

Kaleidoscopic Patterns of Politics in Latin America

Laurence Whitehead , University of Oxford, Oxford, England
laurence.whitehead@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

Why Presidents Fail: Political Parties and Government Survival in Latin America. By Christopher A. Martinez. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024. 324p.

Mobilizing Teachers: Education Politics and the New Labor Movement in Latin America. By Christopher Chambers-Ju. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 267p.

Politics and the Pink Tide: A Comparative Analysis of Protest in Latin America. By Kathleen Bruhn. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024. 258p.

None of the Above: Protest Voting in Latin American Democracies. By Mollie J. Cohen. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024. 267p.

Latin America continues to provide a fertile hunting ground for students of comparative politics. There is plentiful variation between, within, and across countries and subsectors. Yet, there are also shared scope conditions, cultural and institutional commonalities, and region-wide interactions and demonstration effects. There are some areas where comparisons can be based on either the “most similar” or the “most different” system design, but most causal variables of real interest are imprecise, unstable, and mutually interactive. They often operate within discontinuous and unstable political systems that evade mechanistic modeling. Temporal discontinuities and compartmentalized sectors can be so prevalent that “kaleidoscopic” patterns may seem more typical than smoothly institutionalized regularities or predictable convergences.

Patterns emerge even so, and they can be both systemically revealing and normatively significant. The subcontinent provides vivid illustrations of political tendencies that are also widely (although perhaps less starkly) on display in other large world regions. The four volumes under review here offer a good sample of the qualities of research elicited by these conditions. All of them combine close comparative analyses of specific and intricate political contexts, with findings intended to resonate with more general concerns in comparative democratic studies. How

might very high levels of electoral abstention best be understood? Why do certain presidential tenures not last their full term? What produces outbursts of political protest once “neoliberal” cycles of policymaking lose their traction? How do highly structured teacher unions exercise leverage in the critical and conflict-ridden domain of educational policy?

These are all matters of scholarly interest that could be investigated via single case studies, but then the results might not be generalizable. Or they could be explored through large-*n* statistical analysis, but then the contextual nuance and actor intentionality would be undervalued. To sidestep both pitfalls, these authors practice a careful selection of a handful of cases, all closely examined using disciplined comparative methods. They combine detailed empirical investigations of chosen episodes and processes with explicit general interpretations of a wider application.

In *None of the Above* (2024), Mollie J. Cohen addresses a fresh and intriguing topic within the heavily trawled area of comparative electoral behavior. Why might voters choose to cast their ballots, only to register an invalid vote (either blank or spoiled)? This occurs worldwide, but the practice is particularly marked in contemporary Latin America. Her database covers all 18 presidential republics, half of which impose mandatory voting, although with variable degrees of enforcement. She examines 38 recent

presidential and gubernatorial contests, recognizing that some invalid voting is always unintentional, but focusing on the many episodes of high deliberate dissent, including the quarter where she can identify active nonparticipation campaigns. Most of these invalid votes are attributed to citizen concerns over the poor quality of candidates; the author concludes that many active campaigns actually shore up democratic standards, at least in the short run. However, she is properly cautious about these findings, sensitive to the temporal and territorial unevenness of the evidence.

The study gains authority from its inclusion of several more in-depth comparative case studies, notably concerning some well-chosen Peruvian gubernatorial contests. These provide contextual detail to back up the aggregate analysis and enrich her stock of methods. In particular, Cohen makes use of some instructive vignettes presented to various focus groups and reconstructs illuminating election narratives. The protest campaigns indicate a reservoir of prodemocratic pressures, although they also have potential for misuse. It remains, however, hotly contested throughout the Andes whether nonparticipation is the best defense against democratic decline. No single conclusion fits all cases, and rival opinions often reflect clashing political agendas.

Christopher A. Martinez tackles some better-trodden terrain in his study of comparative presidential performance and survival in the office to the end of an allotted term (*Why Presidents Fail*, 2024). There are a variety of ways presidents can “fail” before their time is up: voluntary or forced resignation, impeachment, or simple flight. No Colombian or Mexican president in recent times has “failed” in this sense, although several are considered unsuccessful on a broader register. The database used here covers all 18 presidential republics between 1979 and 2020. That amounts to 151 presidential spells, of which 24 are considered “failed.” Three Andean countries account for half of this total (four failures each in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru) with the remaining in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

It is a heterogeneous list—both Brazilian instances were impeachments; two of the Bolivian falls were negotiated early departures; Honduras witnessed an outright military takeover; one Ecuadorean president fell afoul of the “mental incapacity” clause in the constitution. Major upheavals in Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela do not count as failures because incumbents clung to the office despite massive displays of societal rejection. Two independent variables are treated as background conditions promoting these adverse outcomes: party institutionalization and ruling party comparative strength (both of which also embrace considerable variation). In total, five predictive factors are modeled, but most of the book consists of country chapters examining the main cases, and exploring the key thesis that party configurations largely account for presidential falls.

Although these chapters provide detailed and often enlightening stories corroborated by expert surveys, Martinez tends to downplay the misguided strategic choices made by the presidents in question. For example, Bolivia’s President Sanchez de Lozada was arguably so allergic to his party’s radical social traditions that on the 15th anniversary of the MNR Revolution, he practically gifted its political capital to the opposition. Likewise, his successor President Morales became so fixated on staying on for life that he violated his own foundational constitution, defying a referendum barring him from running again. Argentine President de la Rúa might have fallen anyway, but many believe it was his unshakable commitment to his Peronist predecessor’s Convertibility Plan that stripped him of all allies and permanently shattered his Radical Party, a century after its rise.

