

Measuring Latin American political instability since independence¹

Mensurando a instabilidade política na América Latina desde a independência

Midiendo la inestabilidad política en América Latina desde la independencia

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Abstract

This article presents definitions and novel data on four different ways to operationalize political instability: coups d'état, constitutional endurance, chief executive turnover, and completed executive terms. We cover nineteen Latin American countries since independence until 2005, thus compiling a dataset of country-year observations. Additionally, we code the years in which -independently of regime type- some modicum of political opposition was allowed. The data reveals high levels of intra and inter country heterogeneity, but we are able to offer a periodization of general patterns of regional instability over the past two centuries. First, after independence Latin Americans faced a long period of institution building that was highly unstable. Second, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed remarkable improvements in terms of political stability. Third, military coups challenged the incipient history of stability around 1930. Fourth, after 1980 the trend is towards stability. Finally, political pluralism existed in two thirds of the observations in the dataset. The analysis of the evolution of opposition and completed terms across countries is indicative, however, of intra regional heterogeneity.

Keywords: Political instability; Latin America; Dataset; Political institutions; Independence.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta definições e dados inovadores sobre quatro maneiras diferentes de operacionalizar a instabilidade política: golpes de estado, resistência constitucional, rotatividade de executivos-chefes e mandatos executivos concluídos. Cobrimos dezenove países latino-americanos desde a independência até 2005, compilando assim um conjunto de dados de observações país-ano. Além disso, codificamos os anos em que - independentemente do tipo de regime - algum grau de oposição política foi permitido. Os dados revelam níveis elevados de heterogeneidade intra e interpaíses, mas conseguimos oferecer uma periodização de padrões gerais de instabilidade regional ao longo dos últimos dois séculos. Primeiro, após a independência, os latino-americanos enfrentaram um longo período de construção institucional altamente instável. Segundo, as últimas décadas do século XIX testemunharam melhorias notáveis em termos de estabilidade política. Terceiro, golpes militares desafiaram a incipiente história de estabilidade por volta de 1930. Quarto, após 1980, a tendência é de estabilidade. Finalmente, o pluralismo político existia em dois terços das observações no conjunto de dados. A análise da evolução da oposição e dos mandatos concluídos em diferentes países indica, no entanto, uma heterogeneidade intra-regional.

Palavras-chave: Instabilidade política; América Latina; Conjunto de dados; Instituições políticas; Independência.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta definiciones y datos novedosos sobre cuatro formas diferentes de operacionalizarla inestabilidad política: golpes de Estado, resistencia constitucional, rotación de ejecutivos principales y mandatos ejecutivos concluidos. Cubrimos diecinueve países latinoamericanos desde la independencia hasta 2005, compilando así un conjunto de datos de observaciones país-año. Además, codificamos los años en los que, independientemente del tipo de régimen, se permitió algún grado de oposición política. Los datos revelan niveles elevados de heterogeneidad intra e inter países, pero logramos ofrecer una periodización de patrones generales de inestabilidad regional en los últimos dos siglos. En primer lugar, después de la independencia, los latinoamericanos enfrentaron un largo período de construcción institucional altamente inestable. En segundo lugar, las últimas décadas del siglo XIX presenciaron mejoras notables en términos de estabilidad política. En tercer lugar, los golpes militares desafiaron la incipiente historia de estabilidad alrededor de 1930. En cuarto lugar, después de 1980, la tendencia es hacia la estabilidad. Finalmente, el pluralismo político existía en dos tercios de las observaciones en el conjunto de datos. El análisis de la evolución de la oposición

¹ This article is based on the author's doctoral research/Este artigo é baseado na pesquisa de doutorado do autor/Este artículo se basa en la investigación doctoral del autor.

y los mandatos concluidos en diferentes países es indicativo, sin embargo, de una heterogeneidad intra-regional. Palabras clave: inestabilidad política; América Latina; conjunto de datos; instituciones políticas; independencia. **Palabras clave:** Inestabilidad política; Latinoamérica; Base de datos; Instituciones políticas; Independencia.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of political instability and present novel data on four different ways to operationalize political instability: coups d'état, constitutional endurance, chief executive turnover, and completed executive terms. The descriptive statistics that are described below are based on information on nineteen Latin American countries since independence until 2005, thus compiling a dataset of country-year observations. The data were collected from original political histories, official sources, and other documents available depending on the country and time period. We present and interpret the long term patterns of political instability, noting intra and inter country heterogeneity, and offer a periodization of those patterns.

The concept of political instability emerged hand in hand with the preoccupation with regime stability in the 1960's, and the concept was probably demonized in the context of the ideological battles of the cold war. From a Parsonian view of society, predominant at the time, changes were challenging given that they risked the preservation of the social equilibrium. Just to state two representative examples: "[...] there is political stability to the extent that members of society restrict themselves to the behavior patterns that fall within the limits imposed by political role expectations" (Ake 1974: 273); "A stably functioning polity is one in which there is a limited set of patterns of normal behavior, which recur predictably in given sets of circumstances" (Needler 1968: 12).

It is likely that the lack of clarity about concept definition led to the emergence of empirical definitions. Thus, a number of indexes that lumped different features of a political system which indicated a propensity to observe changes in government took over. Unsurprisingly, the focus on quantification did nothing to clarify the concept. On the contrary, often the "dimensions of political instability" contained both events that are part of democratic activity (such as cabinet changes and peaceful anti-government demonstrations) and others that imply the disruption of the political system (i.e. revolutions, coups). The confusion lingers until today: an avalanche of research done by economists trying to explain the effect of political instability on economic growth continue to show the old imprecisions (for example, Cukierman et al., 1992; Alesina & Perotti, 1997). Although there has been much debate about the optimum way to calculate a measure of political instability that would minimize measurement error, and indexes have become more sophisticated (i.e., Gupta 1990), the fundamental problem of what constitutes political instability at a conceptual level has not yet been resolved, with the focus placed on a misled quantification.

