: *estudios regionales, América Latina, transiciones de régimen*

Introduction

Latin America is often treated as a unit, most frequently as a cultural zone or as a region in which institutions are weak or otherwise inadequate.[1] If that is the case, then apart from geographic proximity, there must be at least one distinctive characteristic that these countries share which separates them from the rest of the countries in the world and which accounts for any difference in performance. Thus, there are two issues involved: whether Latin American countries are homogeneous within the geographical region and whether they collectively differ from the rest of the countries in the world in some way.[2] This paper deals with the second of these issues.

We focus on the unitary treatment of Latin America as it appears in the empirical research on regime transitions. Latin America has concentrated much attention with regard to political transformations, since it has suffered a number of them. Over the past 50 years 39% of all regime transitions in the world occurred in Latin America.[3] Several hypotheses have been proposed in an attempt to explain such phenomenon. Among them, we find that Latin American political culture is not shaped towards democracy, that rigged elections undermine the legitimacy of democracies, that appropriate institutions are absent or just do not work the way they should.

Given that the critiques about how Latin American democracies work (or do not work thereof) are common place, it is worth evaluating whether the negative remarks apply to all democracies, independently of regional considerations of any kind. Przeworski (2001) argues that there are no undesirable characteristics in Latin American democracies that are specific to the region. He provides evidence by comparing the group means of the variables number of veto players, likelihood that the executive be accountable, and a measure of central bank independence in Latin America and the OECD countries. In no case does he find that the Latin American institutions are such that allow for more authoritarianism than in the OECD countries, that is, the means of the variables analyzed are either very similar or the Latin American one is higher. As a powerful illustration, he reports that, during the period 1989-1998, while British prime ministers succeeded in passing 93.2% of his legislative initiatives within a year, Brazilian presidents managed to do the same only 68% of the time.

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[1]   Take as an anecdote the words of US President Ronald Regan after he visited Latin American countries in 1982: "I went down to Latin America to find out from them and their views. *You would be surprised. They are all individual countries.*" (italics are ours). Source: The Washington Post, 12/6/1982.

[2]   The issue of collective homogeneity at the regional level has been the center of contemporary academic debates. In the field of international relations, Altmann, Rojas Aravena and Brigagao (2008) discuss the idea that it is possible that there are several "Latin Americas" that follow trajectories that are increasingly separated.

[3]   Computed from ACLP data.

So, are there solid grounds for treating Latin America as a homogeneous region when thinking of regime dynamics? Is there any characteristic of Latin America that invites us to group those countries? Are institutions, in particular democracy, different in Latin America than in the rest of the world? These questions motivate the empirical research in this piece. An econometric approach allows us to exploit information on all regime transitions occurred in the world over the period 1950-1999. Using the ACLP dataset, we assess the effect of being a Latin American country on the probability of occurrence of a transition either to democracy or to dictatorship.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 presents some evidence on the "complaints" about undesirable particularities of Latin American democracies. We relate these complaints to the literature on regime transitions. Section 2 explores the data to be used and shows some descriptive statistics. Section 3 discusses the econometric model to be estimated. Section 4 reports the findings while section 5 concludes.

1. The Curse of Latin America

There are three main families of complaints about Latin America: those rooted in culture, those based on institutions, and those regarding poverty and income inequality. It is not clear to what extent each of them is a valid concern and what relations exist between them, if any. By valid we mean a distinctive undesirable characteristic of Latin America, which would allow us to separate facts from myths.

This section aims to provide evidence on the depiction of Latin America as a troubled region. See Karl (1990) for a brief classification of the theories of transitions to democracy into those that postulate preconditions for democracy (income, political power, domestic historical conditions, macro oriented conditions, external influences) and those that introduce strategic considerations and uncertainty. The last part of this section introduces some ideas related to the theories of transition that help to explain the econometric approach we are using.

1.1. Culture

Let us begin with references to a "common culture" that the Latin American countries share, which is said to account for similarities in performance of democracy. It was accepted for a long time that Latin American countries inherited from Spain an antidemocratic culture (Morse, 1954; Dealy, 1974; Smith 1974). This interpretation was discarded because in time it became evident that the Latin American peoples embraced democratic values; besides, neither the colonial experiences nor the colonial legacies were uniform in the region (Hartlyn, Linz and Lipset, 1999: 7). Other accounts combine both cultural and economic elements in order to address this phenomenon. According to Lipset (1993), the main reason why Latin American democracies are unstable relative to other geographic regions is that both economic and cultural factors have historically rendered Latin American countries prone to authoritarianism:

> The question remains, why have most Latin American polities not functioned like the US political system? The answer lies in economic and cultural factors. If we look at the comparative record, it still suggests [...] that long-enduring democracies are disproportionately to be found among the wealthier and more protestant nations (Lipset, 1993: 136).

We do not dispute the fact that democracy is likely to endure in wealthy societies; in turn, we focus on the cultural component of the explanation. Note that given that Latin Americans share a common cultural legacy, Diamond, Hartlyn and Linz (1999: 53) conclude the opposite: "Generally in Latin America, the common bonds of Spanish language and Catholic faith provide a substantial degree of cultural homogeneity that is conducive to (at least in that it removes one potential obstacle to) democracy". On their part, Seligson and Booth (1993) found evidence that refutes these claims. Comparing what the authors consider to be two relatively poor and Catholic countries (Costa Rica and Nicaragua), they concluded that political culture is independent from religion and economic development.

The arguments above either support or reject a link between stability of democracy and culture. Now, the logical question to be asked is whether it is possible to define Latin America in terms of culture in the first place. In an attempt to answer this puzzle, Inglehart and Carballo (1997: 42) analyze data on the 1990-1991 World Values Survey and conclude that there exist "coherent and distinctive cultural patterns that could readily be described as Latin American", which is a questionable conclusion given that the sample utilized in their study only represents 4 (Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Brazil) out of 19 Latin American countries, in addition to other inference problems that the study presents. The most troubling of them is that such conclusion is supposedly derived from the distance between countries once scores over two cultural dimensions are assigned.[4] Regions are defined by minimal distance. As a result of the study, Chile and Brazil turn out to be closer to South Africa and Poland than to Mexico and Argentina; also, the latter two countries are closer to Spain, Portugal and Turkey than to Chile and Brazil. Therefore, the Latin American culture thus defined appears to be a slippery concept.

