PRECARIOUS DEMOCRACIES

Understanding Regime Stability and Change in Colombia and Venezuela

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INTRODUCTION

Venezuela’s long-acclaimed democracy started to crumble in February 1989. Had this book been written before that time, Colombia and Venezuela would have provided the perfect pair for a contrasting comparison: whereas Venezuela boasted a well-established democratic regime, Colombia’s barely survived amid serious restrictions and shortcomings. As Venezuela’s democracy started to confront challenges that threw its continuity into question, however, the contrast became increasingly blurred. These South American nations have drawn closer together over the past two decades as both have been rocked by political turmoil.

While most standard explanatory arguments about democracy in Colombia and Venezuela point to similarity, my comparison emphasizes difference. This book seeks to highlight and explain divergence in the patterns of regime evolution in two cases that, due to a tendency to converge at certain crucial moments of their institutional histories, have traditionally been interpreted as following a similar trajectory. The differences between these two cases, I argue, are not only puzzling but also revealing. They throw into question commonly held assumptions about the impact on democratization of staple-led models of development or modes of transition. I draw a nuanced picture of the factors involved in democratization, as well as a more detailed mapping of regime trajectories as complex political processes.

Since their democratic transitions fifty years ago, the political regimes in Colombia and Venezuela have evolved in different directions, creating a complex pattern of convergence and divergence. They first converged in the late 1950s when they underwent simultaneous “pacted transitions.” After 1958, however, these two fledging democracies evolved in significantly divergent ways: whereas Venezuela soon became an inclusive and competitive political system, Colombia remained stunted by the restrictions imposed by the National Front pacts. In the late 1980s...
and early 1990s they converged again, this time as a result of political crises. The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen these two neighboring democracies diverge again, as they have confronted their crises in very different ways. Figure 0.1 shows the evolution of these two democracies over time based on Freedom House scores.1

Political trajectories do not move along straight, predictable lines. No matter how stable they may seem, political regimes suffer setbacks, experience cycles, and take unexpected turns. Alas, the neatly paired comparisons that may be drawn by focusing on more discrete periods of time become extremely difficult to obtain when comparing half a century of political development. Should we then content ourselves with the apparent impossibility of conducting systematic comparisons over time?

As I struggled with the challenges imposed on my initial “most similar systems” research design by actual changes on the ground,2 I stumbled, somewhat serendipitously, on a research strategy that provided a way out of my dilemma: following Jared Diamond, I call it the Anna Karenina principle.3 The famous opening lines of Anna Karenina, Tolstoy’s great novel, read as follows: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”4 In this deceptively simple

Figure 0.1. Colombia and Venezuela: Regime Convergence and Divergence

sentence Tolstoy is making a universal statement: in order to be happy, families must succeed in many respects, not just one; failure to achieve any of those essential components can doom a family, even if it has all the other necessary ingredients for happiness (Diamond 1999: 157). It does not take long to realize the powerful analytical device hidden in this simple statement. Like many other complex social phenomena, democracy is a multifaceted proposition: in order to build and sustain a democratic regime, a society needs to meet a bundle of conditions. The absence of one of them can throw the complex artifact into disarray, thus making for regimes that fail to achieve the basic characteristics of a well-established, functioning democracy. Success, indeed, requires avoiding many separate causes of failure. Thus, to paraphrase Tolstoy, while all happy democracies are alike, each unhappy democracy is unhappy in its own way.

What the precise ingredients for a happy democracy are is of course a matter of heated debate. For the purposes of this book, I rely on a widely accepted procedural view of democracy that focuses on four key attributes: (1) inclusion of the majority of the adult population through universal suffrage; (2) selection of the top political leadership (at the very least the executive and legislative powers) by means of regular, competitive, free, and fair elections; (3) respect for and effective protection of civil rights and liberties; and (4) the ability of elected authorities to govern without being subject to external controls or vetoes by nonelected actors, such as the military. Significant restrictions on or the absence of any of these core elements will therefore yield an unhappy democracy. The beauty of the Anna Karenina principle is that it makes us aware of the fact that the missing ingredients can vary from case to case, as well as over time, and therefore prompts us into a systematic investigation of that variation. This is exactly what this book seeks to do: it is an effort to distinguish the many ways in which Colombia's and Venezuela's unhappy democracies differ from each other and to provide an explanation of the reasons why, despite their many similarities, these two precarious democracies have evolved in divergent and sometimes unexpected ways.

Colombia and Venezuela have often been bracketed together as a particular subset of cases within the Latin American region. The two are not only geographically close (see map 1) but also, at first glance, have
marked similarities: they were both subdued by military dictatorships during the 1950s, both experienced democratic transitions in the same pacted mode at exactly the same time, and both came out of these transitions with stable, enduring, democratic regimes. In addition, both countries have recently experienced political turmoil and institutional decay. Beneath these similarities, however, there are crucial differences in the evolution of these two political regimes. These differences, I argue, not only merit explanation but also throw light on the conditions that help democracy emerge and endure, and eventually decline and break down.