Political stability does not imply lack of change or immobility. It is precisely the merit of an institutional order to be able to absorb and peacefully process potential conflicts of interests and values without breaking down. Political institutions must be self-sustaining, that is, they survive and function only if they continually generate outcomes that are preferred to the use of force by each and every group that could impose itself by violating the institutional order. In order to be self-sustaining, a political system must be organized in such a way that the outcomes it generates, whether the distribution of incomes or division of rents or realization of some non-material values, must reflect the distribution of the "brute," pre-institutional power, including the military force of different groups. Consider the case of parliamentary monarchy in Brazil (1847-1889), where there was a succession of 36 cabinets averaging a tenure of 15 months but no institutional breakdown occurred. According to historian Boris Fausto (1999: 100), "in spite of the crises, this political state of affairs permitted turns in power for the two main parties. For members of the opposition, there was always a chance that they might be called to govern. It was, thus, unnecessary to resort to arms." In this case, the system could absorb the pressures of opposing groups to avoid institutional disruption. Political stability entails a degree of predictability; that is, there is room for change and conflict, but always within the boundaries imposed by institutions.

The core component of the concept of political stability is predictability. The notion of political stability entertained here adopts as “normal behavior,” to employ Needler’s language, such behavior that is enabled by the existing institutional order; in other words, political stability reflects that conflicts can be peacefully processed by institutions. Of course, we assume the existence of some sort of rules. This assumption gathers relevance in the Latin American post-independence context, where the collapse of the colonial rule left new countries without any sort of institutional framework.

The reader will naturally wonder what type of rules are at point. An influential view based on Huntington (1968) sustains that the greater good of the preservation of political stability should be ensured regardless of the cost of the institutional choice (democratic or autocratic). However, institutions that do not tolerate some opposition do not absorb and resolve conflicts; instead, they outright eliminate manifestations of dissent. The apparent tranquility of periods of dictatorship -when no opposition is allowed- hides the fact that institutions able to process conflicts could not be achieved. Frequently, dictators in Latin American history have followed rules orchestrated by them to get a grip on power. Five of the six longest tenured leaders in the region governed with rules and held elections. However, those rules become unpredictable since they are dependent on the mood of a powerful dictator that may change his mind anytime. Hence, political stability cannot be attained in such conditions due to lack of predictability.

This is not to say that the concept of political stability entertained here depends on the existence of democracy, where parties involved in the political game have -in principle- equal chance to access to power. Given that to be self-sustaining institutions must reflect the relations of forces, they may be inegalitarian, restricting political access to those groups that can mobilize military prowess and still favoring those more powerful among those groups that are admitted into the institutional interplay of interests. Hence, in order to achieve stability some degree of tolerance to opposition and political competition is required. The institutions that first generated political stability in Latin America are often described as “oligarchical” but they were in fact more often “polyarchical”. They were highly inegalitarian, restricting political rights to a small portion of male adult population, but also typically pluralistic, allowing a modicum of official opposition to function within the institutional framework. While elections were carefully manipulated by the incumbent governments, thus assuring either their own permanence in office or the victory of appointed successors, opposition was legally tolerated, allowed to win some seats in the legislature, and sometimes even a share of power. And these incentives were most often sufficient for the opposition to participate. Hence, intra-elite conflicts were processed according to rules and, even if not without sporadic repression and sporadic rebellions, were peacefully resolved. Following Chile after 1831 (about which see Valenzuela 1995), several Latin American countries established stable systems of succession in power in which incumbent presidents completed their terms and, faithfully obeying term limits, chose their successors, and through various devices assured their victory at the polls. The stability of such systems of oligarchical pluralism —Chile between 1831 and 1891 and again until 1924, Nicaragua between 1856 and 1890, Brazil between 1894 and 1930, Argentina between 1897 and 1916, Uruguay between 1898 and 1932— was remarkable.

We are now prepared to provide a definition of political stability: Political stability refers to the compliance of political behaviors with a preexisting set of rules that guarantee some degree of predictability provided that there exists institutional recognition of at least a modicum level of opposition.

2. Methodology

In this section, we will tackle the issue of measuring political instability. There are many ways to think about political instability. An important body of literature in political science has focused on regime instability. However, even if there were consensus on how to classify regimes, looking at regime instability exclusively misses important aspects of political instability. For example, coups within dictatorships are usually not taken into account and the reader may appreciate that the assessment of instability under a long tenured dictator differs from a period in which we observe a succession of dictators that perpetrate coups

against each other as the mechanism of succession.

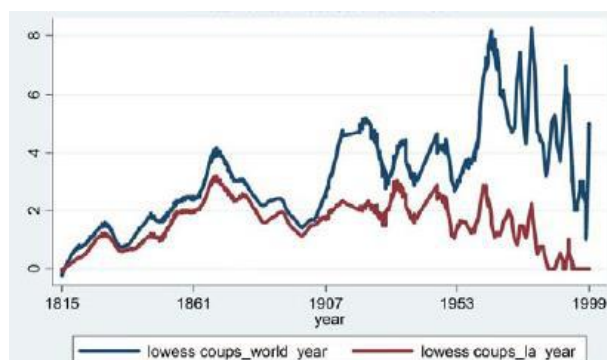
Others have focused on coups d'état (Londregan & Poole 1990); revolutions, coups, and political assassinations (Barro 1990); turnovers of chief executives (Russett 1964); political strikes and riots (Schneider and Frey 1985); constitutional change (Needler 1968); just to mention a few examples. As discussed in the previous chapter, in an attempt to capture several dimensions of political instability, some authors have favored combinations of indicators by constructing indexes (Alesina & Perotti 1996; Cukierman et al., 1992), with differing degrees of success in terms of conceptual coherence. The difficulty of many of these types of scales is that indicators of routine change contemplated in the institutional framework are blended with violent acts.

Why study Latin America? Are Latin American countries distinctively unstable when compared to the world? Regime instability is doubtlessly present in Latin America after 1945. According to the ACLP data (Przeworski et al. 2000), the region concentrates 43% of the world transitions to dictatorship (25 out of 58) and 36% of transitions to democracy, 33 (36%) for the period 1946-2002. From 1947 to 1955, all transitions in the world occurred in Latin America. In total, Latin America accounts for 39% of all regime transitions in the world for the period 1946-2002, which more than doubles the weight of the region in the dataset. Let us evaluate earlier periods. The Polity IV dataset (Marshall & Jagers 2002) reports a score that ranges from full autocracy (-10) to full democracy (10). Surprisingly, since 1982 the average polity score is higher in Latin America than in the rest of the world and except for the first half of the twentieth century, the region has been on or above world average.