Culture has not been the only factor held accountable for Latin America's alleged uniqueness in terms of the democracies it produces. Hakim and Lowenthal note that political violence, military incursions into politics, fragile institutions and alienated citizens are the threats that challenge democratic governance in Latin America (1993: 300). Political violence, as the authors describe, has been the case of only four Latin American countries (Peru, Colombia, Guatemala and El Salvador). Lack of political participation is, if any, a problem of democracy worldwide: as is well known, one of the oldest democracies, the American democracy, suffers from a pronounced decrease in vote turnout among other political-participation related

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[4]   The dimensions are: 1) survival vs. well-being and 2) traditional vs. rational-secular authority.

activities (see Putnam 2000). About military incursions, it is true that Latin American countries have suffered more of them. Indeed, Latin America concentrates 42.9% of the world transitions to dictatorship (24 out of 56).[5]

1.2. Institutions

With regard to institutions, Hakim and Lowenthal (1993: 200) point out that they are fragile on two fronts: legislatures and judicial systems. Thus, "Courts are overburdened and their proceedings, both criminal and civil, are routinely delayed for years. Judges are, for the most part, poorly trained and paid, and they lack the funding to conduct investigations and administer justice effectively. In many places, judicial decisions are heavily influenced by political considerations, intimidation, or outright corruption." [...] "Presidents, frustrated by delay and indecision, frequently resort to exceptional procedures to bypass the legislative process. In doing so, they debase the formal institutions of government, compromise legal norms, and undercut democratic legitimacy" (Hakim and Lowenthal, 1993: 299).

On their part, Mainwaring and Shugart (1991: 53) observe that: "[...] the most important explanation for this phenomenon is not institutional, but rather is an effect of lower levels of development and nondemocratic political cultures. Presidentialism has sometimes contributed to problems of democracy, but the correlation between continuous democracy and parliamentarism is partly an artifact of where parliamentarism has been implemented".[6] An additional claim is based on the fact that Latin American democracies are overwhelmingly presidential (Linz 1996). Nevertheless, it has already been shown that parliamentarism has no advantage over presidentialism *per se* but that the characteristics of the decision making process is what matters on this regard (Cheibub and Limongi, 2002). Therefore, if there is a particular and common institutional feature that undermines democracy in Latin America, it is not presidentialism.

A complete description of those widespread beliefs about how democracy works in Latin America is provided by Diamond, Hartlyn and Linz, who in 1990 envisioned the following scenario when discussing the prospects of democracy:

> In most of the region, more or less genuine electoral competition and alternation would be overshadowed by the failure of all major political parties, and of state institutions in all sectors and levels, to engage and respond to vast segments of the public, who in turn would become increasingly alienated from and distrustful (even disdainful) of formal democratic institutions. Delegative, populist, and neopatrimonial presidents would override the

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[5]   Source: ACLP dataset produced by Przeworski et al. (2000)

[6]   The authors point out that presidentialism has existed mostly in Latin America, while parliamentarism exists almost exclusively in Europe or former British colonies (p. 12).

quest for horizontal accountability and a rule of law, and thereby eviscerate the vertical dimension of accountability as well. Unable to mobilize a policy consensus or any viable, coherent vision of a more just and dynamic country, parties and politicians would flounder in governing, failing to generate sustained economic growth, much less to relieve poverty and inequality. We do not think the current situation is this bad, but neither do we believe that such a "low-level equilibrium" of democracy in Latin America can be viable indefinitely. And even if it is viable, it is hardly desirable. (Diamond, Hartlyn and Linz, 1999: 63)

The above paragraph raises some questions. For example, are elections distinctively flawed in Latin America? Do citizens have more confidence on institutions in other regions of the world? Are all those reasons accountable for an unsustainable rate of growth in the region as opposed to the political situation in more economically developed nations? Are these characteristics absent in "high-level" equilibrium democracies? In particular, the above quotation introduces O'Donnell's concept of accountability (1994), which is invoked in many of these claims (for example, Diamond 1996, Dominguez and Lowenthal 1996, Shifter 1997).

As Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000: 148, italics are ours) put it: "There is widespread consensus in most scholarly literature on Latin American democracies that governmental accountability in both dimensions is *sadly* lacking". Regarding vertical accountability, the authors report that even where electoral mechanisms function, there are signs of deficiencies in vertical accountability mechanisms: "Policy switches, and thus an incongruity between a candidate's electoral mandate and his subsequent governmental policies, are common phenomenon in contemporary Latin America." (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, 2000: 148)[7] Therefore, according to this view, Latin America's weakness lies in its ineffective and defective institutions. The presentation of this type of factors as characteristic of Latin America is surprising. A whole body of literature on political economy dealing with electoral models, corruption, political participation, to mention a few, that attempt to explain rational interaction based on incentives, is applicable in general situations.

According to Siavelis (2004), Latin American countries appeared to approach democratic politics in an institutionalized and predictable manner by the mid-1990s. There was a preoccupation with maintaining democratic quality after regime transitions and conceiving a political system characterized by institutional interactions. A number of Latin American democracies share certain degree of institutional development, but there are important variations in the force and

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[7]   Lehmann also refers to this phenomenon without making an explicit comment on vertical accountability: "Governments in Latin America, also in Africa, have been able because of the particular configuration −or lack of configuration- of the state, to make radical departures in economic policy which are unthinkable in either capitalist or socialist advanced industrial societies, where established habits and interests are more deeply entrenched" (Lehmann, 1990: 204).

relevance of institutions in each country (Machado, Scartascini and Tommasi 2011). Institutions do not operate in a vacuum. Disputes originated in each country given its differences in social structure may account for higher levels of political instability express in coups, public disturbances and other such events that characterize the region (Fukuyama 2006). The strength of formal political institutions in Latin America are an issue at point, and Levitsky and Murillo (2012) have pointed to the need to treat it as a variable and not as an assumption in light of scarce stability and the erratic enforcement of rules.