These and other examples across the 24 cases may be arguable, but the general principle should be that when presidents fail to retain office, the first source of explanation to consider is their own incompetence or hubris. Only after that is it right to hone in on the structural factors identified here. Martinez leaves it to his final page to call for an examination of the “role of presidential agency in shaping governmental stability, and the occurrence and resolution of presidential crises.” In an alternative view of these case studies, floundering chief executives have often proved capable of upending established party configurations, including some that had previously been judged as well-institutionalized.

Kathleen Bruhn’s *Politics and the Pink Tide* (2024) is a stimulating survey of the politics of protest in South American post-neoliberal settings that underscores the significance of country-specific features, or “fixed effects.” The “Pink Tide” of the title refers to a cluster of electoral successes achieved by leftist, anti-system parties during the first decade of this century. This label invokes a loose metaphor encompassing rather diverse political processes. Although evocative, the term is imprecise about which episodes should be included, and exactly when they began and ended (similar reservations apply to democratization “waves,” neoliberal “breakthroughs,” or autocratic “backsliding”). This cluster omits Argentina, Mexico, and Uruguay, and the temporal focus is mainly on the early years of apparent success. It covers five nations—Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Venezuela—where Bruhn has assembled her own database of over 5,000 protest episodes as reported in the local press between 2006 and 2009. To this, she adds data from a 2010 Latin America Public Opinion Project survey of individuals and their reported participation in protest events over the previous 12 months.

The study is rounded off with more in-depth, paired comparisons of major protest events in each of the five countries. The last of these three exercises is the most productive. Bruhn is candid about the limitations of each

of her three research strategies which, taken together, do yield some significant comparative insights. Most protest episodes are motivated more by political grievances than by clear platforms concerning neoliberal economic doctrine, although the two considerations often overlap. Peaceful protests have a wider appeal than violent tactics, but the dividing line is often blurry, especially when policing turns repressive. The relationship between protest violence and police repression is interactive, although assigning responsibility to one side or the other is part of the political struggle and, therefore, inevitably contested. The author focuses more on the mediating role played by parties than on standard social movement determinants but finds that most protesters have very limited party connections. In contrast with Martinez, she finds that deeply embedded parties do not necessarily perform better in managing protests. Indeed, taking the long view, Pink Tide parties that first gained traction in part through protest politics often went on to lose momentum or fracture under the pressure of subsequent protest experiences.

Christopher Chambers-Ju turns his attention to a narrower, but nevertheless strategic, segment within the panorama of Latin American comparative political dynamics: teacher unions (Mobilizing Teachers, 2024). Teachers matter because of their nationwide coverage, their weight within the public budget, their local prestige and influence, and their role in nation-building. Their unions can serve ruling parties, or clash with unsympathetic governments. A strong union may even find its own political party, like PANAL in Mexico; a radical movement of teachers can become a major source of unrest, like SUTEP in Peru. This study constructs a comparative framework based on a close historical analysis of three major countries (Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico), buttressed by a further three shadow cases (Chile, Peru, and an extracontinental case, Indonesia).

Whereas Martinez focuses on party institutions, Chambers-Ju selects teacher organizations for granular examination and theory building. His cross-country comparative framework works well, and he makes good use of careful and detailed case evidence. He compares the hierarchy and centralized direction of Mexico's SNTE with what he terms the "movimentismo" of Argentina's more decentralized CTERA, and the "leftism" of Colombia's FECODE. Most attention is devoted to the quarter century after 1990, characterized by competitive electoral politics and fiscal constraint in all five Latin American settings of interest. Although educational policy tools and dilemmas were fairly similar for all countries, organizational responses and outcomes varied considerably. Chambers-Ju seeks to explain

the higher incidence of teacher protests in Argentina, the electoral mobilization and factionalism of Colombia's teacher unions, and the more hierarchical and disciplined pattern he reports from Mexico. He suggests that the organizational structure of these unions accounts for much cross-country variation, in contrast to the external influences stressed by other authors.

However, the comparative and concluding chapters provide plentiful indications of the mixture between these factors, and the granularity that he rightly favors does not support reductionism. While the contrasting country studies indicate considerable path dependency, they also disclose intervals of sharp discontinuity. The Mexican case provides the best example of inertial persistence, but the fact remains that Elba Esther Gordillo, the strong leader of the SNTE between 1989 and 2013, was spectacularly dethroned and jailed for 5 years by the Pena Nieto government in retaliation for her creation of PANAL as an electoral competitor to the temporary ascendant PRI party. Immediately after the PRI's defeat, she was released by a judge who declared the case against her unproven, while the PRI's 2013 educational reform, which is presented rosily by Martinez, was unceremoniously dismantled. Gordillo attempted a restoration, but was blocked by Lopez Obrador, leading the SNTE back to the far more submissive posture of pre-1989. Likewise, the application of Milei's "chainsaw" in Argentina is sure to jolt the trajectory of CTERA, and something similar could easily occur in Colombia under Petro. All in all, then, teacher organizations may transmit a substantial political impact on each country over significant periods of time, but the "kaleidoscopic" features of macro-politics will tend to generate abrupt and traumatic shocks to the educational system every decade or so.

These four thoughtful and well-researched volumes indicate the contested and often convulsive state of politics on display across Latin America after more than a generation of broadly "democratic" electoral competition. Much more is at stake for the citizenry than the gentle alternation between similar political teams of the Downsian end-state. Neither stable regime consolidation nor full autocracy seems in prospect across this large region. Instead, these studies reinforce the impression that further surges of demand for political change are to be expected, with "oscillatory" outcomes. These waves will spur widespread political hopes and fears, but provide little basis for harmonious equilibrium any time soon. If so, far from proving a curious sideshow for the rest of the world to observe, Latin America may hold up a mirror showing where the leading democracies could be heading.