

Why the United States Should Promote Democracy in Latin America

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This paper will define democracy within the context of modern society. Through understanding what is meant by democracy promotion and its place in Latin America, this paper will explore the different roles that the U.S. has taken with regards to promoting democracy in the region since the onset of the Cold War and up through present day. This historical backdrop will demonstrate that although the United States has tarnished its reputation as an upholder of democracy in the region, that it should still promote democracy in Latin America. This paper will also suggest measures, both in terms of policy and practice, that the U.S. should take in order to become a more effective and better respected promoter of democracy in Latin America.

Democracy Defined

Democracy is and always has been a fundamental principle and value of the United States. However, the democracy that most Americans think of today embraces more than just the bare definition of democracy. Democracy today is actually a combination of ideals that have evolved in Western thought. These ideals can be broken down into two political traditions: popular sovereignty and liberty. (Mandelbaum) The first, popular sovereignty, can be regarded as a social contract between the people and a government where the government is chosen by the people in order to serve the people that it represents. This aspect of democracy has been carried out through open, free and fair elections. In fact, popular sovereignty is what Samuel Huntington characterizes as the “essence of democracy” but makes sure to note that “governments produced by elections may...be undesirable, but they do not make them undemocratic”. (Zakaria, 18) The second component of democracy is liberty, which “...consists of a series of political zoning ordinances that fence off and thus protect sectors of social, political, and economic life from government interference”. (Mandelbaum) This protection provides the groundwork for what we call freedom today; and assurance of freedom requires limitations to be placed upon governments.

It is important to note that these two components or political traditions were not always intertwined, thus the way democracy is defined has changed over time. In the nineteenth century for example, “democracy commonly referred to popular sovereignty alone, and a regime based on popular sovereignty was considered certain to suppress liberty”. (Mandelbaum) Toward the end of the nineteenth century and certainly after World War II, there were only a few countries, in

Western Europe and North America that successfully merged popular sovereignty and liberty. Embedded in this integration was constitutional liberalism¹, which reflected the fact that rule of law in Western countries is placed at the center of politics, hence the existence of a national constitution. It is important to note that constitutional liberalism has more to do with the goals or values of a government rather than the measures by which it is selected. Therefore, when one speaks of the fact that by the middle of the twentieth century democracy had become universal, the distinction must be made that popular sovereignty had become universal, but not the corresponding values of liberty that Western nations have possessed for decades. (Mandelbaum)

In defining democracy, it is also important to note the conditions of establishing of democracy. Relative to constitutional liberalism, popular sovereignty is much easier to institute. The minimum requirement for popular sovereignty, or what is sometimes referred to as political democracy, is open, free and fair elections. (Zakaria, 19) However, securing liberty is much more difficult and its implementation requires institutions such as functioning legislatures, government bureaucracies, and full fledged legal systems with police, lawyers, prosecutors and impartial judges. Establishing and maintaining such institutions, requires skill that is some times highly specialized. Additionally, these institutions must be "... firmly anchored in values; that is to say, people must believe in the importance of protecting these zones of social and civic life from state interference". (Mandelbaum) Therefore, it is clear that popular sovereignty is a fundamental part of and primary step towards democracy; however, securing democracy's other component, liberty, requires time and at least a generation, to develop. (Mandelbaum)

The Rhetoric of Democracy Promotion: U.S.-Latin America Relations during the Cold War

Emerging from WWII victorious and with a new adversary, the United States faced an unprecedented threat, communism, that would ultimately determine its' engagement in world affairs. This threat, as outlined by President Truman in his address to a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, was one that put American values of democracy in jeopardy. He stated that the current world characterized two ways of life; one "based upon the will of the majority...[which] is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression" and the other "based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority... [which] relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal

¹ This term, refers to the Greek and Roman philosophical roots of "liberal" which emphasized individual liberty. Because rule of law in Western countries is placed in the center of politics, the term is constitutional liberalism is applicable here as opposed to simply liberalism. (Mandelbaum)

freedoms”.² This dichotomy would not only provide the United States with a sense of conviction and righteousness, but would establish the framework for which all U.S. foreign policy and engagement throughout the world would be carried out.

