

## Book Review

– *Élites, radicalismo y democracia: Un estudio comparado sobre América Latina*, by Asbel Bohigues, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2021

This book focuses on the question of what role political elites play in the “normal” times of democracy. Bohigues justifies this focus by comparing the study of democracy with the study of transitions to and from democracy. The “transitology” literature, with classics such as Linz, Stepan, O’Donnell, Schmitter, and more recently Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán considers the agency of particular people in positions of political power fundamental to processes of change between regimes. This being the case, Bohigues wonders why the literature on the functioning and quality of democracy seems to pay little attention to the agency of the same type of political actors but instead focuses on factors such as institutions, culture or structural ones like the economy. The justification for the book is clear: If elites have the power to affect democracy, why are we not researching what effects their agency has on it? Bohigues focuses on one subset of political elites, the members of the legislature, for 18 Latin American countries during the 1995-2015 period. He discusses different conceptualizations of democracy, defining it as a multidimensional phenomenon. Following an introduction, the book details the different variables that affect the quality of democracy and its relationship with elites. This is followed by a methodological chapter explaining the book’s mixed approach, a contextualizing chapter on Latin America, followed by three empirical chapters and a conclusion.

For his large-n empirical analysis, Bohigues takes advantage of two datasets: The elite opinion surveys from the Base de Éléites Latinoamericanas of the University of Salamanca (PELA-USAL) and the dataset of the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem). PELA-USAL focuses on attitudes and opinions of legislators from all over Latin America with data for 20 years; as Bohigues notes few elite opinion surveys can boast such a long time series with so many countries. V-Dem for its part has some of the most complex and multidimensional approaches to democracy, with over 400 different indicators grouped in five separate dimensions. These dimensions are electoral (existence of elections), liberal (civil and minority rights and rule of law), participative (civil society and direct democracy), deliberative (quality of debate and respect in the public arena) and

egalitarian (equality in access to rights, resources, and power). The datasets provide detailed information coming from two perspectives: PELA data is self-reported by legislators and V-Dem data comes from expert surveys. Bohigues concludes that legislators' self-placement on the extremes of a left-right ideological scale (dubbed "radicalism" by the author) has a positive correlation with the egalitarian dimension of democracy, but a negative one with the electoral, liberal, and deliberative aspects. The existence of radical legislators potentiates equality in access to power and resources for different groups but affects the electoral, rule of law and the civility of the political discourse dimensions. On the other hand, the legislators having an attitude of support for democracy has a positive correlation with the electoral, deliberative and egalitarian dimensions of democracy.

The further analysis focuses on an index that puts together the five different V-Dem indicators of democracy, dubbed by Bohigues *democracia plena*, or full democracy. This analysis shows that elite support for democracy is not a necessary condition for full democracy. Even more, interestingly, it shows that radicalized elites are necessary for one configuration of conditions that lead to full democracy. So, full democracy (a high ranking on the five scores put together) can exist, even without strong elite support for democracy, but also, some of the instances of full democracy can only exist when there are radicalized elites, regardless of whether they are far-left or far-right deputies. The empirical section of the book finishes with a more detailed study comparing two such cases of that configuration: Uruguay and El Salvador, which shows that it is the long-term commitment of elites to democracy that makes radicalism a condition for full democracy. So, without that commitment to democracy, radicalism would not lead to full democracy.

The three empirical chapters correspond to an HJ-Biplot analysis, which is a quantitative technique useful for both dimension reduction and clustering, followed by a fuzzy-sets Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) and finally a comparative process tracing. While none of these techniques is unheard of in political science, they are not as common as regression analysis. It is a strength of this text that the author dedicates enough pages to explain the values of these techniques as well as the potential methodological limitations and criticisms. In the fsQCA and comparative process tracing chapters, the author adds valuable contextual information about the political and economic evolution in the region as a whole and in particular countries. This case-level information allows the data to connect to real political processes and causal mechanisms, whereas by itself it would appear as in a vacuum. The mixed-methods design is well-crafted and creative. The techniques are adequate for the questions dealt with in each section and they integrate well to triangulate information.

How this research deals with the elite's self-identification at the extremes of the left-right scale could have been problematized. Ideology is a notoriously murky concept, and the increasing relevance of cultural issues such as same-sex marriage to the detriment of economic issues, plus the historical meaning of

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political notions during the times of the dictatorships both lead me to believe that much could be gained from defining radicalism more precisely. I doubt whether “radicalism” is the best concept here, as it does not connect to, for example, violent radicalization. In short, the intrinsic tension of a notion that is not usually associated with stable democracy should have been discussed.

To finish, I think that this study opens up research avenues in at least two ways. First, it proposes an innovative operationalization of the concept of “critical juncture”, moments of fast and radical social and institutional change. This is no small accomplishment, as this is an often used but at times hard-to-measure concept, and the operationalization could aid its inclusion in more quantitative studies. Secondly, the book talks about the role of elites but focuses on a very specific subset of political elites (legislators). Further research could start looking at the effect of the agency and attitudes of other political elites (executive, judicial, local) and other types of elites on the quality of democracy.

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