

# **Authoritarian culture and the development process of political democratization in Latin America**

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## **Abstract**

Latin American democracy has emerged from scratch over the past century, and today it is characterized by the increasingly obvious development of illiberal democracy, with the label of "illiberal democracy" interpreting the non-traditional nature of this democracy and the uncertainty of its future development. This article elaborates from the perspective of authoritarian culture, reviews the imprints and manifestations of authoritarian culture at different stages of the democratization process in Latin America, analyzes the authoritarian cultural factors that have shaped the state of "illiberal democracy" in Latin America today, and concludes and reflects on the future development of democracy in Latin America.

## **keywords**

## **Introduction**

Democracy in Latin America began at the beginning of the twentieth century and has continued to grow ever since, reaching its peak at the end of the twentieth century. In fact, however, there are only a handful of countries in Latin America that can be characterized as truly democratic and free, and the quality of democracy has been called into question. According to the logic of democracy, the more democratic a country is, the better and more organized the development of all aspects of society should be. But this is not the case. In the past 100 years of democracy, the process of democratization in Latin America was characterized by dictatorships and alternating military and civilian rule. In the current phase of democratic consolidation, the crisis of democracy is still not far away, and the label of "illiberal democracy", which is characterized by **electoral democracy but not by civil liberties**, indicates that Latin American democracies are as fragile as ever, and that the certainty of their future development is doubtful. This article attempts to analyze and explain this issue from the perspective of authoritarian culture in Latin American political culture.

## **1. Authoritarian culture in Latin America**

Early Latin American political culture was heavily influenced by the Spanish colonizers, and Spain, isolated by the liberalizing influences of the Counter-Reformation, had a cultural identity rife with militancy, crusades, and intolerant Roman Catholicism, steeped in a tradition of dogma-worship of centralized rule, and pervaded by strong military values as a result of the reconquest of Iberia from the Moors. The cult of authority in its own culture served as the dominant ideology throughout the centuries of its colonization of Latin America. Conservative, strongly Catholic ideological and cultural traditions are deeply rooted in Latin America. The continent is an almost "perfect" replica of the authoritarian cultural traditions of its sovereigns, which are manifested in the cult of the strongman leader, elitism, corporatism, feudalism and a passion for centralized rule.

## **2. The process of political democratization and the culture of authoritarianism in Latin America**

In the more than a century-long process of democratization in Latin America, Latin American democracy, which began under the rule of Caudillo, has gone through the Caudillo dictatorship,

oligarchic authoritarianism, popular authoritarianism, bureaucratic authoritarianism and modern democratic politics. The culture of authoritarianism has always been a constant presence in the democratic process, turning the tide and shaping the times.

## **2.1 The Caudillo democratic period (1900-1939) at the beginning of the development of democracy**

The period from 1900 to 1939 was the early stage of the development of democracy in Latin America. As we all know, since the independence of Latin America in 1810, the region had been under the dictatorship of Caldero, with unstable government, no soil for democracy to grow, and even less freedom to talk about. The eruption of social problems over time eventually led to a serious threat to the political status of the rulers, and the oligarchic dictatorship was in crisis, so the rulers had to use the cloak of democracy to buy opponents and bring in the middle and lower classes to gain political support. The representativeness and breadth of this electoral democracy is very limited, and the electorate is extremely restricted. A quote from the then Mexican dictator Díaz best describes what kind of purpose this top-down democratic election arrived wrapped in, saying, "A dog with a bone in its mouth neither barks

nor bites.”<sup>1</sup> The bone of democracy has been thrown out, but it does not have the conditions to swallow, and can only be stuck in the throat to appease or suppress the “hungry” feelings of the people. The flower of democracy that blooms in the soil of a completely hardened authoritarian regime is destined to wither quickly. In the “Great Depression” of the 1930s, it was quickly drowned out by bottom-up popular movements and fair protests. The only three electoral democracies ended in military coups. For the first time, democracy blossomed in the authoritarian soil of Latin America, but it was short-lived.