In contrasting the post-transition trajectories of these two regimes over the past five decades, I focus on three divergent outcomes. The first is related to the degree of civilian control of the military and the limits placed on the military’s influence on policy matters. Since the late 1950s, and for the first time in Venezuelan history, the military became subordinate to civilians, who in turn asserted their authority in most realms of public decision making. By contrast, in Colombia, despite the fact that power was also devolved in 1958 from the military to civilians, the latter experienced enormous difficulty gaining full control and asserting their authority in crucial matters such as defense and security. The second divergent outcome has to do with the ability to neutralize and incorporate armed challengers on the left and thus secure the state’s monopoly over the use of force. Again, in stark contrast, whereas in Colombia an internal armed conflict pitching the state against various irregular forces persists to the present, Venezuela not only managed to quell a disloyal opposition by defeating the guerrillas in the late 1960s but also, and most important, managed to turn the disaffected former guerrillas into a loyal opposition on the left, fully incorporated into the polity. The third and last divergent outcome has to do with the consolidation of an inclusive and competitive political society. In part as a result of the incorporation of the radical left, in the 1970s and 1980s Venezuela managed to create a pluralistic, representative, and competitive party system that allowed for the active participation of a diversity of parties on the left, despite the continuing dominance of the two main center parties. On the other hand, the Colombian party system remained dominated by two-century-old political parties, and the formation of a loyal opposition on the left was thwarted by both formal exclusion and the expansion of the armed
left. Despite their common origins as pacted democracies, differences in these three crucial dimensions mark the distance that separated Colombia and Venezuela’s democratic trajectories between 1958 and 1998.

Since the late 1980s these two long-standing democracies have been shaken by deep political crises that have compromised their survival. Still, amid the simultaneous decline of these democracies, the differences remain apparent: whereas Venezuela’s democracy struggled to survive the challenges posed by a declining oil rent, the progressive weakening of its state, the collapse of its party system, and the ideological polarization that ensued, the Colombian crisis is more aptly characterized as the slow and gradual decay of a regime that had trouble overcoming certain “birth defects,” or restraining conditions, inherited from its pacted transition. That these two democracies have simultaneously faced deep trouble should not obscure the fact that their twin crises are fundamentally different in nature.

My hope, of course, is not only to point to those particular features that make these two democracies precarious, or unhappy, yet different. I also seek to account for those differences. That these two countries followed different democratic trajectories is puzzling given their apparent commonalities—most notably, the simultaneity and almost identical nature of their democratic transitions. Why did they diverge after having undergone such similar transition processes? This question becomes even more puzzling in light of the two regimes’ previous evolution: for over a hundred years since independence, caudillo and military rule had been a constant in Venezuela, with only one ephemeral democratic experiment, the Trienio years, from 1945 to 1948. In sharp contrast, since the 1830s Colombia shows an impressive record of civilian rule, grounded in periodic (if not completely free and fair) elections, with very few and brief interruptions—rare episodes of military rule in a case where some form of elected civilian government has been a constant. Why then was Venezuela more successful at establishing a democratic regime after 1958 than Colombia? And why have they recently displayed divergent forms of decay?

To answer these questions, I build on and critically engage a large body of literature written over the past two decades on democratization. With the “third wave” of transitions from authoritarian rule for the most
part over, the field of Latin American politics started shifting in the 1990s: the previous emphasis on democratic transitions gave way to new preoccupations, mainly centered on the durability and performance of these fledging democracies. Starting in the early 1990s there was an outpouring of studies concerned with the dilemmas and challenges of democratic consolidation. By the mid-1990s, however, the term consolidation came under attack by one of its early proponents: Guillermo O’Donnell wrote a searing critique in the *Journal of Democracy* that not only sparked a fascinating intellectual debate in that journal but also did away with the use of the very concept of consolidation. O’Donnell’s critique centered on the teleological nature of the concept, as well as its ethnocentric implications: because it tacitly implied that all democracies were on the road to becoming mature democracies (such as the ones that exist in the global Northwest), studies focusing on consolidation had difficulty accounting for those cases (such as most countries in Latin America) where a problematic mixture of democratic institutions and antidemocratic practices had become, nonetheless, deeply institutionalized. Despite efforts by some to clarify the meaning and uses of the concept (see Schedler 1998), the debate over “consolidation” became entangled in a controversy between a minimalist notion (where consolidation was equated with stability or duration, thus becoming superfluous) and a number of maximalist—though often highly imprecise—definitions of what it meant for a democracy to become consolidated. In the end the concept of consolidation was abandoned, probably for the better.