Polity IV also reports a transition scale that goes from 3 to -2 indicating type and extent of transition, which I have collapsed into a dummy equal to 1 if any transition took place during the year. 23% of all regime transitions occurred in Latin America for the period 1800- 2000 (Latin America's share of country year observations in the dataset is 20%). During the nineteenth century, 26% of all transitions took place in Latin America. For the post World War II period, the percentage is smaller than in ACLP at 21% but still higher than the region's 15% share of all observations in the dataset at the time. In light of these data, Latin American regimes were stable and undemocratic during the 19th century and became most unstable in 1930 when 6 out of 19 countries experienced a regime change (Argentina, Dominican Republic, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil).

Let us look comparatively at another measure of instability. Coups d'état, understood as "irregular transfers of power (including revolutions)" occurred frequently during the last two centuries of the history of the world. According to the Marshall and Jagers (2002) dataset, only during 18 years (out of the 173 for which data is reported) no coups took place anywhere on the globe. Latin America remained coup-free for 29 years while coups were taking place in other parts of the world, with 24 of all those cases occurring on or after 1922. However, the region concentrates all coups in the world for 46 years (27% of the time). Figure 1 shows the evolution of coups in the world and in Latin America, revealing that the region accounts for most coups up to 1907. Between 1815 and 1849 Latin America experienced 26 coups (out of 39), 102 (out of 129) for the next 50 years, 82 (out of 141) in the first half of the twentieth century, and 51 (out of 236) for the period 1950-1999.

Figure 1 - Number of coups D'état, 1815-1999, Latin America and the world.



Source: Banks (2002).

The two measures of instability revised for the period 1800-1999 do not coincide in that coups data show a much more unstable scenario in Latin America than regime transitions do, particularly during the nineteenth century. Additionally, the comparison of coups and regime transitions data for the world and Latin America allows the conclusion that studying Latin America is a good starting point to understand political instability. Now if most cases within the region are unstable, we are not left with much variance to explain. The following sections show that even when instability is concentrated in Latin America when compared to the world, the within-regional heterogeneity is remarkable.

Why study Latin American since independence? Because it may be the case that instability feeds on itself, it is necessary to look at long term processes (Londregan & Pool 1990). Hence, it is necessary to explore institutional patterns since the inception of new nations, and Latin American countries have a rich history to offer. The institutional experience of colonial Latin America had a profound effect on the development of independent institutions. The Spanish colonial administration was direct and centralized, leaving little space for self-government. No one born in the colonies, a creole, could hold higher posts in the Spanish colonial administration. The only institution that entailed some modicum of self-government in Spanish America—the *cabildo*—was an estate body, with offices that could be purchased and kept in perpetuity after 1556, and only few elective posts subject to the confirmation by the Crown and elected under highly restricted suffrage. The fiscal powers of the *cabildo* were minimal. These institutions functioned so badly that in 1789 intendentes appointed by the Crown took over most of their functions. Summarizing its evolution, Haring (1947:165) concluded that “the *cabildo* had virtually disappeared at the end of the colonial era.”

When the Spanish colonial administration disintegrated—and it collapsed not because of any pressure for independence in the Americas, but because of events in Europe—the ensuing conflicts, whether between territorial units or between landowners and peasants over land or between creoles and peninsulares over political power or just among different militias over nothing, could not be resolved within a pre-existing institutional framework. Until one of the forces established its military domination or the opposing forces agreed to process conflicts according to some rules, conflicts could only take violent forms. Finding a suitable institutional framework was a learning-by-doing process. The choice of the rules of the game were not obvious and the issues of stability and alternation in power were key criteria. Such concerns were crystalized in the variance of presidential terms, term limits (or lack of them), and in much broader and innovative ways. For example, the Colombian monarchy (1811-1812), the Mexican empire (1821-1823), the Argentinean (1811- 1812 and 1812-1814) and Venezuelan (1811-1812 and 1812) triumvirates, the Argentinean (1810, 1810-11) and Chilean (1823) early juntas, the Paraguayan Perpetual Dictatorship (1816-1841) and Gran Colombia’s Dictatorship (1828-1830), rotating executives in Venezuela (1811-12) and Paraguay (1813-4), and a 3-member *congreso plenipotenciario* in Chile (1823). In later periods, further experimentation took place.

Moreover, independence was not a one-time event for several Latin American countries. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua declared independence from Spain in 1821 but were then briefly absorbed into Iturbide’s Mexican Empire until its dissolution in 1823. Afterwards, they constituted the United Provinces of Central America (later called Federal Republic of Central America), with Guatemala as its political center. Under federal provisions, each component state issued its own constitution and elected local officials. Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras seceded in 1838, while El Salvador formally did so in 1841. The Dominican Republic declared independence in 1821, but was subsequently occupied by Haiti until 1844. Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1813, but was reconquered and could not establish independent institutions until 1821. Panama declared independence from Spain in 1821 but remained a part of Colombia throughout the nineteenth century. Even before its liberation from Spanish domination in 1822 by Bolivarian troops, the fate of Ecuador had been decided at the 1819 Angostura Congress, and the country remained a part of the Republic of Colombia until 1830. After an eleven-year struggle against Spain, Venezuela abandoned colonial rule as a component state of the Republic of Colombia, leaving it only in 1829. In Uruguay, revolutionary struggle began in 1811, and after conflicts with Buenos Aires, Portuguese Brazil annexed it

between 1816 and 1825. Having attained independence from Spain in 1821 and 1825, Peru and Bolivia constituted the Peru-Bolivian Confederation in 1836, which survived only three years, largely due to Chilean intervention.

Table 1 shows, for each country, the date when Latin Americans first rebelled (*grito de la independencia* or cry for independence), the date of independence from colonial power, the date of independence from another power or territorial unit, and the date of final independence.

Table 1 - Dates of independence.