## **2.2 The early years of democratic development (1940-1977), when military intervention was frequent.**

In this period, on the one hand, with the rise of trade unions and the emergence of popular politics in Latin America, a popular base existed for the realization of popular interests through democratic elections; on the other hand, “the emergence of opposition parties, the existence of ideological controversies, and the relative freedom of the press” (Smith, 2013)<sup>2</sup> made possible the mass mobilization of democracy. The Oligarchic republics virtually disappeared in

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<sup>1</sup> Baidu Encyclopedia. Porfirio Diaz. Retrieved August 26, 2024, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/波费里奥-迪亚斯/10795773>

<sup>2</sup> Smith, P. H. (2013). *Democracy in Latin America* (T. Daoming, Trans.). Shanghai: Yilin Press, p. 382.

the mid-20th century. At the same time, the political democracy of Latin America in this period was broadened in its representativeness and breadth, and the electorate continued to expand, with women joining the ranks of the voters, and the emergence of "popular politics" in Latin America. Women became a tool for voters to further expand their political support. It also gave rise to the popular "Lady's Election" in the same period, like Mrs. Perón in Argentina and Mrs. Pinochet in Chile, both of which played an important role in mobilizing female voters. But the durability of democracy was curtailed during this period. The number of democratically elected states was also small, not exceeding half the number of countries in the region, and with the exception of Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela, none of the other democracies survived for long. Authoritarian regimes alternated with democratic regimes, and democracy was often viewed as a scourge by political elites and the military.

The democracies of this period had absolute authority in controlling the direction of national affairs, but the dynamics of democratic political development were generally perceived as provocative or threatening. The main reason for this phenomenon was that the Latin American people, who had gained

the fruits of democracy in the midst of oppression, had exceptional expectations and trust in their governments, but because politicians, in an attempt to attract followers, implemented overly radical policies after they came to power, making it possible that, although these policies satisfied to some extent the interests of the lower classes' demands for wealth and land and gained their support, these radical policies, which were characterized by robbing from the rich to give to the poor, provoked the social economic elites, industrial leaders and landowners, and also aroused the extreme discomfort of the middle class, which was still in its infancy. The military also expressed a similarly strong sense of suspicion and distrust of democratic politicians during this period. The military's distrust came mainly from democratic politicians who: "(1) seemed more interested in winning elections than in defending the country; (2) railed against the military's longstanding complicity with the traditional oligarchies; and (3) once in power, sometimes tried to establish the administration's authority over the military. All of these actions threatened to undermine the honor and autonomy of the armed forces" (Smith, 2013) .<sup>3</sup>The military's distrust also led

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, P. H. (2013). *Democracy in Latin America* (T. Daoming, Trans.). Shanghai: Yilin Press, p. 385-386.

to the immediate consequences of the military's interference in the government that followed.

### **2.3 Period of right-wing democratic development (1978-1998)**

Compared to the second phase of Latin American democratic political development, democracy in this period became more moderate and stable, and the influence of authoritarian cultural traditions seems to be increasingly fading. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, under the Washington Consensus and domestic economic and political pressures, Latin America's right-wing elites were eager to find a breakthrough to continue to defend their regimes, and democracy, which had been denied, was courted, and democracy was instrumentally endorsed by domestic elites, who believed that popular discontent and protests against the government could be lowered through the limitations that democracy entailed. At the same time, international forces with an interest in Latin American countries saw democracy as an effective tool for penetrating Latin America and were happy to see it. Overall, this period saw a strong development of democracy in Latin America under the third wave of democratization in the world, a further expansion of the durability and breadth of democracy, the

return of military governments to the people, and the decline of military intervention. In the 1980s, the electorate was expanded to all adult citizens. The 1980s saw the expansion of the electorate to include all adult citizens, but the representativeness of democracy contracted dramatically compared to the previous cycle, and popular demands were limited or even ignored. The trend towards illiberal democracy became apparent and was generally established in the 1990s. The democratic process likewise moved forward in a tortuous manner in the context of rivalry and negotiation between civil officials and dictators. The development of democracy in this period was characterized by a relatively strong right-wing tendency.