With the shift away from democratic consolidation came a new emphasis on the “quality of democracy.” This new approach has yielded little progress in the way we conceptualize the variation among existing democracies: for some, the quality of democracy refers to the performance of a given set of democratic institutions (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002); for others, the quality of democracy should be viewed from the perspective of outcomes (in particular, in terms of the extension of democracy to the realms of the economy and the society). The notion of the quality of democracy suffers from exactly the same teleological problems O’Donnell found in the concept of consolidation: it poses, again, whether explicitly or implicitly, that democratic regimes inherently move through levels or stages from lower to higher degrees of democratic
quality. Neither does it escape from the ethnocentric trap: there is, again, the tendency to associate high-quality democracies with those developed in the northwestern quarter of the globe, leaving again a residual category (“low-quality democracies”) to encompass all those regimes that have emerged and developed elsewhere. In terms of conceptual clarity, the “quality of democracy” debate has so far added very little: instead, it seems to have gone full circle, by adding an ever-increasing list of attributes and dimensions that should be considered in measuring a democracy’s quality.\textsuperscript{14}

The disappearance of “consolidation” as a well-received term in debates on democratization, as well as the many drawbacks affecting the emerging focus on the “quality of democracy,” has left us without a unifying paradigm for the study of politics in post-transition Latin America. As Hagopian noted more than a decade ago, since the heyday of the transition studies “the Latin American field has not followed with as compelling a framework for studying politics after regime change” (1993: 465; original emphasis). That we lack a unifying paradigm, a common umbrella to cover the rich variation among currently existing democracies, may be for the better: instead of trying to cluster them in an unsatisfactory dichotomy pitting consolidated versus unconsolidated regimes, we are forced to observe even more attentively the processes whereby democracies evolve and the trajectories they follow and to become more adept at defining with greater precision in what respects and to what degrees democracies do vary. Some authors have classified their cases according to an electoral democracy/liberal democracy dichotomy. Others have proposed new typologies: among the most useful suggestions is the proposal by Mainwaring, Brinks, and Pérez-Liñán (2001) to add a new type, semidemocracy, to the classic division of regimes into democratic or authoritarian ones. Still, the type “semidemocracy”—being the most populated one—encompasses too many “diminished subtypes of democracy” (Collier and Levitsky 1997), thus leaving us without a clear way to differentiate between them.

My proposal is to disaggregate the bundle of dimensions encompassed in what we call the full package of “democracy” and then use the Anna Karenina principle to make a distinction between different types of unhappy, or precarious, democracies. The research strategy that guided
my comparison of Colombia and Venezuela builds precisely on this idea: by unpacking the multiple components of democracy and disaggregating the various dimensions on which issues of quality and performance can be assessed, it becomes possible to identify the dimensions or components that may be weak or missing in each particular case. Once such attributes are identified, we not only have a more accurate way to describe currently existing regimes, but we are also better able to compare and contrast cases that do not obtain the full package implied by standard definitions of liberal democracy.

This book picks up where debates on democratic consolidation and the quality of democracy have left us: short of easy labels with which to classify a series of borderline cases, it aims at uncovering significant variations among them, thus making them susceptible to classification and explanation. The argument also builds on the conviction that democratization is better conceived as an ongoing process, a continuum rather than a dichotomy, which admits intermediate stages, moments of advance as well as moments of regression. Rather than use the problematic concept of consolidation, my argument falls back on an older alternative, that is, the notion of institutionalization, conceived as the post-transition development of a regime that is able to fulfill and reproduce the procedural conditions of political democracy.¹⁵

There is no need for this process to be unilinear or for the concept to have a teleological flavor. Democratic institutionalization is rather conceived as a contentious process whereby the institutions typical of democracy may or may not become resilient and self-sustaining. The process consists, to a great extent, “of eliminating the institutions, procedures and expectations that are incompatible with the minimal workings of a democratic regime” (Valenzuela 1992: 70), thereby permitting the beneficent ones to develop further.¹⁶ It involves a struggle between actors who benefit from and lose due to these formal and informal undemocratic arrangements and hence “unfolds through precedent-setting political confrontations that alter or revalidate the institutional and procedural environment in its perverse or beneficent aspects” (71).

In sum, I propose to view the institutionalization of democracy as an ongoing contentious process—a struggle among political actors who continuously clash over the shape of the institutional architecture fram-
ing their interaction. Such a struggle does not take place in a political vacuum, however, but within the constraints imposed by the historical and institutional context, inherited from the preauthoritarian period, the authoritarian experience, and the transition process. It is a multifaceted process, occurring simultaneously in different arenas or dimensions that interact, sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes neutralizing or even reversing previous achievements. As such, it cannot be understood as a unilinear and smooth progression of the entire political regime, from unconsolidated to consolidated democracy. Finally, as the Venezuelan case abundantly shows, it is by no means inevitable, irrevocable, or a historical necessity: there is always the possibility of political change occurring in the opposite direction, what some have called “deconsolidation,” or better put, political decay.

