

Bohigues, Asbel. (2021). *Élites, radicalismo y democracia: Un estudio comparado sobre América Latina*. Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. 295 pages



BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

There are many attempts to explain democratization in Latin America. Most of them treat democracy as a unidimensional concept and look for general explanations of why some countries become more democratic. In “Élites, radicalismo y democracia,” Bohigues demonstrates the theoretical and empirical relevance of investigating democracy’s many dimensions (i.e., electoral, liberal, participative, deliberative, and egalitarian). Utilizing elite surveys mixed with qualitative evidence, the book shows that legislators’ attitudes explain variations in these types of democracy. In fact, these effects may even be contradictory, helping to improve certain dimensions while worsening others. Scholars interested in democratic theory, Latin American politics, and elite behavior will benefit from this book.

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When many Latin American countries were transitioning from autocracy to democracy in the late 20th century, the scholarship on comparative politics treated these two regime types as a dichotomous choice. This was the case of Linz (1990) who was concerned that the “perils of presidentialism” would allow the military forces to make a comeback. Among others like Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2014), O’Donnell (1994) proposed a more nuanced perspective on regime type: even if some countries remained democratic, their practices did not resemble those of advanced democracies. In *Élites, radicalismo y democracia: Un estudio comparado sobre América Latina*, Bohigues contributes to this stream of research dedicated to identifying and explaining Latin America’s varieties of democracy.

The book’s first contribution is its extensive review of the comparative literature. This is a gift to instructors seeking to supplement their syllabi on courses like Comparative Politics and Democratic Theory. Based on the review, the author argues that elites play a determinant role in shaping their country’s five dimensions of democracy (electoral, liberal, participative, deliberative, and egalitarian). The relevant caveat is that Bohigues discusses how different elite attitudes are related to each of these dimensions. In other words, these dimensions do not vary “together;” instead, they are affected by different factors which may, in some cases, lead to contradictory results.

The author also demonstrates that, naturally, elite attitudes do not exist in a vacuum. His function, thus, includes other independent variables, namely socioeconomic context, political culture, democratic background, institutions, and geopolitics. Ultimately, this regards a two-stage dimensional model of democracy: context shapes the political elite’s attitudes, which will influence each of the five democratic varieties.

To map elite attitudes, Bohigues benefits from a major research initiative: the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America Observatory (PELA-USAL). Since the early 1990s, scholars from the *Universidad de Salamanca* have surveyed elected officials from every Latin American legislature. The book, thus, utilizes a dataset including over 8,000 interviews with representatives conducted in 18 countries from 1995 to 2015 (a total of 95 legislatures, or country-years). This is combined with contextual data extracted from multiple sources (e.g., V-Dem, Latinobarometer, World Bank).

With such rich material in hand, the model is tested based on a mixed-method approach including econometrics, qualitative comparative analysis, and process tracing. None of these techniques allows the author to make causal inferences. Yet, there is merit in combining different methodological approaches, especially because they reinforce the validity of the correlations proposed in the book. Furthermore, the

qualitative effort provides relevant explanations for the findings obtained with statistical tests.

The methodological approach should also be applauded by the students of specific Latin American countries. That is, in many comparative studies, countries tend to be transformed into binary variables with little to no in-depth information. In the book, Bohigues provides a detailed account of the political context of most countries. This means that those specifically interested in, let us say, Uruguay or Costa Rica, will also benefit from the theoretical framework and empirical analysis of this study.

Bohigues’ first finding is not surprising: elites’ democratic support is positively correlated to democratic levels, while elite radicalism exercises negative effects. There is, however, a caveat that emphasizes the need for a nuanced approach to understanding democracy in Latin America. While the first attitude matters for electoral and liberal democracy only, the latter relates to deliberative, participative, and egalitarian democracy.

The most interesting results of the book are yet to come. The author counterintuitively demonstrates that when legislators are radical and the country enjoys a democratic background and favorable economic conditions, full democracy (*democracia plena*) becomes more likely to exist. In such cases, elites differentiate themselves from each other and present clearer proposals for the electorate. Furthermore, this historical background allows legislators to learn to play the ‘democratic game’ with each other. These contextual differences explain, Bohigues argues, why elite radicalism is linked to democracy in Uruguay but not in El Salvador.

To a certain extent, this resembles what the American Political Science Association (1950) called for in its manifesto for a more responsible two-party system in the United States. It is true that since its publication in 1950, the level of polarization between Democrats and Republicans became so extreme that elites most often fail to engage in fruitful dialogue. *Élites, radicalismo y democracia* shows us that in the weak party systems of Latin America though, radicalism in the form of programmatic differentiation may still help to build healthier democracies.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Asbel Bohigues and João V. Guedes-Neto were co-authors in two academic articles.

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