Such a framework gave way to a strategy called NSC-68. This strategy differed from initial plans for securing the strong points in Europe, in that it established the notion that a threat to free institutions anywhere constituted a threat everywhere. This strategy would provide the justification and legitimacy for the United States to intervene anywhere along the periphery so far as it constituted a threat. (Gaddis, 89) The Korean War would set the precedent for implementing this strategy in Asia as well as other parts of the world.

Latin America was far from a region unfamiliar to U.S. intervention during the Cold War. Much like nationalist movements in other parts of the world, revolutionary movements in Latin America were quickly categorized as potential communist fires that needed to be put out. (Carolyn Shaw, 73) The authoritarian, and often military, regimes that were brought into power through populist and socialist movements began to trouble U.S. leaders as they carried with them what seemed to be the seeds of communist ideas. While these regimes brought forth change, it is safe to say that U.S. fears of communist ideology spreading distorted what were only intended to be nationalist agendas. This premise, however, would dictate U.S. engagement in Latin America over the proceeding decades.

The first example of U.S. intervention took place in the early years of the Cold War in Guatemala with the newly elected President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. Winning the presidency as a result of elections precipitated by student riots and unrest amongst the professional classes, Arbenz represented change for the Guatemalan people when he assumed office in 1951. Backed by communist supporters that pushed for further land and labor reform, Arbenz’s main goal was to get rid of the presence of the United Fruit Company. After Arbenz confiscated 178,000 acres of land in 1953 and refused to make the proper payments that the U.S. government demanded, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles invoked the Monroe Doctrine as he pushed a resolution through at the Tenth Inter-American Conference stating that “... because ‘international communism... is incompatible with the concept of American freedom,’ the American states would “adopt within their respective territories the measures necessary to eradicate and prevent subversive activities””. (LaFeber, 164) This translated into the launching of a covert operation in which CIA operatives armed and trained Guatemalan exiles in Nicaragua and Honduras under the leadership of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in June of 1954; by the end of the month Armas sat at the helm of the Guatemalan government, just as the U.S. intended.

² Truman’s speech – Truman doctrine, March 12, 1947

U.S. success in overthrowing the Arbenz government led to the hastiness of U.S. leaders trying to replicate covert operations in other Latin American countries. This would prove a much harder task with Cuba under the Kennedy administration. Even still, the Guatemalan intervention marked the beginning of the U.S.'s inability to successfully replace the ousted regime with a more effective and liberal leader. (LaFeber, 165) Such a scenario would play out as the U.S. yet again intervened covertly in Chile in the 1970s.

President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger publicly announced their reluctant support of the newly elected Chilean President Salvador Allende. They stated that although his presidency was not welcomed, "...[it] was the decision of the people of Chile...". As Allende began instituting his nationalistic reforms and nationalized nearly \$1 billion of American investments from multinational corporations, covert operations to oust Allende's regime had already been well into operation. Although his seizure of American investments did not sit well, the fear yet again of U.S. leaders was the possibility of Chile emerging as a Soviet satellite. (LaFeber, 287) The CIA worked closely with the Chilean army to successfully kill Allende and oust his regime in a coup d'état staged in September of 1973. Augusto Pinochet, a general in the Chilean army would take over the presidency, backed by the U.S. government.

As was the case with Guatemala, U.S. intervention in Chile was covert in nature, and the goal was to take preventative action by not allowing the emergence of a communist state in the Western hemisphere. Although these two regimes that were perceived to be a communist threat were removed, the U.S. government failed in ensuring stable, efficient and liberal leaders in their place. Additionally the U.S. demonstrated that the dominance of the Cold War not only dictated U.S. foreign policy and engagement with Latin America, and the rest of the world, but showed that the U.S. was willing to undermine its democratic values in order to combat communist. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that within the context of the Cold War, the U.S. "...did little to help the democratic rhetoric become a reality... [but rather] U.S. policies in the region served to threaten democracy in several instances". (Shaw, 71)