A Contrasting (and Long-Overlooked) Pair of Cases

Colombia and Venezuela make an interesting pair indeed. Not only did they share the same Hispanic colonial experience, but also, from 1821 to 1830, they formed part of the same country, Gran Colombia. After its dissolution and the emergence of Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador as three separate political entities, some basic similarities endured: the division of the newly independent elites into Liberal and Conservative Parties was a common feature in these countries, as it was in most of Latin America during the nineteenth century; the struggle among competing regional elites was the cause of frequent civil wars throughout the century; state formation was slow and made difficult by the scarcity of resources that these societies could muster (see Centeno 2002); both remained basically poor, agrarian societies, dependent on the boom-and-boom cycles of their main agricultural products for export, namely, coffee and cocoa (see Bergquist 1986b).

They also share a common feature regarding their population: in contrast to other countries in Latin America in which a significant portion of the population defines itself as direct descendants of ancestral indigenous cultures (e.g., Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia), Venezuela and Colombia have small indigenous populations (estimated
at 2 percent in each case), and a significant majority of the population is made up of mestizos, people of mixed indigenous, African, and Spanish heritage.19 The majority of the population in these two countries speaks Spanish and is Catholic.20 In consequence, there are no salient ethnic, linguistic, or religious cleavages in either Colombia or Venezuela that could explain variation in political outcomes.21 The absence of deep-seated cleavages that could threaten the shared notion of national unity means that by the beginning of the twentieth century both countries had achieved a well-delineated and largely undisputed national identity. Therefore, the lack of national unity cannot be posed as the cause of differences between these two democratization processes.22

Interestingly, despite these and many more common historical features, the political trajectories of Colombia and Venezuela have differed in important ways. It is precisely that divergence which this book seeks to emphasize and explain. Following independence, and as a result of the tumultuous politics characterizing much of the nineteenth century in Latin America, two different forms of rule emerged in these two agrarian societies: whereas Venezuela became an autocracy, Colombia became an oligarchy.23 From independence until the turn of the twentieth century, Venezuela had only three civilian presidents (Vargas, Rojas Paúl, and Andueza Palacio), whose governments, taken together, lasted fewer than four years (López-Alves 2000: 198). After the last of the civil wars in Venezuela, the triumph of Cipriano Castro’s Andean army led to the installation of a long-enduring autocracy headed first by Castro (1903–8) and later by his lieutenant, Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35). On his death Gómez was succeeded by two military strongmen: General Eleázar Lópe Contreras (1935–41) and General Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–45). After a brief interlude, characterized by an attempt to establish a radical version of democracy by force under the so-called Trienio (1945–48),24 Venezuela returned to military rule, first under a military junta (1948–50) and then under the personal rule of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1950–58). In sum, before 1958 Venezuela never experienced a period of “oligarchic” democracy but only three years of an experiment in radical democracy.

By contrast, in Colombia an even-handed competition among regional elites was conducive to a competitive oligarchy that became an “oligarchic democracy” on the establishment of universal male suffrage
in 1936. From 1830 to the late 1800s Colombia had a string of civilian governments, with only three failed attempts (by Urdaneta, Melo, and Mosquera) to establish military rule that together did not amount to more than three or four years. Throughout the nineteenth century elections and civil wars were the main mechanisms for achieving power and forming a government in Colombia. From 1910 to 1946 (when a new episode of violence broke out), elections became accepted as the only mechanism for doing so. In Colombia oligarchic civilian rule has been the norm and caudillo or military autocracy the exception.

Taking the previous regime trajectory as a predictor of regime evolution, one might expect to find a lasting dictatorship in Venezuela and a stable democracy in Colombia. In 1958, however, both experienced a transition to democracy, and, paradoxically, it was in Venezuela that a more inclusionary and competitive democracy emerged, while only a limited semidemocracy took root in Colombia. How can we account for this counterintuitive outcome? Why did democracy thrive in the case where one would have least expected it (Venezuela) and become stunted in what seemed to be the most favorable case (Colombia)? What accounts for their divergent forms of institutionalization? How do we explain their divergent forms of decay?

Unfortunately, for the most part, the literature on Latin American politics has left us without a clear understanding of how to locate Venezuela and Colombia from a comparative perspective. Despite the fact that they have been, together with Costa Rica, Latin America’s most enduring democracies, they have largely been neglected in the comparative literature on the region. Because of the stability of their democratic regimes they used to be mentioned only in passing as divergent cases from the rest of the region throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Most analysts addressing the wave of democratization that swept the continent in the 1980s have also overlooked them, focusing instead on cases where democratization occurred much more recently.