1.3. Poverty and income inequality

What is special about Latin America's political record? We mentioned before that there were three families of complaints about Latin America. We have already discussed culture and institutions and are left with the third one: income inequality and poverty. The fact that Latin America is a region with particularly high levels of inequality and poverty is well documented.[8] For example, O'Donnell (1996) pointed to the high and increasing levels of inequality and poverty in the region, and tracing them back to colonial times. In the 1980s and 1990s inequality in Latin America increased due to the debt crisis and the following structural reform policies (Gasparini and Lustig, 2011).

That is a valid complaint. But what explains regime instability? Is it institutions or inequality/poverty or something else? O'Donnell believes that "[...] the direction of the current explicative efforts is [...] to take the extreme inequality and poverty as important causes of the bad functioning and the scarce representativeness of the Latin American democratic regimes." (O'Donnell, 2001: 101, own translation).

The argument becomes more complex when we consider the causal circularity that ends up being proposed between poverty/inequality and institutions. When thinking of possible remedies to the issue of poverty and income inequality in Latin America, O'Donnell proposes that a strong state (absent in Latin America after the socioeconomic crisis and stabilization programs) be built in order to mobilize and make effective the public interest. He specifies: "By 'strong' I mean several interrelated features: a reasonably well–motivated, noncorrupt, and skilled civil service; capacity to formulate and implement policies; openness to, but not colonization by, society; at least some transparency and accountability; and responsiveness to goals and priorities formulated through a democratic political process" (O'Donnell, 1996: 9).

The features put forward as characteristic of a strong state remind us the arguments we reviewed above: it all comes down to institutions, which are expected to both produce and be a result of income distribution and poverty. Now, how is a particular institutional design, emerged from certain income levels and wealth distribution

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[8]   See Szekely 2001, among others.

expected to produce higher income levels and more equitable wealth distributions? Could this jump ever occur endogenously? Do institutions matter in regard to these outcomes? Further research needs to be pursued on this topic; but certainly, as has been discussed here, this puzzle becomes evident in the literature about Latin America.

1.4 Transitions

The main purpose of this article is to discuss whether Latin America exists as a distinctive region compared to the rest of the world. Through the study of models of transition to democracy and to dictatorship, we assess this concern. Above we referred to common sources of Latin America's alleged uniqueness in terms of the democracies it produces. Specifically, we referred to cultural, institutional and, poverty and inequality arguments.

Latin American-regime transitions have been widely studied. To begin with, classic works have tried to generalize the cases beyond the geographic scheme, culture or the type of previous regime (O'Donnell, Schmitter y Whitehead, 1986). The authors argue that one of Latin America´s unique feature is that the countries within the region share the characteristics of democratization opportunity. Nonetheless, a couple of characteristics are not shared by all the countries of the analysis: 1) that of bureaucratic authoritarianism prior to its transition and 2) the infrequent resources towards explicit and formal economic and political pacts as transitional devices in Latin America.[9] In addition, they strive to point out that there is not a single "Latin America" according to the conditions prior to transitions.

In the study of patterns of transition, Linz y Stepan (1996) widen the classic taxonomy to make more useful the analysis.[10] According to the five types of regimes explained by the authors, with four of those being non-democratic, they highlight that the characteristics of each one has profound implications for the *paths* of the transition and the *tasks* that different countries must face when they begin developing consolidated democracies. In addition, they indicate that the non-democratic type of regime shows the possibilities and limits of the pacts as a transition option available or not in any type. However, they focus significantly on the steps of their ideal types from non-democracies by studying only Southern Cone countries (Brasil, Uruguay, Chile y Argentina), they point out that those transitions were granted from above by the military which helped the latter secure institutional power post-transition.

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9   The pacts do not work out for some reasons such as whether civil society is weak or poorly organized (exclusive agreements of elites), or, on the contrary, when the levels of social organization are high and there is a representative and strong party system in place (institutionalized political actors).

10 Hence, they offer a typology with five categories of regimes: democratic, authoritarian, totalitarian, post totalitarian and sultanista (Linz y Stepan, 1996: 40)

Other authors focus on the modes of transition.[11] Munck and Skalniff (1999: 343) define transitions as "periods of regime change, are formative or founding moments". Those moments set societies on paths that shape their political development. These authors use a path dependent analysis starting at transitions points all the way through democratic consolidation.[12] Like other authors, they define the mode of transitions in terms of the actors of the process (Przeworski, 1991). They investigate how the transition process shape the post-transitional regime and its politics by affecting multiple groups and their legacies. The actors and institutions are central in that idea where institutional rules, elite competition, and terms of rules being accepted or not, are key features. They conclude that "the process of transition itself, is important in determining the likelihood that the outcome of transition will be a democratic form of government, as well as the distinctive challenges new democracies face when they try to consolidate themselves" (Munck and Skalniff, 1999: 359).

Others focus on post-transition military civilian relations. Like the civilian governments in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, etc., Chile's new government faced the challenge of returning from a militar one (Loveman, 1991). The main focus of the new democracies was to lessen the central role in politics and the institutional prerogatives that the armed forces had. Through an in depth study of the Chilean case, Loveman explains civil-military relations and its institutional legacy.

The above selected references, drawn from the literature on regime transitions, were presented in order to exemplify distinctive features of the conditions reported to have been crucial in understanding transition in Latin America. Next, we present descriptive statistics on data referring to regime transitions in order to get familiar with the facts and prepare to assess the alleged uniqueness of Latin America.