Country	Independence			
	<i>grito</i>	from colonial power	other	final
Argentina	1810	1816	- -	1816
Bolivia	1809	1825	1839	1825
Brazil	1822	1822	- -	1822
Chile	1810	1818	- -	1818
Colombia(a)	1810	1810, 1819	1830	1830
Costa Rica	1821	1821	1823	1838
Cuba	1898	1898	1902	1902
Dominican Rep(b)	1821	1821	1844	1844
Ecuador	1809	1822	1830	1830
El Salvador	1811	1821	1823	1841
Guatemala	1821	1821	1823	1840
Honduras	1821	1821	1823	1838
Mexico(c)	1810	1813, 1821	- -	1821
Nicaragua	1821	1821	1823	1838
Panama	1821	1821	1903	1903
Paraguay	1810	1811	- -	1811
Peru	1820	1821	1839	1821
Uruguay(d)	1811	1815	1828	1828
Venezuela(e)	1810	1811, 1821	1829	1829

Notes:

- - Not applicable

a) Independence from Spain was declared in 1810, but the Spanish returned in 1815 until their decisive defeat in the Battle of Boyaca (1819). b) The Dominican Rep presents a brief hiatus: from 1861 to 1865, it was annexed to Spain by the request of Santana (the local dictator). He is then forced to resign as governor general by the Spanish. The “Guerra de Restauracion” finds the locals victorious and in 1865 the Spanish leave the country. c) Although Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1813, the Spanish regained control. Independence was possible only in 1821. d) Uruguay’s revolutionary struggle began in 1811 under the leadership of Artigas, but Montevideo was invaded in 1814 by troops from Buenos Aires. Uruguay had an autonomous government briefly in 1815 but it was annexed to Brazil from 1816 to 1825. e) Although Venezuela declared independence from Spain in 1811, it could not maintain the institutions of neither the short-lived first or second republic due to continued fighting. Only the triumph of Bolivar’s forces in the Battle of Carabobo of 1821 effectively achieved independence from Spain. The Cucuta Congress of 1821 organized the Republic of Colombia, which Venezuela joined. Grito: Year of the *grito de la independencia* or first uprisings against the colonial power or creation of autonomous government. From colonial power: Year of declaration of independence from the colonial power. Other: Year of independence from a power different that the colonial power. Final: Year of final independence. Source: author’s compilation.

Note in the table above that the dates of declaration of independence from the colonial power may not coincide with the days in which the first cry for independence was exclaimed. Consider the case of Ecuador. According to Hurtado (1980: 36-8), the creoles had progressively come to recognize the desirability of replacing the Spanish authorities. In August of 1809, they perpetrated a successful coup, declared independence, and swore allegiance to the king. By August of the following year, the patriots had been assassinated and Spain retained power until the Battle of Pichincha in 1822. It is useful to compare these dates to appreciate how long and difficult the road to independence was. For the rest of the analysis I will take the date of final independence.

Once countries became independent, they could and eventually did develop political institutions. The political dust of independence settled around 1870 and the oligarchical republics, which were remarkably stable, flourished. The predominantly liberal governing elites, duly obeying terms, oversaw fast economic growth and the expansion of primary exports (Skidmore and Smith 2001). These highly exclusionary political institutions allowed for the peaceful processing of conflicts between elites — typically over centralization, tariffs, or the role of religion (conservadores versus liberales, see Gargarella 2005). Among those regimes are Central America's coffee republics, Bolivia (1880-1899 and 1899-1916), and Peru (1886-1914). With manipulated elections, the incumbent frequently guaranteed the election of his chosen successor, and in the unlikely case that he failed to do so, election results were often annulled with a legally questionable argument (for example, during the 1906 Costa Rican presidential elections (Yashar 1997: 54).

3. Results and Discussion

This section discusses newly collected data since the date of final independence until 2005 for the nineteen Latin American countries. Over 194 years of history, four measures of instability capture different aspects of the phenomenon. I present four measures of political stability. Three of them relate to standard indicators in the literature (irregular transfers of power -coups-, chief executive turnover, and constitutional endurance) and the fourth one is more innovative and perhaps the best indicator of political instability (completed presidential terms), also presented in the literature as presidential failures (Martínez 2021).

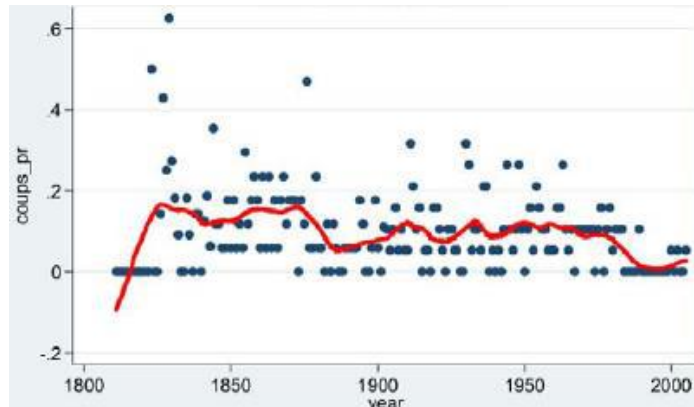
The empirical analysis of coups d'état, chief executive turnover, constitutional endurance, and completed terms show that stability is at least as common as instability in the region, and that the historical experiences of countries vary greatly.

3.1 Coups d'état

Coups d'état do not only measure institutional instability, but political instability in general: I have included cases of non-preagreed transfers of power within lawless regimes, assassinations, military coups, revolutions, forced resignations (excluding resignations due to public pressure), and civil wars. I have coded the variable as a dummy for this analysis. The variable *coups* shows whether a coup occurred at any time during each particular year. Hence, I considered as a coup instance of use of force or threat of the use of force that resulted in a resignation.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of countries that experienced at least one coup d'état in a given year. If we were to consider illegal closures of the legislature, of 1,008 country years for which I have data, there were 66 instances of this phenomenon (including twice in one year in Paraguay 1940). We find an outlier in 1829, when 5 out of 8 countries with non-missing data experienced at least one coup.