"The Third Wave": Returning to Democracy in Latin America

The process of returning to democracy, referred to as democratization, that occurred in the 1980s is known amongst scholars as the "third wave". (Shaw, 76) While some scholars claim that democratization is a product of solely external³ or internal⁴

³ This school of thought is known as "external reengineering" and presents a scenario in which democracy is imposed from the outside with little or no regard for the history, culture of intricacies of domestic processes of a country.

factors, most scholars today have widely accepted that democratization has occurred as a result of both domestic and international factors. (Legler, Lean and Boniface, 4) There is a third factor that can be inserted into the analysis of the democratization process – the role of transnational actors. The inclusion of transnational actors allows for international factors to account for state-to-state relations and emphasizes the role of nonstate actors in the democratization process. Although the extent to which each of these factors are important to the democratization process is difficult to discern, “the key theoretical issue is... [the] varying patterns of interaction [amongst these factors] across time and space”. (Legler, Lean and Boniface, 4)

As demonstrated, the Cold War provided a less than favorable backdrop in which Latin American countries were faced with transitioning out of authoritarian, military regimes to democracies. As a result of the economic shocks of the late 1970s oil crisis, in addition to growing accusations and scrutiny of human rights violations, authoritarian regimes in Latin America struggled to maintain power. Both internal unrest and slowly growing international attention pushed for a political change in within the region. While security concerns diminished as the Cold War came to an end at the end of the 1980s, some scholars argue that this period marked the first point in which democracy became a priority for the U.S. (Shaw, 66) Whether characterized as a priority or otherwise, this “third wave” of democratization and the end of the Cold War provided a new opportunity for both the U.S. and transnational actors to begin to transform democracy promotion rhetoric into action. (Shaw, 77)

The Case for Democracy

As demonstrated through U.S. engagement in Latin America during the Cold War U.S. interests have not always coincided with U.S. values. In fact, promoting democracy, and naturally preventing the spread of communism, was used as a justification for U.S. intervention in the world. However, with the Cold War a part of the past, it is important to reconsider the interaction of U.S. interests and U.S. values. While existing in contradiction in the past, the notion that our moral preferences and strategic goals have to exist within a dichotomy is false. (Wollack)

In fact, there are four major reasons why democracy promotion serves the political, economic and ideological interests and values of the U.S. First, democracy promotion is a charitable endeavor. Second, democracy yields economic and political stability. Third, democracy promotion combats and acts as a tool against extremism. Fourth, more democratic countries are more peaceful.

⁴ Scholars that believe democratization is a result exclusive to the dynamics of the domestic political system.

As with most forms for foreign aid, the promotion of democracy is a charitable endeavor. (Wollack) There is a widespread and almost universal demand for political democracy, beginning with the establishment of open, free and fair elections. (Fukuyama and McFaul, 33) In addition to public opinion surveys of people throughout the world⁵, the number of political democracies present across the globe today, some 119 countries (Zakaria, 13), is a clear indicator that democracy is a universal aspiration. With that being said, democracy is an aspiration in which the U.S. should play a role in advocating and promoting worldwide.

Democracies encourage stability. Democracies, by their very nature are representative of the people, which, in turn yields "...more stable physical and economic welfare for [the people] than [do] autocracies". (Fukuyama and McFaul, 33) Politically, democracies ensure the people a political voice while placing limitations on the government through systems of oversight and accountability. Democracies have also been found to better assure sustainable development. (Wollack) Steadier economic development rates on the whole are more prevalent under democratic systems when compared to other forms of government. (Fukuyama and McFaul, 33)

Democracy promotion also serves as a tool in combating extremism. Democracy increases the necessity and prospects for peace through the formation of civic groups, political parties and elections. Therefore, U.S. support can help promote those who advocate a "third way" that exists between two extremes. A third way that calls for "...freedom of speech and expression, fair elections that reflect the will of the voters, representative political institutions that are not corrupt and are accountable to the public, and judiciaries that uphold the law". (Wollack, 434)