## **2.4 Period of left-wing democratic development (1998-2015)**

During this period, electoral democracy in Latin America continued to expand and gain a foothold. Since the end of the twentieth century, the negative effects of the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus have begun to be felt, as the intensification of poverty and injustice has led to popular discontent, anger directed at right-wing authorities in Latin America, and a rush to find alternatives to neoliberalism. The

victory of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998 changed the direction of neoliberalism in the right-wing "market democracies. The victory of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998 changed the neoliberal orientation of the right-wing "market democracies", and many right-wing voters hoped to achieve political change through the right to vote, so that the state would be free from international interference, defend its sovereignty, and serve the interests of the population. Under this situation, the new left came to power at the end of the 20th century and developed rapidly in the first decade of the 21st century, and Latin America was swept by the "pink wave" of the left. At the same time, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and other countries are committed to the experimentation and exploration of Latin American-style "socialism", and achieved some results. "unlike the current 'right-wing' emphasis on individual rights and free-market competition, the New Left values public welfare, social solidarity, and state responsibility" (Smith, 2013) .<sup>4</sup>By the end of 2010, Latin America's democracies were showing a blossoming.

The authoritarian culture of Latin America during this period incarnated populist ideas that influenced the process

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, P. H. (2013). *Democracy in Latin America* (T. Daoming, Trans.). Shanghai: Yilin Press, p. 241.

of democratic development in Latin America. In order to maintain their rule, the rulers embraced populism either actively or passively to achieve their political goals. Because of the different degrees of embrace, the left has been divided into moderates and radicals. The moderates are represented by Brazil and Chile. They respect the representative political system in their political strategy and seek common ground with the opposition. The radicals, as a debating regime, are irreconcilable with the opposition. The moderates emphasize the regulating role of the market in their economic policies and support the private sector. The debating left, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of the state, as in the case of the solution of the poverty problem, which is often carried out in an extreme way by super-increasing government spending. The consequences of such radical policies are evident today. Moderates, on the other hand, would adopt a relatively restrained aid policy to address the problem of poverty and institutionalize a gradual reduction of poverty. The polemical left is full of heroic bravado about solving the problem of domestic poverty, but it lacks institutional norms and planning. At the same time, the development of illiberal democracy in Latin America is further characterized by the fact that,

according to a survey conducted by Freedom House<sup>5</sup>, in 1999, only "Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, and Uruguay qualify as liberal democracies. The following year, Argentina and the Dominican Republic joined the group, and in 2002, Mexico entered the group, at which point Argentina briefly withdrew and returned in 2003" (Smith, 2013).<sup>6</sup>

## **2.5 Left-wing "pink wave" fading period (2015-present)**

After more than ten years of Latin American left-wing ruling situation, the Latin American political arena once again "cliché", because of the economic development policy formulation, welfare vote policy overdrift national wealth, the people's aspirations to solve ineffective and difficult to solve the problem of corruption and other issues, left-wing political parties ruling credit greatly reduced, and once again face the power of the situation of power alternation, the political arena There is a trend of "left retreat and right advancement" in the political arena. However, with the left-wing governments in Argentina, Venezuela, and Bolivia gaining new life one after another since 2019, the trend of

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<sup>5</sup> Freedom House is an international non-governmental organization based in Washington, D.C., dedicated to the study and support of democracy and political freedom. It is dedicated to the study and support of democracy and political freedom.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, P. H. (2013). *Democracy in Latin America* (T. Daoming, Trans.). Shanghai: Yilin Press, p. 404.