Despite the number of studies on the subject, students of democratization in Latin America have yet to draw out the full implications of Costa Rican, Colombian, and Venezuelan models of democracy. These long-enduring democracies have many lessons to offer, especially with regard to the long-term evolution of democratic regimes once they are successfully installed. They provide a sufficiently long time span to assess
the predictions that have been formulated on the basis of much more recent democratization experiences. Indeed, they offer a unique opportunity to test, revise, refine, or modify a whole set of propositions put forth during the past two decades of studies on democratization.

The comparative study of Venezuela and Colombia,28 I argue, contributes to the ongoing debate about the prospects and dilemmas of democratization in Latin America and other regions of the world. Not so long ago, a conspicuous interpretation of Latin American politics saw the region as condemned to an endless pendulum movement between authoritarianism and democracy. By focusing on the Colombian and Venezuelan cases, where democratic institutions managed to endure for over four decades, and by exploring the causes of their stability as well as their enduring shortcomings, this study contributes to an understanding of the conditions under which—short of achieving the full package of a happy democracy, and in the absence of an open authoritarian regression—precarious democracies may evolve and endure. Once considered enigmatic exceptions to Latin America’s authoritarian swing, Colombia and Venezuela may now be regarded as potential models—both in their accomplishments and in their limitations—of the future of democracy in the region.

### Explaining Divergent Democratic Trajectories:
The Notion of Structured Contingency

Colombia and Venezuela belong to what Huntington (1991a: 12–36) has labeled the “second wave” of democratization, which took place between 1945 and 1962. Many of the cases belonging to that wave soon fell prey to authoritarian regression. Democracy managed to survive in Colombia and Venezuela. As a consequence they have been classified as “successful” instances of democratization.29 A closer study of these two cases yields some interesting results. First, they show that successful transitions do not necessarily lead to the institutionalization of happy democracies. Second, they reveal that the long-term evolution of a democracy does not depend as much on the mode of transition (which was similar in both cases) as it does on other factors.
In a suggestive piece titled “Democracy Is a Lake” (1994), Charles Tilly summarized the two opposing views on how and why democratization happens by drawing a contrast between those who see democracy as an “oil field” (i.e., a product of structural change) and those who conceive of it as a “garden” (i.e., an artifact of elite manipulation). He then proposed to think of it as a “lake”: “although it has distinguishing properties and a logic of its own, it forms in a variety of ways, each of which retains traces of its singular history in the details of its current operation” (14). Tilly’s lake metaphor is an ingenious way to stress the need to find a middle ground between structural explanations of regime change and those based on individual agency and to integrate them in sound, productive, and systematic ways.

In lieu of Tilly’s lake metaphor, I like to think of democracy as a work of architecture, whereby if the design and details of the construction are consequential to the final outcome, so is the terrain where the building is planned and constructed. This is the image conveyed in my mind by Terry Karl’s notion of “structured contingency,” coined in her article, “Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America” (1990). Even in situations characterized by high levels of uncertainty—as regime change tends to be—the decisions taken by actors respond to a series of limits and possibilities set by the existing socioeconomic structures and political institutions. The margin of liberty is not unlimited, yet it still exists. Conversely, the preexisting structures and institutions do not predetermine the results, but they do indeed condition them. In Karl’s words:

What is called for, then, is a path-dependent approach which clarifies how broad structural changes shape particular regime transitions in ways that may be especially conducive to (or especially obstructive of) democratization. This needs to be combined with an analysis of how such structural changes become embodied in political institutions and rules which subsequently mold the preferences and capacities of individuals during and after regime changes. In this way, it should be possible to demonstrate how the range of options available to decision makers at a given point in time is a function of structures put in place in an earlier period and, concomitantly, how such decisions are conditioned by institutions established in the past. (1990: 7)
Building on Karl’s notion of structured contingency, I argue that long-standing political institutions (e.g., the state, political parties, and the party system) play a crucial role as bridges between structural factors and the strategic choices made by elites during critical junctures. “Between the constraints imposed by societal interests and class struggles and the opportunities presented by individual choices and elite bargains are the political institutions that link the structures to the agents, knitting them together in complex ways” (Anderson 1999b: 10–11). These institutions, in particular, the state and political parties, at once embody the legacies of historical battles and shape the way in which current political struggles and bargains are carried out. In other words, economic structures and social transformations do not have an immediate impact on politics, unless there are political institutions and organizations that are able to translate those underlying forces into the political arena.