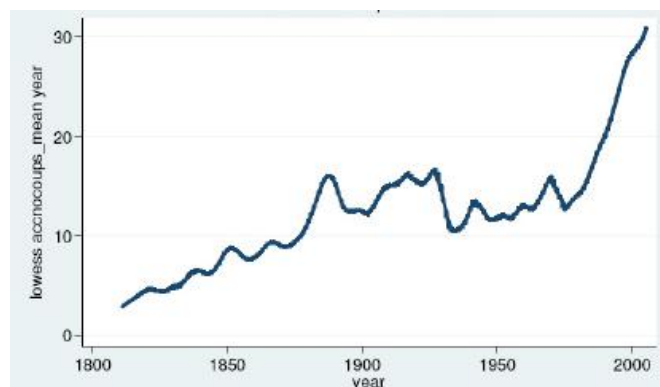
Figure 2 - Proportion of countries with at least one coup, Latin America, 1811-2005.



Source: Author's compilation.

During the twentieth century, the peaks occur in 1911 and 1930 when 6 out of 19 countries registered at least one coup d'état. The country that experienced coups most frequently is Bolivia (36), and the most stable in this sense is Cuba (5). In terms of the timing in the occurrence of coups, the two centuries are almost even, with 14 more coups occurring during the nineteenth century. Note that while there are peaks in 1911 and 1930, the average cumulative years without coups is high during that time (see Figure 3), largely because the 13 countries that did not experience coups in those dates accumulated a number of years without coups during the same time. In fact, in 1930 the average number of years without coups is 18.8, being the highest value for the period 1900-1950. For example, by 1929 Argentina had accumulated 68 years without coups, Panama 27, Colombia 29, Brazil 40, and Uruguay 53. Between 1930 and 1931, 10 Latin American countries experienced a coup.

Figure 3 - Average number of cumulative years without coups, Latin America, 1811-2005.



Source: Author's compilation.

The data on coups allow us to observe periods of stability by looking at the average number of accumulated consecutive years without coups in the region. The peak of stability during the nineteenth century occurred in 1888, when 9 out of 17 countries had experienced at least 10 years coup-free. Until 1900, the maximum number of accumulated years without coups is held by Chile in 1890 (60 years) followed by Brazil (57 years) in 1888. During the entire twentieth century, the maximum occurs in Uruguay in 1972 (96). Uruguay only experienced one coup d'état in the entire twentieth century. Overall, we observe that as we get closer to the present day, the regional mean increases, as countries had time to accumulate after the low point in 1963 when 5 countries experienced military coups (Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Peru). The most recent coup

occurred in Ecuador in 2005.

Coups d'état inform us that at a particular time political behaviors did not comply with pre-existing rules given that the use of force or the threat of the use of force were employed to produce a succession in executive power. Taking into account the occurrence of coups does not describe the entire picture of political instability, given that institutions may be changed by political leadership without resorting to force.

3.2 Constitutional endurance

Constitutions establish political institutions and therefore their endurance is a sign of institutional stability. At the onset of republican life, the leaders of the independent movements embarked on the task of organizing the government. As discussed above, there was much hesitation about institutional choice and also lack of experience with popular rule due to the fact that the colonial administration practically excluded representative institutions.

The feverish production of written rules in the form of constitutions results in a total of 217 national constitutions with 216 reforms. Most of the time, Latin Americans had some sort of framework that organized their businesses: in only 147 country years there was no constitution in force, representing only 4.6% of the dataset. Given this overproduction of constitutions, one may be led to believe that these documents were mere formalities made by tyrants seeking for some degree of legitimacy. And sometimes they were. However, the very fact that attempts to create an institutional order were made are indicative of a generalized culture among the political leadership that an institutional framework was required, particularly during the nineteenth century. According to Gargarella (2004), nineteenth century constitutions were rarely whimsical and expressed different views on how to organize society with some of those legal debates continuing until the present date.

Whether conservative or liberal, most nineteenth century constitutions provided for emergency provisions which were usually enforced to neutralize political opposition. Indeed, in Loveman's view (1993), extraordinary provisions have traditionally conferred a legal foundation for dictatorship. A different perspective on this issue is offered by Aguilar Rivera (2001), who argues that when provisions for extraordinary times are absent from constitutions, congress was pushed to confer illegal powers to the executive therefore introducing uncertainty in the political game and motives for rebellions. Hence the importance of assessing when political opposition, at least at a modicum level, was permitted -which is something that I will return to.

Even when taking into account these caveats, constitutional endurance is a measure of political instability. A way to think about institutional instability is to assess whether a constitution survived a generation (set at 25 years). Only Uruguay's 1830 constitution achieved it within the first generation after the final declaration of independence and Brazil and Uruguay almost did. Five countries waited a second generation after independence until a constitution lasted at least twenty five years, while the remaining ones waited even longer. Table 2 presents the constitutions that first lasted 25 and 50 years by country. In eight countries, never did a constitution last 50 years, and in Ecuador no constitution ever lasted at least 25 years -although the 1906 charter came close, having lasted for 23 consecutive years.

Table 2 - First constitutions that survived one and two generations of 25 years.

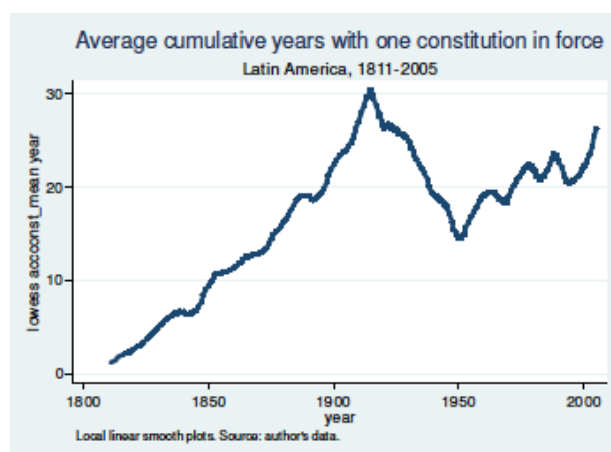
Country	Independence Year	Constitutions that first lasted	
		One generation	Two generations
Argentina	1816	1853	1853
Bolivia	1825	1880	1880
Brazil	1822	1824	1824
Chile	1818	1833	1833
Colombia	1830	1886	1886
Costa Rica	1838	1871	1949
Cuba	1902	1901	None
Dominican Rep	1844	1929	None
Ecuador	1830	None	None
El Salvador	1841	1886	1886
Guatemala	1840	1879	1879
Honduras(a)	1838	1982	None
Mexico	1821	1857	1857
Nicaragua	1838	1858	None
Panama	1903	1904	None
Paraguay	1811	1814	1870
Peru	1821	1860	None
Uruguay	1828	1830	1830
Venezuela	1829	1830	None

Note: the Honduran 1982 charter had its 25th anniversary in 2006. Source: author's data.