2. Descriptive Statistics

The empirical analysis that follows is based on the ACLP dataset produced by Przeworski et al. (2000), which runs from 1946 or year of independence with updated data until 1999. It counts 7,500 observations and 106 variables on 199 countries, of which 19 are labeled as Latin American thus representing 9.6% of the sample.[13] The dataset provides information on transitions in the following form: the variable TAD is a dummy equal to 1 when regime transitions to democracy take

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[11]   See Karl and Schmitter (1991) for an explanation of the types of transitions and the types of democracy that emerge from each one.

[12]   The authors bring up the distinction between transition from democracy and from authoritarian rule. They point out that the transition from authoritarianism helps in determining the prospects of democratic consolidation and the success of the transition itself. They argue that the mode of transition affects the consolidation of new regimes but that it also indicates if the transition is to democracy or to some other type of regime.

[13]   The series begin from 1950 whenever we include income per capita in the analysis due to unavailability of data. In particular, in Latin America the data on income for Cuba is missing.

place and it equals zero otherwise, while the dummy TDA indicates the occurrence of transitions to dictatorship. Out of a total of 7312 observations, only in 143 country year observations did a transition take place. Thus, transitions represent only .0196% of all non-missing country year observations.

The data show that Latin America's record of regime transitions is impressive. The region concentrates 55 out of 143 (39%) regime transitions in the world over the period 1946-1999. Of the 56 world transitions to authoritarian rule, 24 (43%) occurred in Latin America and the analogous figure for democratic transitions is 36%. The mean of the variable TJK (equal to 1 when either type of transition takes place) is .054 for Latin America and .014 for the rest of the world; the means of the variable TAD are .03 (Latin America) and .009 (rest of the world); and the averages for TDA are .023 (Latin America) and .005 (rest of the world). Unsurprisingly, the z tests for the differences in means of the variables TAD, TDA and TJK in Latin America versus the rest of the world support in each case the alternative hypothesis that the samples come from different populations with 99% confidence (TJK: the computed z is equal to -5.51. TAD: z=-3.86. TDA: z=-3.78). As unfolds from these numbers, transitions are a rare event; but note that Latin America's share of them outweighs its share in the sample.

Figure 1 shows histograms for transitions to democracy and dictatorship in the world and in Latin America. The peaks of transitions to democracy in the world are 1979 (5), 1990 (6), 1991 (7) and 1992 (6). In 1979, 3 out of 5 cases are Latin American countries (with Ghana and Nigeria); in 1990, 4 out of 6 cases correspond to Eastern Europe (the other two are Chile and Comoro Island); in 1991, 4 out of 7 cases are Sub-Saharan countries (with Nepal, Bangladesh and Suriname); in 1992, 2 transitions of this type occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa (with Mongolia, Thailand, Guyana and Albania). Never more than 3 democratic transitions occurred in a particular year in Latin America, and the years in which 3 of them took place are far apart: 1958 and 1979. From 1956 to 1959, there was a transition in Latin America each year, and also from 1979 to 1986 (with the exception of 1982). We do not find such regularity when we look at the data of the whole world, apart from the 1990-1992 peak. It is worth mentioning that, as we might suspect from an eye inspection of Figure 1, there is no evidence of waves of democratization. If it were true that democratization follows such a pattern, then as democracies are born (TAD=1) we should observe that existing democracies survive (TDA=0), or otherwise the addition of the new democracies would cancel out with lost ones. The correlation coefficient between TDA and TAD has the expected sign but is very small: it is equal to -.0098 for the world and -.027 for Latin America.

Figure 1

Transitions to democracy and dictatorship in the world and in Latin America
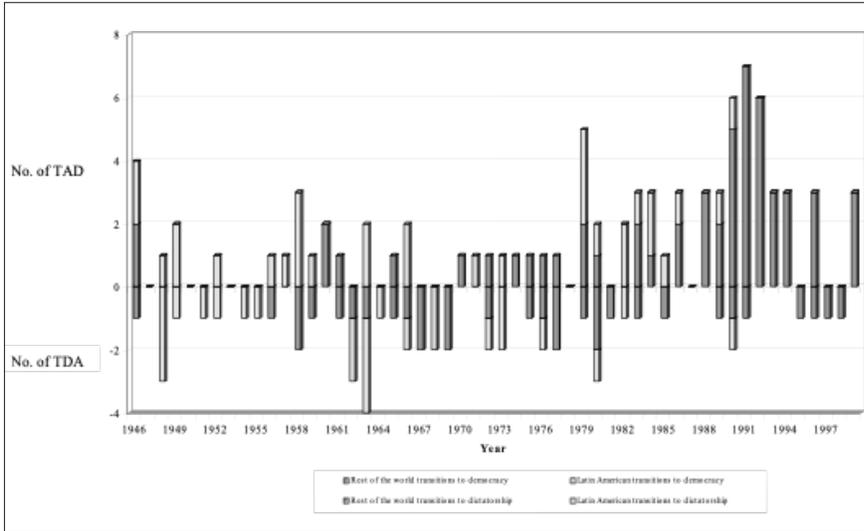
Source: Various authors

Latin America leads transitions to dictatorship, particularly at the beginning of the time series. Most of these countries later became democracies, some of them after switching back and forth regimes. Only three Latin American countries never experienced a transition to dictatorship: Dominican Republic (a democracy since 1966), El Salvador (a democracy since 1984), and Nicaragua (became a democracy in 1984).[14] From 1946 to 1955, all transitions in the world occurred in Latin America, while between 1956 and 1982, Latin America represents 41% of all transitions to dictatorship.

After 1982, only one transition to dictatorship occurred in Latin America (the *autogolpe* of Fujimori in Peru in 1990).[15] Three Latin American dictatorships never experienced a transition to democracy in the sample: Mexico, Paraguay and Cuba, which were dictatorships during the 54 years.[16] Therefore, 84.2% of the 19 Latin American countries experienced at least one transition to democracy in the period

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[14]   Note that we could also refer to peaks of transition to dictatorship: 1948 (3), 1962 (3), 1963 (4), and 1980 (3).