The role of political institutions as bridges helps explain how socioeconomic structures become “translated” into actual strategic decisions and political outcomes. Thus my explanation emphasizes long-standing political-institutional variables: the timing and pace of state formation, the nature of political parties and the timing of their emergence, and, above all, the relationship between states and parties. Political institutions not only translate the impact from the social and economic realms into the political; they also act as the living testament of the past, embodying the legacies of previous trajectories and choices. They thus exert a continuous influence, providing a thread of continuity even after critical junctures (such as the transitions) have significantly altered the course of political trajectories.

My work thus sides with those arguing in favor of a fundamental role for institutions in social causation, especially those working on the variant called “historical institutionalism.”31 In my view, historical institutionalism and the notion of structured contingency combined make the most suitable analytical approach to the emergence and evolution of democracy. I conceive of democracy neither as an “oil field” nor as a “garden” but as a social construction whose designers must pay due attention to the building’s structural foundations. It is the interplay of structures, institutions, and agents that finally shapes strategic decisions and their outcomes. Many have tried to short-circuit this complex ex-
planatory path by jumping directly from structures to outcomes or by overlooking the causal impact of background conditions and placing all explanatory power on short-term elite choices and calculations. In my explanation, socioeconomic structural transformations, as channeled by preexisting institutions (i.e., states and parties), add up to a historical-institutional account of the kinds of struggles, the nature of the setting, and the types of decisions that become available to political actors in times of change.

The causal argument built in the following pages thus points in two different but interrelated directions. It first turns to the distant past in search of clues beyond the immediate chronicles of the transition and points at important historical disparities with a long-term impact on both the transition process and its aftermath. As indicated by the apparent paradox of previous regime evolution, in searching for these clues it is necessary to look beyond regime-level variables. In addition to the obvious dissimilarity in socioeconomic evolution, differences related to the state and political parties but most important to their mutual relation emerged as avenues for accounting for the divergence between Venezuela and Colombia in the post-1958 period. This book therefore calls for the recovery and full use of political history as a key to our explanation of contemporary political processes—not political history understood in the conventional sense, as a narrative of heroes and epic battles, but rather as a genealogy of political institutions such as the state and the party system. With regard to the state, it is important to take the timing of its emergence and consolidation into account, as well as the vehicles by means of which it managed to assert control over territory and population. Among other things, differences in the timing and experience of state consolidation are key to explaining whether parties become (or not) appropriate vehicles for the representation of social cleavages and conflicts. Taken together, states and parties go a long way toward explaining variation in regime trajectories.

My explanation also confronts issues raised by the transitions’ literature, more specifically, the role of the mode of transition as a predictor of future regime evolution. A careful look at Colombia and Venezuela makes it evident that their pacted mode of transition does not suffice to explain the complex and not always predictable ways in which a regime
may evolve after a transition has been completed. In order to account for
differences in the patterns of regime evolution, a more nuanced analysis
is needed. My argument thus becomes more finely grained and explains
divergent regime evolutions as a consequence of differences discovered
when unpacking the notion of pacts: their degrees of exclusion and in-
clusion, the nature and scope of the institutional constraints imposed on
the various dimensions of democracy, and, finally, their degree of institu-
tional entrenchment.

These two distinct institutional legacies (from the past and from the
transition) are then used to explain why between 1958 and the late 1980s
Colombia’s and Venezuela’s democratic trajectories diverged. They also
help us throw light into the processes of erosion and decay that have af-
ected these two democracies since the early 1990s. The strategy yields a
complex and nuanced comparative historical account of the evolution of
these two regimes during the second half of the twentieth century. Such
an account differs from two alternative approaches to the study of democ-
ratization: the so-called structural approach, primarily concerned with the
role of socioeconomic factors as determinants of political outcomes, and
the voluntarist, elite-driven approach, which is mainly interested in the
short-term consequences of actors’ strategic decision making.32

Structural Explanations of Regime Evolution

It would be very tempting to solve the puzzle posed by the divergent
evolution of democracy in Colombia and Venezuela with an explanation
that hinges mainly on structural factors. According to this view, democ-


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oil is not so much a good predictor of democracy as it is of authoritarianism (see, e.g., Ross 2001). Oil-rich regimes tend to be state-centered and tend not to become democratic (Huntington 1991b). The more resources state elites control independently of socioeconomic classes, the more likely it is that authoritarian regimes will take hold and persist over time (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Kitschelt 1992: 1030). Yet, despite all these predictions, oil-rich Venezuela managed to build a democratic regime that lasted for over four decades.

On the other hand, the comparison of Colombia with other coffee-producing countries is also a puzzling one: while Costa Rica, for example, was able to build a resilient democracy, Colombia has gone from one type of limited democracy to another. Thus, not only Venezuela but also Colombia challenge resource-driven explanations of democracy, especially those focused on the political impact of their primary commodity exports. What, then, is the ultimate role of structural factors? My conclusion is that by neglecting the organizational, institutional, and political factors that mediate between structures and agents, some structural explanations fall short of offering a satisfactory account of regime change.