Lastly, democracies are more peaceful. Encouraging a more stable, humane and peaceful world is in both the interest and maintains the values of the U.S. It is clear that if democracies produce stability and growth, then it is natural to assume that "a more democratic world is not simply a more orderly and humane place: [but] it is a more peaceful and prosperous place". (Wollack, 434)

Now that the four reasons why the U.S. should promote democracy have been outlined, it is important to address some major criticisms. One such criticism is that democracy is "culturally rooted and that societies with other cultural backgrounds may choose other forms of government as they wish". (Fukuyama and McFaul, 33) However, this criticism does not take into account that democracy is a universal good as demonstrated through the huge increase in the number of democracies present today as compared with a century ago. This demonstrates the want for a more representative and peaceful form of government throughout the world. As a

⁵ Fukuyama & McFaul. "Should Democracy be Promoted or Demoted?", pg. 33

result of demand, the promotion of democracy is the servicing of a universal value, and is not an imposition. Another criticism is the idea that democracy promotion is just a guise for continued U.S. intervention in the world. It is understandable to assume this position based on history; however, this position plays into the false idea that U.S. interests and U.S. values will continue to exist in opposition. The world in which we live today is more democratic than ever before, which only lends itself to U.S. interests and values of peace and stability. The last counterargument to U.S. democracy promotion questions the credibility and capability of the U.S. to promote democracy given its willingness to set aside democratic values for strategic gain. Again, in today's world strategic interests and values of the U.S. do not exist in opposition. However, some scholars have suggested that the U.S. needs to tone down democracy promotion until it has a better handle on sequencing democratic reforms in other countries. This would require the acknowledgement that elections, state building, and liberal rule of law are distinct stages of political development. (Fukuyama and McFaul, 33) The U.S. is also in a position to continue to strengthen multilateral ties with regional and sub-regional organizations.

Democracy Promotion in Practice: Forging a New Way

Now clear that it is within U.S. values and interest to promote democracy in Latin America, the U.S. must consider how its actions in the past have shaped others' views of the U.S. as a legitimate promoter of democracy. As the U.S. continues to promote democracy in the region, it will have to first reestablish its reputation as a democratic nation, stifle the use of democracy promotion as rhetoric, act as an enabler to democracy in the region, and consider reforming the structure democracy assistance.

First and foremost, the United States has to restore itself and an example of democracy. The U.S. has continually invoked its own experience of democracy as a tool for promoting democracy abroad. (Fukuyama and McFaul, 34) If the country is going to continue to do this, it has to repair the damage that past and recent undemocratic practices have caused. Authors Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul, cite the indefinite detention of combatants/terrorists at Guantanamo Bay, the failure to legally prosecute high-level officials for the maltreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in 2004, and the disregard for international opinion and international law in the decision to invade Iraq, as examples that have tarnished the U.S. as a model for democracy abroad. The U.S. commitment to democracy has to be upheld through our actions and engagements throughout the world.

In realizing the tarnished reputation that the U.S. has based its actions on, the U.S. needs to tone down promoting democracy rhetorically. In keeping with this tradition, the U.S. will do nothing to improve its position as a legitimate promoter of democracy. Rhetoric will only continue to prove correct the discrepancy between U.S. idealisms and U.S. actions. Rather than loudly trumpeting calls for

democracy promotion, "...acting in concrete ways to support human rights and democratic groups around the world, while speaking more modestly about U.S. goals..." would better serve the strategic and moral interest of the U.S. (Fukuyama and McFaul, 36)

Perhaps the most critical decision that the U.S. has to make is what type of role it wants to assume in promoting democracy. As such a strong world, the U.S. has a choice in the type of role it wants to play in promoting democracy within Latin America. The "instructor" role has been assumed by the U.S. in the past and roughly translates to democratic rhetoric that attempts to mask other U.S. interests – as was seen throughout the Cold War era. The U.S. could assume the role of an "enforcer", much like it did in Haiti when military intervention was set forth to ensure more desirable outcomes. A "role model" policy would allow the U.S. to disengage in the region and avoid intervention all together. In choosing the role of an observer, the U.S. would be even more distanced from Latin America. The last role that the U.S. could assume would be that of an enabler. That is to say, the U.S. could adopt this strategy by "...cooperating with other actors who have similar interests to promote democracy..." and although it may not produce results quickly, the role of an enabler is probably the most positive, but must be adopted with care. (Shaw, 80-82)