[15]   Of the other 10 transitions that occurred after 1982, 6 took place in the Sub–Saharan Africa region, and then in the following: Suriname in 1990, Thailand in 1991, and Pakistan in 1998.

[16]   Mexico under the PRI did not satisfy the alternation rule in order to be classified as a democracy. The alternation rule reads as follows: "The incumbents will have or already have held office continuously by virtue of elections for more than 2 terms or have held office without being elected for any duration of their current tenure in office, and until the time when they were overthrown

1946-1999. In order to capture the history of political instability of a country unit, the variable STRA counts the number of past transitions to authoritarian rule.[17] On average, the Latin American country year observations present about one (0.99) past transition to authoritarianism with a standard deviation of 1.1, while the mean for the rest of the world is .23 with a standard deviation of .49. As expected, the z test for the difference in means tells us that the probability of getting a difference this large (.76) due to sampling variability alone is less than 1% (computed z = –22.07).

Table 1 presents the variable STRA broken down by regime type. A glance at it reveals that while Latin America follows the pattern of the rest of the countries in the world in that most dictatorships have experienced no past transitions to authoritarianism, the case of democracies is different. There are relatively more Latin American presidential democracies that experienced at least one past transition to authoritarianism than the rest of the countries in the world. Note that all Latin American democracies are presidential in the sample, except for Brazil in 1961-2 when it was a mixed democracy. However, we know from previous research mentioned in the preceding section that although presidentialism is predominant in Latin America, it does not account for instability of democracy.

they had not lost an election." (Przeworski et al, 2000: 29). Paraguay was a military dictatorship and Cuba was under communism.

[17]   When a country experienced a transition to authoritarianism before 1946, STRA = 1 in 1946.

Table 1:

Sum of past transitions to dictatorship by type of institution – Latin America and the Rest of the World (country–years)

STRA	Dictatorship	Democracy			Total
		Parliamentary	Mixed	Presidential	
Latin America					
0	248	0	2	120	370
1	138	0	0	311	449
2	55	0	0	64	119
3	17	0	0	27	44
4	15	0	0	5	20
5	7	0	0	17	24
Total	**480**	**0**	**2**	**544**	**1026**
Rest of the World					
0	3080	1477	200	301	5058
1	574	295	122	52	1043
2	113	47	9	1	170
3	13	0	0	0	13
4	0	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**3780**	**1819**	**331**	**354**	**6284**

Source: Authors

Let us now look at transitions by income level. Table 2 breaks down not only transitions by income level, but also into the region under our scrutiny and the rest of the world.[18] We know what the income level thresholds are for each type of transition. For those income levels above that of Argentina in 1976 ($5,851),[19] no transition to dictatorship ever occurred. The world threshold for transitions to democracy is given by Bulgaria in 1990 with $6,739 of income per capita, followed by Venezuela in 1959 ($6,718) (see Appendix A for a list of the Latin American country years in which both transitions to democracy and dictatorship occurred by lagged income level).

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[18]　Note that we get fewer transitions than in the figure shown since we were cross-tabbing them with lagged income per capita. Due to missing data for lagged income per capita, we lost there: 9 observations in the world where TAD=1, of which 5 happened in Latin America, and 9 observations in the world sample where TDA=1 of which 4 occurred in Latin America.

[19]　The lagged value of income per capita in 1976 was $6,055.

Table 2

Transitions to Democracy and Dictatorship by lagged income level and region

Lagged income per capita	Rest of the World			Latin America		
	TAD= 3D1	TDA= 3D1	Total	TAD= 3D1	TDA= 3D1	Total
1,000	19	12	33	0	0	0
1,001–2000	13	10	42	11	7	20
2,001–3,000	8	3	18	6	6	10
3,001–4,000	2	3	9	3	2	3
4,001–5,000	3	0	12	3	2	8
5,001–6,000	3	0	5	2	1	3
6,001–7,000	1	0	2	1	1	1
7,001–8,000	1	0	1	0	0	0
¿8000	1	0	1	0	0	0
Total	**51**	**28**	**79**	**26**	**19**	**45**

Note: The oil countries habe been excluded from the sample in the construction of this table. Those countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates
Source: Authors

From this section we learned that transitions are an infrequent event, that there are no waves of either democratization or authoritarianism, and that transitions occur less often at high income levels. Both types of transitions recurrently appear in the region of our interest, thus making it a suitable object of study in order to investigate the distinctiveness of Latin America.

3. Empirical Strategy

Let us assume that there are some unique characteristics about the way things are in Latin America. We could think that, along with much of the literature discussed above, horizontal mechanisms of accountability do not work properly, that separation of power is ineffective, that other agencies which could control the government are absent, etcetera. Moreover, it could be the case that the Latin American culture is distinctively prone to authoritarianism, given the colonial legacies or that the popularity of Catholicism somehow affects the transition probabilities in the region. Then it should be the case that the unobserved heterogeneity of Latin American countries will be captured by the Latin American dummy.[20]

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[20]   But keep in mind that this would only address the issue of whether the region differs from the rest of the countries in the world, but not whether the region is homogeneous in some other manner.

The empirical strategy addresses the question postulated in this manuscript. It consists in estimating full transition models by dividing the sample according to lagged regime and then estimating the transition probabilities (which is equivalent to estimating a Markov model with a shift). Then, we assess the impact of the variable LA, a dummy which equals 1 if a country is Latin American and equals 0 otherwise.[21] Whether the sign of the coefficient is positive or negative, given insignificance, does not matter. However, if it is true that being a Latin American country involves some inherent proneness to instability, then the coefficient should be positive and significantly different from zero in both types of transitions. If it is the case that democracies are unstable but not dictatorships, then the signs should be reversed (the coefficient for transitions to dictatorship should be positive) when comparing both types of transitions regarding the LA dummy.