**The Mode of Transition Hypothesis**

From the perspective of those who see democracy as the contingent outcome of elite bargaining and negotiation, elites can make democracies grow, given the right values, beliefs, attitudes, and strategic choices. O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead’s (1986) influential volume offered an argument of this kind when accounting for the democratizing wave that starting in the mid-1970s extended from southern Europe to South America under unfavorable structural conditions. According to their model, transitions from authoritarianism to democracy happen through a game of strategic decisions between actors who suffer from few structural constraints (see also Di Palma 1990; Higley and Gunther 1992). For these authors, the crucial issue is the ability of elites to manipulate a highly uncertain setting and their capacity to create agreements that lead to the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of a democratic set of rules.
This kind of actor-oriented explanation has been charged with abandoning the structural approach in favor of a short-term view of democratization, as well as with overlooking the social forces from which elites draw their strength and capacity to negotiate, thus making democracy look like the artifact of relatively simple and self-interested action on the part of the elites. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge their view of regime transitions as exceptional moments in which structural conditions seem to be temporarily suspended, thus allowing for more fluid political exchanges and less constrained contingent choices.

My criticism focuses on the assertion that the specific modality of transition is the main predictor of the regime’s subsequent evolution and trajectory. Among others, Stepan (1986) and Karl (1990) have forcefully argued that the specific path taken by a regime in the course of its transformation away from authoritarianism (the “mode” of transition) holds the key to understanding the subsequent evolution of a democratic regime. However, arguments that overemphasize the mode of transition as a predictor of regime development suffer from several problems. They may assign more importance to the juncture of the transition than it really deserves, at the cost of ignoring or overlooking the importance of long-term (i.e., socioeconomic or political) factors, which have a distinct impact on the future evolution of a democracy (Cavarozzi 1991; Hartlyn 1994). Likewise, placing the main focus on the transition juncture tends to ignore the contingent nature of politics, that is, the extent to which democratic evolution depends on contemporary factors, not necessarily related to the transition period, such as the opportunities or hurdles that appear as the political process unfolds (see Hartlyn 1994).

The comparison between Colombia and Venezuela, where transitions to democracy followed the same “pacted” mode, calls into question the alleged impact of the mode of transition on subsequent regime trajectories. If that hypothesis were true, Colombia and Venezuela’s political regimes would have evolved in very similar ways after their transitions in the late 1950s. Yet this was not the case. While admitting that transitions are indeed critical turning points at which actors purposely change the institutional structure framing their interaction, the comparison of these two crucial cases of pacted democracies leads to a more nuanced conclu-
sion: instead of the overall “mode” of the transition, it is the blueprint for a new institutional arrangement crafted during the transition that holds the key to its long-term effects. In particular, I argue for the importance of the degree of inclusion or exclusion provided by the new institutional architecture, the scope and nature of the restrictions introduced by the new rules of the game, as well as their degree of entrenchment in the political process. In other words, what really matters for the subsequent evolution of a democratic regime are the transition’s institutional legacies rather than the overall mode of transition.

In sum, both the structural and the process-oriented approaches to regime change suffer from serious shortcomings when it comes to explaining regime development over time. In Kitschelt’s felicitous words, “Whereas structural approaches explain too much, . . . ‘transitology’ explains too little” (1992: 1033). An excessive emphasis on a contingent and elitist outlook on democracy runs the risk of being too instrumental and voluntaristic, as well as neglecting the historical, structural, and institutional constraints that frame political interaction. On the other hand, an exaggerated emphasis on structural factors risks overlooking the elements of individual and collective agency present in the configuration of the political framework within which social life evolves. There is good reason to attempt to bridge the structural/procedural divide. In my view, a focus on the genealogy and evolution of political institutions provides precisely that much-needed bridge.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 acknowledges that there is a place for structural factors in explanations of how democracies come about and evolve over time, especially those that focus on the social consequences of economic configurations. However, the narrower political economy arguments, in particular, resource-driven explanations focused on coffee in Colombia and oil in Venezuela, are not only insufficient but also, at times, misleading. I argue
that these nations’ economic structures helped the development of coalitions of social and political forces that were critical to advancing democracy in the second half of the twentieth century, with new urban middle sectors playing central roles with varying degrees of independence vis-à-vis the landed elites and different allies in each one of these two cases.

In chapter 2, I contrast the sharp discontinuity in Venezuelan socio-economic and political patterns from the nineteenth to the twentieth century with Colombia’s notable continuity. The consolidation of a central state and the emergence of the oil industry account, to a great extent, for Venezuela’s capacity to make a clear break with the past, whereas in Colombia the persistence of the Liberal and Conservative Parties provided a remarkable degree of political continuity. I also argue that the differing evolution of parties in the two countries is more a function of variations in stateness than of social structures. The divergent patterns of state and party development meant that Venezuela, by the 1950s, was endowed with a more autonomous and resource-laden state and more modern and representative political parties than was the case in Colombia.