In adopting the role of an enabler, the U.S. could compliment the previous strategies of restoring itself as an example of democracy and downplaying its rhetoric, as well as strengthen regional and transnational actors. In the 1990s, the United States did this by strengthening its support for multilateral institutions like the Organization of American States (OAS). While their first step was the creation of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy in 1991, the OAS continued making strides toward putting democracy promotion into action. Resolution 1080 and the Santiago Commitment were passed in 1991 followed by the Washington Protocol in 1992 and later the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001.

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the U.S. shifted away from such strong support of multilateralism in Latin America. This schism was apparent as the OAS condemned the coup that ousted Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez in 2002. The U.S. was much more worried about Chavez's relationship with Castro than with supporting Venezuelan democracy. The U.S. involvement with Haiti in 2004 further tarnished the American reputation for supporting democracy in the Hemisphere. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was "a man who was democratically elected, but he did not democratically govern or govern well... [and that the U.S. is] there to give the Haitian people another chance". (Shaw, 78) This attitude sets a dangerous precedent for the legitimacy of U.S. democracy promotion efforts, and will pose a challenge if the U.S. assumes the role of enabling democracy promotion in the region. However, if the U.S. can successfully move towards this role, it will make

significant strides in repairing some of its damaged credibility through past unilateral and undemocratic actions.

One last measure the U.S. should consider rectifying is reorganizing the democracy assistance that it provides. With the creation of a new position within the State Department, the director of foreign assistance, the United States Agency of International Development (USAID) was officially tied to the State Department. Authors Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul go as far as suggesting that a new department within the federal government be created; it is to be called the Department of International Development, of which its secretary would serve as part of the President's cabinet. Claiming, "Any strategy for more effective democracy promotion must include significantly greater resources as well as a reorganization of all U.S. government bureaus and agencies tasked with providing democracy assistance," this strategy would provide much needed structural reform. (39) This new department would absorb:

"...USAID, Defense Department postwar reconstruction operations, rule of law training programs currently housed in the Department of Justice, agricultural aid now located in the Department of Agriculture, technical assistance programs in the Department of the Treasury, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation." (39)

Now the likelihood of such a large reorganization project aside, such a department would be conducive to seek promoting democracy through aid focused on nurturing democratic regimes by means separate from military operations and diplomacy. (39) Again, such a realignment would be a break from past U.S. involvement and with time could compliment already existing democracy promotion efforts implemented through multilateral veins.

Conclusion

Democracy is a fundamental value and interest of the United States, as well as an aspiration of most countries in the world. The promotion of democracy by the United States was nothing more than rhetoric throughout most of the twentieth century as the U.S. chose to ensure national security interests over democracy in a global context. This was particularly poignant in U.S.-Latin America relations as the U.S. intervened covertly to overthrow presidents Abenz and Allende in Guatemala and Chile respectively. As democracy returned to the region during the "third wave" in the 1980s, the U.S. and transnational actors were presented with a new opportunity to put democracy promotion into practice within the region.

While many may argue that the U.S. should not promote democracy, doing so is aligned with U.S. values and interests. The U.S. should promote democracy because it is a charitable endeavor and democracies provide stability, combat extremism and are more peaceful. However, in continuing its democracy promotion efforts, the U.S. must consider its tarnished reputation. The U.S. will

take strides in restoring itself as an example of democracy, tone down its rhetoric of democracy promotion, assume a less unilateral role as an enabler of democracy, and consider reforming the structure of democracy assistance as a part of the foreign aid regime. In looking back over the twentieth century, the U.S. must understand its reputation in the promotion of democracy in Latin America. In doing so, and in following the aforementioned suggestions, the U.S. should continue work towards a more stable and peaceful world through democracy promotion in the region.

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