There were periods of constitutional stability that lasted over two generations. Colombia's 1886 constitution survived the maximum time without having been suspended: 105 years. Other constitutions that have endured over 50 years (as of 2005) are: Mexico 1917 (89), Argentina 1853 (96), Chile 1833 (92), Uruguay 1830 (88), Costa Rica 1949 (57), Guatemala 1879 (66), Bolivia 1880 (51), and Brazil 1824 (65). Amongst the most unstable countries are Venezuela with 25 constitutions in force, followed by Ecuador (21), Dominican Republic (21), Bolivia (19), and Peru (17). Institutional instability measured by constitutional age also manifests the heterogeneity that predominates in the region.

Figure 4 shows the average cumulative number of years with one constitution in force. The maximum of 32 years occurred in year 1916, the peak of a 30-year period of stability, once again confirming that what was deemed "the oligarchical period" was remarkably stable.

Figure 4 - Average cumulative years with one constitution in force, Latin America, 1811-2005.



Source: Author's compilation.

In line with what was shown with coups d'état, the first years after independence proved to be unstable for most countries (excluding Cuba and Panama which became independent in the twentieth century), with improved stability around year 1900 and then declining after the first quarter of the twentieth century.

3.3 Chief executive turnover

Chief executive turnover, when changes of heads occur at times stipulated by the rules of the game, is a sign of the normal development of politics. In Latin America, the presidential terms were typically of 4, 6, and 5 years (in that order), with an average of 4.34. If the constitutional term of the chief executive is for non-renewable 4 years and if this norm is always observed, then we would expect the typical 4-year moving average value to be 1.25 heads per year. Protracted dictatorships or repeated reelections would generate lower numbers, while coups and other contests for power would be seen as more frequent turnovers. The 4-year moving average in Latin America is 1.42, indicating that on average frequent executive turnovers outweigh the cases of long tenured executives.

Latin Americans traditionally established terms and term limits. In only 7.69% of 3,171 cases, rulers did not have terms or had life terms, and in 19.46% of 3,108 observations there were no term limits. However, terms were frequently extended and the cases of long lasting rulers are not so few. The longest tenured leader in the entire history of Latin America is Alfredo Stroessner (Paraguay 1954-1988). Other five leaders held power for entire years during periods longer than 20 years: Pedro II (Brazil 1841-1870), Fidel Castro (Cuba 1976-2005), Porfirio Diaz (Mexico 1884-1910), Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia (Paraguay 1813-1839), and Manuel Estrada Cabrera (Guatemala 1898-1919). 12 others kept power for over 10 years. Curiously, 5 of the 6 longest tenured leaders mentioned governed with rules and held elections. Stroessner changed term limits; Pedro II was a constitutional monarch; Fidel Castro is indirectly elected without term limit; Porfirio Diaz eventually modified both term and term limits; and Manuel Estrada Cabrera modified term limits. Francia, who died in office, is the sole exception, since he ruled with only a proto-constitution and was declared Dictator for life by a Congress that never again met.

The proportion of countries with one head is shown in figure 5. A historical low in 1841 (40%) and a peak in 1897 at 91%. The latter value coincides with the previous subsections in characterizing the decade before 1900 as highly stable. It later decreases into the 1930's to recover steadily until year 1987, when all Latin American countries had the same leader for the whole year. Mexico had the maximum number of heads than any other country: 12 in 1823 and 10 in 1824. From 1955 to 1967, Uruguay had more than one head per year. 7 countries had 5 consecutive years when no single head sustained power for 365 days. In 71% of cases heads is equal to one and that percentage remains the same when we analyze the two centuries separately.

Figure 5 - Proportion of countries with one chief executive, Latin America, 1811-2005.



Source: Author's compilation.

3.4 Accumulated completed terms

The correlation between the number of accumulated consecutive years without coups and constitutional endurance is 0.43. The reasons for such low number are that in a number of coups d'état constitutions were not abrogated, and also that constitutions were sometimes changed without overthrowing the incumbent. In turn, executive turnover per se is not reliable, because when taken as raw data, it counts regular -and desirable- changes of the executive as measures of political instability. We need a better measure that can capture the strengths of each of the previous three measures presented above.

A solution consists in employing the accumulated number of consecutive years with completed terms. This variable captures the lawful completion of terms under preexisting rules, which incorporates the absence of coups d'état, the stability of head during a term, and the fulfillment of rules during a term. Accumulated completed terms capture whether the system attained some degree of predictability. Completed terms is a dummy equal to one for every year of a spell in which the nominal chief executive completed a previously specified term (even a life term), regardless of whether he was elected or appointed to it, and provided that the incumbent did not resort to an autogolpe strategy by extending her term while in office. Periods of instability were as frequent as periods of stability thus neglecting the myth that Latin America is a single unstable region. In fact, for the whole region the share of observations with completed terms (53%) slightly exceeds that of incomplete terms (47%).

The wide array of cases that one finds while reading political histories in the process of coding the data is truly surprising. Frequent cases of not completed terms respond to the occurrence of coups and other violent exits such assassinations and suicides (e.g. Germán Busch in Bolivia and more recently Antonio Guzmán in the Dominican Republic), or executives who extended their terms while in office (from Brazilian Getulio Vargas in 1937 to Honduran Juan Fernandez Lindo in 1848), or heads who were ousted and then called back to power (e.g. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Eugenio Aguilar in El Salvador). Conversely, there were five leaders who called for elections before their terms were completed, including Raúl Alfonsín in Argentina and Eleazar Lopez Contreras in Venezuela, but since they held on to power until a proper successor was inaugurated, they were coded as having finished.