The basic model to be investigated is that presented by Przeworski et al. (2000: 124). The reason why we chose it is because it contains several variables that capture some of the "complaints" exposed in Section 2. Since extensive theoretical support is provided in the original source we do not reproduce them here. Now we turn to the specification of the model. Regarding economic development, the model includes the variables LEVLAG (lagged income per capita). The effect of the international context is captured by the variable ODWP, which measures the proportion of other democracies in the world. In turn, the lags of the variables G and T represent, respectively, the rate of growth and the cumulative rate of leadership turnover in the previous period. Past instability is represented by the variable STRA (discussed in the previous section). The effects of religion are tested through the variables CATH, PROT, and MOSLEM which indicate the proportion of the population that is Catholic, Protestant, and Moslem, respectively. The variable RELD captures the degree of religious heterogeneity, through an index of the degree of religious fractionalization. BRITCOL is a dummy that accounts for whether the country was a British colony, while NEWC records whether a country existed in 1945 (NEWC equals 1 if it does not and 0 if it does).

In any case, an eye inspection of some descriptive statistics on income and political stability suggests that heterogeneity strives within the region. Refer to the Appendix B for descriptive statistics on some political and economic variables.

[21] In addition, a couple of models with a different econometric specification were estimated where a regional dummy is included for all other regions of the world (See Table 5).

Thus, based on this source we estimate probit models with the following specification:

$$Pr(TJK_{i,j} = 1)$$
$$= \Phi(\alpha_0 + \alpha_1\,CATH_{i,j} + \alpha_2 LEVLAG_{i,j} + \alpha_3 LA_{i,j} + \alpha_4 PROT_{i,j}$$
$$+ \alpha_5 MOSLEM_{i,j} + \alpha_6 RELD_{i,j} + \alpha_7 BRITCOL_{i,j} + \alpha_8 NEWC_{i,j}$$
$$+ \alpha_9 ODWP_{i,j} + \alpha_{10} STRA_{i,j} + \alpha_{11} GLAG + \alpha_{12} TLAG)$$

In an alternative specification, we introduce the variable EMILAG, a dummy equal to 1 if the effective head in t–1 is or was a member of the military by profession. We do this in order to allow for heterogeneity of military dictatorships on the grounds that they are suspected to last short periods of time (Przeworski 2003). Provided that reason, we expect EMILAG to have a destabilizing influence on dictatorships, thus contributing to the occurrence of a transition to democracy. We also run alternative models including regional dummies for other parts of the world.

4. Findings

Table 3 presents the results of the models of democratic transitions. Column 1 shows the estimates of the probit in the original source with updated data until 1999. When compared with the results reported with data from 1950-90, there are two differences. On the one hand, the variable RELD is now negative and insignificant. On the other hand, LEVEL is no longer significant, thus suggesting that income per capita is irrelevant regarding the probability that a dictatorship transits to a democracy. In turn, ODWP gains significance.[22]

The rest of the variables remain the same, that is, STRA, TLAG, and GLAG continue to be significant. On its part, the religious variables (CATH, PROT and MOSLEM), NEWC and BRITCOL are still not significantly different from zero. All signs remain the same for which EMIL=1 are democracies. They are the effective heads during the following country-year observations: Benin 1996, Sierra Leone 1996, Guatemala 1951, 58 and 70, Panama 1952, USA 1953, Argentina 1946, 1993, Brazil 1946, 1979, Chile 1952, Colombia 1958, South Korea 1988, Philippines 1992, Thailand 1983, France 1958, Greece 1950, Portugal 1976, and Turkey 1961.

Column 2 reports the results of the probit model when including the dummy variable for Latin America. The t value of .543 for the coefficient of LA indicates that being a Latin American country has no relevance in shaping the probability that a democratic transition will occur.

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[22] There is probably a typo in table 2.17 in the original source, since the t value for the coefficient of ODWP should be positive.

The results in column 3 reveal that the inclusion of the variable EMILAG changes some of the previous findings. Now the variables MOSLEM and NEWC are statistically significant and keep the negative sign. The coefficient on EMILAG is positive and significant as expected. More importantly for addressing our research question, the coefficient for the Latin American dummy continues not to be statistically significantly different from zero at all conventional levels of confidence.

Table 3

Probit Estimates. Probability of Transition to Democracy (TAD)

VARIABLES	Transition to Democracy		
	(1)	(1) + Latin America	(1) + Latin America + Lagged member of the military
Lagged income Per Capita	0.00002 (0.00003)	0.00002 (0.00003)	0.00003 (0.00003)
Lagged Rate of Growth	–0.02659★★★ (0.00800)	–0.02639★★★ (0.00802)	–0.02643★★★ (0.00821)
Lagged cumulative rate of leadership turnover	0.56700★★★ (0.20503)	0.56431★★★ (0.20532)	0.55648★★★ (0.21506)
Lagged member of the military			0.26266★★ (0.12671)
Degree of religious heterogeneity	–0.02188 (0.33511)	0.00040 (0.33859)	–0.04606 (0.34902)
Latin America		0.10891 (0.20040)	0.02969 (0.20382)
Proportion of Catholic	0.01385 (0.20535)	–0.05311 (0.24131)	–0.05126 (0.24294)
Proportion of Protestant	–0.29660 (0.41788)	–0.30696 (0.41934)	–0.24740 (0.43251)
Proportion of Moslem	–0.35117 (0.23556)	–0.35627 (0.23590)	–0.40337★ (0.24105)

VARIABLES	Transition to Democracy		
	(1)	(1) + Latin America	(1) + Latin America + Lagged member of the military
Country in 1945	–0.29677★ (0.15957)	–0.27325 (0.16653)	–0.28838★ (0.16832)
British colony	0.01856 (0.15181)	0.01654 (0.15197)	0.04676 (0.15391)
Past Instability	0.29219★★★ (0.05770)	0.28342★★★ (0.05972)	0.25334★★★ (0.06334)
Porportion Other Democracies in the World	2.64845★★★ (0.60173)	2.63755★★★ (0.60182)	3.02717★★★ (0.62675)
Constant	–2.94136★★★ (0.30964)	–2.95041★★★ (0.31030)	–3.19310★★★ (0.32590)
Observations	2,827	2,827	2,774
LR chi2(11)	91.57	91.87	99.50
Prob > chi2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000