"left-right advancement" has changed again, and in 2021, which is also the election year of Latin America, the wind direction of the democratic politics of Latin America under the influence of the new crown epidemic will change again, and the game of left and right-wing will become even more complicated. The left-wing "pink wave" is gaining color again. Unliberal democracy has become a label for the state of Latin American democracy.

### **3. Interpretation of authoritarian cultural influences on the form of illiberal democracy in Latin America today**

Latin American democracies have developed over the centuries from the European and American styles, but they have developed a different style of democracy from that of the European Union.

The traditional model of democracy in the United States is characterized by illiberalism and a significant reduction in the quality of democracy. If we look at the roots of the democratization process in Latin America, we can find some answers in the beginnings of democracy in Latin America. The importance of political and cultural factors is highlighted here. In the alternating era of feudalism and democracy, North

America, a step away, threw off the shackles of authoritarianism and ran wild, singing the triumphal song of democracy all the way. The Latin American continent is in the vain Caudillo democratic model to seek the truth of freedom, democratic development twists and turns in the beginning of the road has been doomed. Specifically, the trend of illiberal democracy in Latin America was revealed in the third stage of the development of Latin American democracy (1978-1998), and was basically formed at the end of the 1990s. However, from the perspective of the whole development process of Latin American democratic politics, the first two development stages of Latin American democratic development only undertook the gestation stage of democratic development, while the real growth and development of democracy in Latin America began from the third stage, that is to say, illiberal democracy was accompanied by the growth of local democracy in Latin America at an early stage, which is deeply characterized by the development of local democracy in Latin America, and at the same time also reflects the innate poor development of democracy in Latin America. Democracy's first appearance in Latin America was as a whitewasher of authoritarian regimes, which is very different from its neighbor, the United States, where democracy serves as a

limiter and supervisor of state power, with a strong authoritarian cultural color. The different roles and identities, and the fact that the concept of democracy is a foreign one, will of course lead to a different set of institutions and laws. From the very beginning of democracy, the soil of Latin America has nurtured the seeds of unfree democracy, and accompanied by the growth and development of democracy in Latin America, in the countless political development of the collision of barbaric growth, before it blossomed into the flower of the ideal, we can only use such a concept as the concept of unfree democracy for the tentative frame.

It is worth noting that Latin Americans, while idealistic in their belief in democracy, are very realistic about the performance of their governments. If the democratic government does not bring the good economic situation and fair and just society that the Latin American people aspire to, the Latin American people, who are also influenced by the authoritarian traditional culture, will not exclude the leaders from adopting non-democratic means of governance, such as overstepping the law and imposing by force. The political strongman has never been ingrained in the minds of the Latin American people as the

savior of the world. "These attitudes reveal a broad acceptance by the people of the imposition of top-down restrictions on democracy, bringing about what Guillermo O'Donnell has called 'mandated democracy' and what Fareed Zakaria has labeled 'unfree democracy'" (Smith, 2013).<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the formation of this model of illiberal democratic development can also be seen as a compromise under a sort of win-win situation between Latin American dictators and civil servants, influenced by the traditional authoritarian culture. The reasons for this are, for one thing, that Latin American political parties and interest groups have not built up sufficient trust to allow a transition to liberal democracy. And from the standpoint of social elites, illiberal democracy represents an easy, lasting solution. On the one hand, it benefits from the legitimacy that comes from free and fair elections; on the other hand, it has the added advantage of limiting democratic freedoms. In the famous words of Simón Bolívar, it offers a compromise between tyranny and anarchy. Secondly, these illiberal democracies all have large marginalized populations, which may be indigenous, urban migrant workers or peasants. Most of these groups are loosely

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, P. H. (2013). *Democracy in Latin America* (T. Daoming, Trans.). Shanghai: Yilin Press, p. 392.

organized, and it is more difficult to form a representative political party to express their own interests. Against this background, illiberal democracy can, on the one hand, guarantee the vested interests of the elites, and on the other hand, pacify these loosely organized masses of people and maintain the stability of the regime as a whole. This is also a kind of "optimal path" that the Latin American elites and popular classes have found for themselves in the continuous political development.