A straightforward way to assess political instability is to look at how many years it took until incumbents could finish a term, and a better way is to see when such achievement was sustainable - I take two consecutive terms of at least 4 years (see Table 3).

Table 3 - First completed term of any length, first two consecutive completed terms of at least 4 years, and period of turmoil.

Country	Completed terms		Turmoil
	One, any length	Two consecutive, ≥ 4 years	
Argentina	1860	1874	58
Bolivia	1884	1888	63
Brazil	1898	1902	80
Chile	1836	1841	23
Colombia	1837	1841	11
Costa Rica	1859	1898	60
Cuba	1906	1917	15
Dominican Rep	1853	1938	94
Ecuador	1834	1843	13
El Salvador	1850	1907	66
Guatemala	1869	1910	70
Honduras	1842	1891	53
Mexico	1829	1884	55
Nicaragua	1843	1867	29
Panama	1908	1920	17
Paraguay (*)	1844	1857	46
Peru	1833	1894	73
Uruguay	1834	1864	36
Venezuela	1835	1847	18

Note: (*) Carlos Antonio Solano Lopez was elected for a 10 year term (1844-1854), which he completed. He was then reelected to a three year term which he finished in 1857. Source: author's compilation.

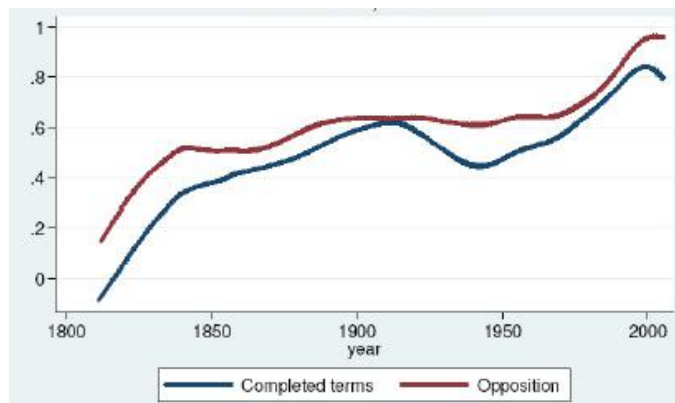
As shown in the table above, eight Latin American countries reached institutional stability within the first generation following independence, and three did so within the second generation. The remaining eight Latin American countries had to wait more than 50 years before constitutional incumbents could feel safe in office. Thus, most Latin American countries experienced “wars of attrition,” which ended only either when one side was militarily victorious and established its dictatorship or when prolonged warfare destroyed so many resources that little could be gained by winning the military conflicts and the antagonists agreed to some rules to process them peacefully. Table 3 also shows the length of the period between independence and the completion of the second term of at least four years (“turmoil”). The period of thus defined turmoil was indeed long in several countries. Notably, it took the Dominican Republic 94 years before two consecutive terms could be completed. Even Panama and Cuba, which became independent much later than the rest of the countries in the region, needed over 10 years to achieve it.

At this time, it is useful to recall Definition 1 from the introduction: Political stability refers to the compliance of political behaviors with a pre-existing set of rules that guarantees some degree of predictability provided that there exists institutional recognition of at least a modicum level of opposition. How do we measure “a modicum level of opposition”? The variable opposition is a dummy that adopts the value of one when as of the end the year, there was a legislature elected at least in part by voters facing more than one choice and the chief executive was elected in contested elections. This variable is intended to indicate whether the institutional system allows at least some political pluralism, crystallized in voters having more than one choice at the polls (unless there was consensus among all parties, as in Chile 1891). This measure of the existence of a minimum level of political tolerance does not rule out electoral manipulation, fraud, and the many ways in which Latin Americans controlled electoral outcomes -a topic to which I will return in the next chapter. However, resorting to such mechanism is an indication of the presence of political opposition and of the efforts made to achieve some degree of legitimacy according to established institutions.

For the entire 1811-2005 period, opposition was allowed in 64.5% of the observations in the dataset. The percentage of cases with political pluralism, as expected, was lowest before 1880 (49%), then improved between 1880 and 1930 (66%) to decline once again with the succession of Latin American military coups from 1930 to 1980 (61%), and was highest after 1980 (88%) when tolerance for the opposition became the norm. While opposition as defined above was never uncommon, peaceful alternations of power after elections were relatively rare events: in almost two centuries of history, there were only 105. Before 1880, there were 10 such events, which is not such a poor performance considering that stable institutional frameworks were in the making. In the next 50 years, there were 13, from 1930 to 1980, there were 32 and in the period 1980-2005, the number rises to 50.

Figure 6 shows the proportions of countries with completed terms and with opposition. Notably, the trends show that the proportion of countries that tolerated opposition was consistently higher than the proportion of countries where chief executives managed to finish a term.

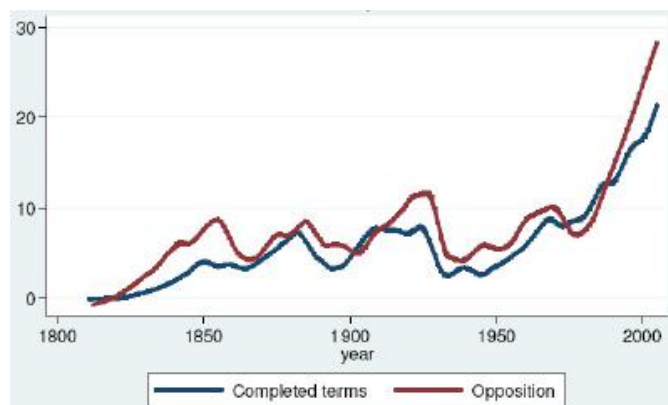
Figure 6 - Proportion of countries with completed terms, opposition, Latin America 1811-2005.



Source: Author's compilation.

Figure 7 shows the average cumulative years with completed terms and opposition. There were a number of cases when opposition existed but there were either no terms or they were not completed. The peak in the opposition series during the nineteenth century responds to Brazil (67 years) where opposition was tolerated from independence until the 1889 revolution.