Standard errors in parentheses
★★★ p<0.01, ★★ p<0.05, ★ p<0.1
Source: Authors

Regarding transitions to dictatorship, Table 4 presents three models analogous to those presented for democratic transitions. Column 1 reproduces the model in *Democracy and Development* with updated data. The novelties are that the variables NEWC changed their sign, but is not significant anyways. Column 2 reports the estimates of the model in column 1 with the addition of the Latin American dummy. The only variable that is affected by this inclusion is CATH, which becomes less significant and keeps the negative sign. However, the LA variable although perhaps capturing part of the effect of CATH, throws a t value of –1.04, thus not significantly affecting the probability of transition to dictatorship.

In column 3, we observe that the inclusion of the variable that allows for heterogeneity of dictators has impact in the significance of the CATH variable making it no significant any more. However, it does not alter the significance of the model in column 2. The coefficient for EMILAG is positive but insignificant. This partly comes in no surprise since our goal is to capture those aspects of democracies that make them more likely to revert to dictatorship, and this variable was included on the grounds of capturing dictator's heterogeneity, not that of democrats.

Table 4

Probit Estimates. Probability of Transition to Dictatorship (TDA)

VARIABLES	Transition to Dictatorship		
	(1)	(1) + Latin America	(1) + Latin America + Lagged member of the military
Lagged income Per Capita	–0.00049★★★ (0.00010)	–0.00052★★★ (0.00011)	–0.00051★★★ (0.00011)
Lagged Rate of Growth	–0.02115 (0.01366)	–0.02153 (0.01362)	–0.02214 (0.01369)
Lagged cumulative rate of leadership turnover	0.68087★★★ (0.22750)	0.60363★★ (0.23460)	0.59639★★ (0.23408)
Lagged member of the military			0.17219 (0.28548)
Degree of religious heterogeneity	1.55257★★ (0.78224)	1.65199★★ (0.79355)	1.65307★★ (0.80041)
Latin America		–0.43742 (0.40444)	–0.42323 (0.40542)
Proportion of Catholic	–0.95574★★ (0.43390)	–0.75183★ (0.45474)	–0.72550 (0.45532)
Proportion of Protestant	–1.39899 (1.08351)	–1.46304 (1.10314)	–1.55886 (1.13963)
Proportion of Moslem	–0.20070 (0.42414)	–0.20439 (0.41975)	–0.19451 (0.42036)
Country in 1945	0.26558 (0.37986)	0.00821 (0.43893)	0.07209 (0.45369)
British colony	–0.77314★★ (0.31093)	–0.74822★★ (0.31223)	–0.73923★★ (0.31273)
Past Instability	0.83743★★★ (0.10789)	0.87302★★★ (0.11372)	0.87294★★★ (0.11420)
Porportion Other Democracies in the World	–5.55804★★★ (1.14415)	–5.68784★★★ (1.16040)	–5.68375★★★ (1.16280)
Constant	0.69895 (0.63853)	0.94919 (0.67859)	0.87648 (0.68617)
Observations LR chi2(11) Prob > chi2	2,160 196.99 0.0000	2,160 198.10 0.0000	2,160 198.45 0.0000

Standard errors in parentheses
★★★ p<0.01, ★★ p<0.05, ★ p<0.1
Source: Authors

4.1. Including All Regional Dummies

In Table 5, we include models with a different econometric specification where a regional dummy was included for all other regions of the world, with the base category being the region with most observation (see detail in Table 5 notes). The first two columns indicate the probability of transition to democracy (TAD) while the last two columns indicate the probability of transition to dictatorship (TDA). In column 2, we included the variable that indicates whether the executive was a member of the military or not (lagged one year).

Column 1 shows the estimates of the probit model excluding the variable EMIL. We can see that all the variables remain the same (signs and significance) compared to model 2 in Table 3. Nevertheless, the coefficients of the variables proportion of Catholic, proportion of Moslem and British colony change signs but are insignificant. It is important to notice that when we introduce dummy variables per region, we obtain significance in three of them. However, for addressing our research question, the coefficient for the Latin American dummy continues to be not statistically different from zero at all conventional levels of confidence. In column 2, we observe that the inclusion of the variable that allows for heterogeneity of dictators is significant and its inclusion changes previous results in that the variable that denotes if a country did not exist in 1945 becomes significant.

With the inclusion of the regional dummies in the models of transitions to dictatorship in Table 4, the variable that accounts for the rate of growth becomes statistically significant, while the variable that indicates de degree of religious heterogeneity is not different from zero anymore. In contrast to the probability of transition to democracies, none of the dummy variables per region has a significant effect on the probability of a transition to dictatorship. In column 1, only the variables MOSLEM and NEWC change their signs in comparison to column 2 from table 4. Still, for addressing our research question, the coefficient for the Latin American dummy continues to be not statistically different from zero at all conventional levels of confidence.

In all the models including regional dummies, the one signaling Latin America is not significant. Only the coefficients of three regional dummies (South Asia, East Asia and the Caribbean and Non-Iberic Central and South America) are significant in the models of transition to democracy. No regional dummy is statistically significant in the models of transition to dictatorship.

Table 5

Probability of Transition. Dummies per world region.