The third chapter revisits the literature on democratic transitions, focusing on pacted transitions from authoritarian rule, which involve formal agreements across the civilian political opposition to limit competition and constrain change in certain policy areas, thus providing significant guarantees to key social and political actors. Rather than uncritically accept that all pacted transitions may significantly compromise further democratic development, I argue that pacts can vary in significant ways, with different implications for the kinds of institutional blueprints and legacies they engender. The final section of chapter 3 unpacks the category of pacts and introduces a series of innovative analytical distinctions that help explain their impact on subsequent democratic evolution; these have to do with their degree of inclusion or exclusion, the nature and scope of restrictions imposed by the agreements, and the duration and degree of institutional entrenchment of the agreements. These differences are then employed to account for the contrast between the Colombian and Venezuelan post-transition democratic trajectories.

In chapters 4 and 5 I examine the extent of democratic institutionalization achieved by the regimes in the two countries. Chapter 4 explores
the degree to which these two democracies managed to limit the use of force, first by examining civil-military relations and then by analyzing efforts to eliminate and incorporate challengers on the left of the political spectrum. Chapter 5 focuses on the evolution of political society, paying particular attention to the institutionalization of a pluralistic, inclusive, and competitive party system. It highlights dramatic differences between the two countries in this crucial dimension of democracy.

The book concludes with an exploration of the nature of the contemporary crises confronted by Colombia and Venezuela, those same crises that opened the gates for the arrival of Alvaro Uribe and Hugo Chávez to the presidency of their respective nations. Here I argue that the contemporary crisis in Colombia is much more tightly linked to the nature of its pacted transition than is true in Venezuela.

The complex patterns of regime evolution in Venezuela and Colombia can be made intelligible through a comparative historical analysis. The recent travails of democracy in these countries are better understood from a vantage point that privileges political history, especially the history of institutional evolution, rather than long-term structural factors or short-term calculations. While I argue for the importance of the past, I do not advocate using a framework that privileges the so-called structural or socioeconomic determinants of politics. I prioritize political institutional variables, such as the state and political parties, as the carriers of political experience from one historical era to the next. To the extent that it highlights continuities from the past, my analysis emphasizes path-dependence. Nevertheless, it also acknowledges that long-prevailing political practices may be purposively changed at certain critical junctures, such as transitions, by the actors engaged in the struggle for institutional redesign that characterizes episodes of regime change. In short, this book makes the case that a comparative historical institutional framework—focused on the institutional legacies from the distant past as well as on those from more recent critical junctures—provides the best means to account for the divergent trajectories followed by these two democracies in the second half of the twentieth century.
For those readers interested in the fascinating presidents of Colombia and Venezuela, Alvaro Uribe and Hugo Chávez, respectively, this book may prove a disappointment. As mentioned above, this book’s main contribution is a sustained comparative historical analysis of Colombia’s and Venezuela’s divergent democratic trajectories over the past fifty years; it is therefore neither about Uribe nor about Chávez. Part of the argument, precisely, is to challenge those accounts that are predominantly or exclusively focused on individual personalities, or short-term events. What those same readers may find in these pages is an explanation of why, and how, Colombia and Venezuela arrived at a point where their societies were ready to put their trust and confidence in the hands of these two highly controversial figures. Sitting at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, Uribe and Chávez epitomize two radically different responses to the political impasses faced by these democracies since the late 1980s. Whereas Uribe is usually associated with the right, Chávez is a self-declared socialist, a pioneer in the recent leftist turn in Latin America. They are both extremely popular in their own countries. Even after the disclosure of paramilitary-related scandals in Colombia, Uribe’s popularity remained at an all-time high. In Venezuela, despite surprisingly stubborn poverty indicators combined with rising levels of criminality, Chávez remains the most popular political leader in decades. A lot of ink and paper has been spent describing these leaders’ contrasting styles and radically divergent positions vis-à-vis critical issues such as free trade or the role of the United States in the region. Much less, however, has been devoted to explaining how it was that the two oldest and allegedly most stable democracies in South America gave rise to such polarized politics and mercurial leaders. This book is precisely an effort to do so. It traces the evolution of these two democracies, from their emergence in the late 1950s until the crises that provided fertile terrain for the emergence of Uribe and Chávez. While quality and style of leadership remains a crucial factor in political life, this study is built on the conviction that historical legacies, sociopolitical coalitions, and institutional architectures provide a fuller explanation of contemporary politics in Colombia and Venezuela, and elsewhere.
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