Figure 7 - Average cumulative years: completed terms, opposition, Latin America 1811-2005



Source: Author's compilation.

While the above figures characterize regional trends, countries differed greatly among each other. With regard to the evolution of cumulative years with completed terms over time across countries, the first observation that one can make is that there are many cases with high peaks. Let us try to identify the most obvious periods of stability and instability by looking at spells of over 20 years. In the “stable” group we find: Costa Rica 1890-1913, 1920-1943, and 1949-2001, Dominican Republic 1966-2003, Honduras 1982-2005, Mexico 1876-1909, and 1934-1999, Nicaragua 1859-1890, Argentina 1862-1885, and 1898-1927, Brazil 1894-1925, Chile 1831-1885, 1891-1914, and 1932-1969, Colombia 1958-2005, Paraguay 1841-1861, 1954-1987, Uruguay 1899-1930, Venezuela 1959-1988, and Cuba 1976-2005.

There are also a number of cases with more than 20 consecutive years of unfinished terms. These are: Dominican Republic 1853-1879, and 1884-1929, Guatemala 1835-1864, Honduras 1933-1964, Nicaragua 1891-1912, and 1933-1956, Panama 1968-1988, Argentina 1816-1853, and 1952-1982, Bolivia 1855-1879, 1925-1951, and 1964-1984, Brazil 1821-1893, Ecuador 1924-1947, Paraguay 1811-1840, Peru 1956-1979, Venezuela 1915-1935, and Cuba 1948-1975. One might ask if the assessment of stability is fair given that a country might not concentrate consecutively as many as 20 years with completed terms. The countries with the highest percentage of years with completed terms are: Costa Rica (74%), Chile (71%), Uruguay (70%), and Mexico (67%). The rest of the countries are below 60%, and the minimum is 36% in Brazil. The imperial era brings Brazil to the bottom of the list given that for almost a century terms were not completed. At the top of the list of countries with the lowest percentages of completed terms are also Guatemala (42%) and Bolivia (43%). Note that 3 cases appear in the unstable list only (Guatemala, Panama, Peru), while 4 populate the stable list exclusively (Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Uruguay). Overall, most countries concentrate long spells of both stable and unstable cases (Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Venezuela, Cuba).

When we consider the joint evolution over time of the variables completed terms and opposition per country (not shown) offers interesting insights. We refer to a few cases that may serve as an illustration. During imperial Brazil, opposition was allowed but none of the two emperors finished their terms. During the republican period, terms were completed with political opposition, until the 1930 coup d'état. While the military regime allowed for limited party competition, two consecutive terms could not be completed until 1985. The Argentinean oligarchical period that started after national unification and extended until 1916, contemplated the competition of political elites and terms were completed except for two. Honduras, Paraguay, and Venezuela show about 100 years without either completed terms or opposition. In Chile the nineteenth century was very similar to Brazil's, but in Chile during the twentieth century the two variables move together. In Cuba, terms were completed after the revolution but opposition has not been permitted. The inverse evolution of opposition and terms is observed during most of the twentieth century in Uruguay, which is due to the fact that colorados elected presidents without opposition in the 1911 and 1915 elections who completed their terms until president Terra Leiva's 1933 autoup. Later on, terms were completed until the 1973 coup and opposition was allowed continuously since 1985.

4. Conclusion

The analysis above results in a number of empirical observations that I will present as a periodization. First, after overcoming the fights for independence from the colonial power, Latin American countries experimented both with governmental forms and territorial units. Building stable institutions, when at least two consecutive terms could be completed, was possible only after an average 46 years of turmoil. The efforts to adopt some kind of a legal framework are evidenced by the 166 constitutions that were in effect through the nineteen hundreds. And frequent executive turnover characterized that period.

Second, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed remarkable improvements in terms of political stability. From 1880 to 1930, terms were more often than not completed (60%), which represented a reversal in the odds when compared

to the earlier period (term were completed in 37% of the cases). Coups showed a similar pattern.

Third, military coups challenged the incipient history of stability around 1930. According to Rouquie (1994: 223), “Between February and December of 1930, the military were involved in the overthrow of governments in no fewer than six, widely differing Latin American nations - Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Peru, and Guatemala. The same year also saw four unsuccessful attempts to seize power by force in other Latin American countries. Over the following years, Ecuador and El Salvador in 1931, and Chile in 1932, joined the list of countries in which military-provoked political shifts and unscheduled changes of the executive had taken place.” Only after 1980 was political stability restored again. The decline in the levels of stability are shown by the different variables analyzed and did not start to recover until after the 1950’s.

Fourth, after 1980 the trend towards stability is clear: in only two percent of cases a coup took place, average constitutional endurance was 22 years, terms were completed 80% of the time, and the 4-year moving average of chief executives was 1.26 (much closer to the 1.25 ideal with 4-year terms). Despite these regional trends, the experiences of particular countries with political stability and opposition differ greatly.

Finally, political pluralism -understood as the presence of at least a modicum level of opposition- existed in two thirds of the observations in the dataset. The analysis of the aggregate regional data on opposition shows trends similar to those of accumulated completed terms. The proportion of countries with completed terms and the proportion of countries with opposition correlate fairly well (0.7), as well as the correlation of the average number of consecutive years with opposition and the average number of consecutive years with completed terms (0.9). The analysis of the evolution of opposition and completed terms across countries is indicative, however, of intra regional heterogeneity.

Understanding long term patterns of political instability allows us to proceed in the analysis of important political questions. For example, it would be possible to extend Emery et al.’s (2023) research on the impact of political instability on institutional quality in Latin America. Most quantitative research involving political instability, be it as a dependent or as an independent variable, focuses on the latter part of twentieth century until the present. Having the entire universe of observations (since independence) avoids the problem of right truncated data. Moreover, research on political determinants of economic development could benefit from using the different ways to operationalize political instability, which allow to separate instability of formal institutions (constitutional endurance) from instability derived from political dynamics (executive turnover, coups d’etat, completed terms). The work of economic historians on key financial indicators, for example Zendejas and Ford’s (2021) piece on nineteenth century Latin America sovereignty and debt, may be complemented with systematic information on domestic political instability.

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