VARIABLES	Transition to Democracy		Transition to Dictatorship	
	(1)	(1) + Lagged member of the military	(1)	(1) + Lagged member of the military
Lagged income Per Capita	0.00002 (0.00003)	0.00003 (0.00004)	–0.00051★★★ (0.00012)	–0.00052★★★ (0.00012)
Lagged Rate of Growth	–0.02786★★★ (0.00829)	–0.02840★★★ (0.00853)	–0.02474★ (0.01454)	–0.02507★ (0.01458)
Lagged cumulative rate of leadership turnover	0.58663★★★ (0.20810)	0.57722★★★ (0.21789)	0.63497★★★ (0.23886)	0.63134★★★ (0.23900)
Lagged member of the military		0.32406★★ (0.13557)		0.17836 (0.30160)
Degree of religious heterogeneity	0.51530 (0.44546)	0.41406 (0.46254)	1.33933 (1.03132)	1.31025 (1.04001)
Sub–Saharan Africa		0.78050★★ (0.31340)	0.69575 (0.82149)	0.69178 (0.83448)
South Asia	0.75305★★ (0.30785)	0.70934★★ (0.34658)	0.10574 (0.90486)	0.06674 (0.91760)
East Asia	0.66763★ (0.34220)	0.37440 (0.29134)	1.06049 (0.97481)	1.11427 (0.99171)
Southeast Asia	0.39186 (0.28296)	–0.26106 (0.38775)	1.00695 (0.72045)	0.94999 (0.73334)
Middel East/North Africa	–0.17099 (0.37550)	0.24974 (0.33815)	0.45493 (0.92101)	0.51948 (0.93125)
Latin America	0.36931 (0.33151)	0.63720★★ (0.29496)	0.08830 (0.56235)	0.11188 (0.56637)
Caribbean and non-Iberic Central and South America	0.64128★★ (0.28783)	0.18074 (0.33898)	0.90035 (0.78853)	0.93266 (0.80701)
Eastern Europe/ Soviet Union	0.09698 (0.32630)	0.28854 (0.46252)		
Western Europe	0.39373 (0.45440)	0.19030 (0.35630)		
Proportion of Catholic	0.14913 (0.34931)	0.04966 (0.50171)	–0.52436 (0.58000)	–0.51468 (0.58183)
Proportion of Prot-estant	–0.03412 (0.48718)	0.07392 (0.32734)	–1.39447 (1.43465)	–1.61261 (1.49953)

VARIABLES	Transition to Democracy		Transition to Dictatorship	
	(1)	(1) + Lagged member of the military	(1)	(1) + Lagged member of the military
Proportion of Moslem	0.10171 (0.32038)	–0.36898★ (0.22183)	0.01583 (0.65812)	–0.02468 (0.66177)
Country in 1945	–0.33632 (0.21551)	0.02544 (0.17529)	–0.13738 (0.59466)	–0.04308 (0.61852)
British colony	–0.03771 (0.17070)	0.22441★★★ (0.06614)	–0.41747 (0.36674)	–0.39649 (0.36858)
Past Instability	0.26497★★★ (0.06170)	3.27314★★★ (0.65644)	0.86344★★★ (0.12329)	0.87235★★★ (0.12516)
Porportion Other Democracies in the World	2.85715★★★ (0.62580)	–3.83749★★★ (0.42976)	–5.75429★★★ (1.20580)	–5.76000★★★ (1.20877)
Constant	–3.56189★★★ (0.40931)	0.00003 (0.00004)	0.33362 (0.93387)	0.29038 (0.93759)
Observations LR chi2(11) Prob > chi2	2,827 106.33 0.0000	2,774 115.02 0.0000	2,160 204.45 0.0000	2,160 204.79 0.0000
Standard errors in parentheses ★★★ p<0.01, ★★ p<0.05, ★ p<0.1				

★ Probability of Transition to Democracy (TAD): omitted regions due to collinearity (Pacific Island/ Oceania and North America). Base category region 1: Sub-Saharan Africa

★★ Probability of Transition to Dictatorship (TDA): omitted regions due to collinearity (Pacific Island/ Oceania, Eastern Europe/ Soviet Union and North America). Base category region 10: Western Europe

Note: In the original data, there was a category referred to all industrial countries. Since that category is not relevant to our argument of region, we divided that classification and generate a new one. Industrial countries were separated and located in their proper regions, and North America (region 12) was created in addition.

Source: Authors

Concluding remarks

We began this manuscript questioning whether or not Latin America is distinctive from the rest of the world. The exploration of the complaints that abound in the literature about the region showed what the descriptive statistics confirmed, that is, that instability of political institutions is a good place to look. The findings from the models estimated indicate that there is no unobserved characteristic exclusive of Latin American countries that affects the probability of experiencing a regime transition, even when regional dummy variables are included.

This is a conclusion that is hard to accept for students of Latin America, including the authors of this paper. Most observers recognize the value of traits related to culture, a shared colonial legacy form the Iberian Peninsula that contribute in defining the region. However, this paper's results −along with others − suggests otherwise. Do we only need better general theories that allow us to specify the "right" econometric models? What is the weight of context? Can it produce region specific knowledge? A recent discussion among top Latin Americanists working in the field of political economy presents a number of alternatives (Smith et al. 2014), but the debate ultimately revolves around methodology and theory and how detached they can be in specific contexts. While it is easy to concede that the choice of the method will depend on the nature of the question being proposed.

A recent debate triggered by a special issue of Latin American Politics and Society (Luna, Murillo, Schrank 2014) revived the discussion about the connection between specific Latin American "themes" and different methodological approaches. The authors of the original piece and their commentators laid out the nature of the debate: are there topics specific enough in Latin America so that they need to be studied differently? Can we think of processes such as corruption, the operation of democratic institutions in a global manner? Do political actors share utility functions universally enough so that we could predict behaviors across regions? This poses a theoretical and epistemological puzzle. But then, how would we test it empirically? To attain external validity, large N studies are appropriate but would regional dummies be enough or are they just an acknowledgment of ignorance about unobserved factors? Undoubtedly, the research agenda has taken this direction, recognizing that contextual variables need to be taken into account in explaining political institutions performance, although we still need to figure out its relative weight.

There is room for vast extensions of this work, since we have only dealt with the issue of regime dynamics and we cannot derive more general conclusions about the uniqueness of Latin America. This piece may then serve to provide a starting point in the development of a fair and realistic scenario of the countries that happen to be labeled as "Latin American," whatever that means.

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