In general, the feudal hierarchical ideology of the Spanish Crown and Iberian feudalism created the soil for strongman politics. The authoritarian tradition resorting to caudillo, military regimes, populism, and elitism has always influenced the development of Latin American democracy. Although Latin American democracy has survived for centuries, the authoritarian influence of colonial culture is deeply rooted in Latin America, and to some extent these ideas reflect the extreme pessimism of the population about the capacity of representative democracy.

Nor do the elites of the authoritarian era usually withdraw quietly from political life after a democratic transition. In democracies, elites can often perpetuate their influence through authoritarian successor parties. In democracies,

elites may be widely dispersed across parties, but their influence is not diluted when they are also widely dispersed across states and governments (Albertus & Deming, 2021).<sup>8</sup>The state of illiberal democracy in Latin America has the imprint of a centuries-old authoritarian culture.

## **4. Reflections on the Future of Latin American Democracy**

### **4.1 Vigilance against the populist forces of authoritarian incarnation**

In recent years, populism has gained momentum in the international community. In Latin America, populism is even more prevalent, and many populists have turned into radical social change agents. These people are dissatisfied with the existing social distribution and national governance, and are committed to breaking the existing state apparatus, scoffing at the idea of rationally repairing the state management; they are keen on high-income and highly subsidized state welfare policies, but are blind to the sustainable crisis of the country's future economic and social development. These "radical paths are bold, impatient and argumentative. Rather

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<sup>8</sup> Albertus, M., & Deming, M. (2021). Branching out: Consequences of the dispersion of authoritarian elites across state and government in Latin America. *Democratization*, 28(3), 101-120.

than operating within the existing system or even reforming it, radicals seek to replace it. They express a deep distrust of the market and want to expand the economic role of the state. They seek to redistribute income and wealth, usually through generous government subsidies in many forms. They distrust the opposition. Rather than adding to a fair future, they want to initiate change immediately” (Smith, 2013).<sup>9</sup> With the rise of populism globally and the growing power of populism in Latin America, the power of populism, which cannot be underestimated, will play an increasingly important role in shaping the course of Latin American political development.

## **4.2 Persistence of illiberal democracy or regression to undemocratic status**

For the people, the people generally need a government that knows how to develop the economy. If not, then a government that gives people confidence in their lives, as in the case of Cuba and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. But if some of Latin America’s democratic governments can neither meet the nation’s expectations for economic development nor give the people a sense of confidence in their political future, once a crisis occurs, a reversal is inevitable. In the election year,

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, P. H. (2013). *Democracy in Latin America* (T. Daoming, Trans.). Shanghai: Yilin Press, p. 243.

by the new crown epidemic impact of Latin American society, government behavior is highly challenged. For Latin Americans, political authority has a deep imprint in their culture. Even after the democratic transition, the authoritarian culture in Latin America still maintains a vigorous influence and decisive power, and the authoritarian influence in the democratization process of Latin American politics has always been there. Once a crisis arrives, facing the uncertainty of the future, Latin American societies under the authoritarian tradition will inevitably repeat history, calling for strongman politics to solve the problem and welcome the "new birth" of democracy. Although Latin America has made great strides in the last few decades in the regulation of democratically elected civilian governments, the extent to which democratic values have been truly internalized remains problematic. Authoritarian attitudes are an important manifestation of Latin American political culture and have always exploded with surprisingly potent and even revolutionary force in the midst of democratic twists and crises. The forces of uncertainty brought about by this authoritarian culture can only add to the uncertainties of a fragile democratic future. Unless the democratic system is sufficiently hardened and the powerful are kept in its cage, democratic certainty will not come until it has been achieved.

## **5. concluding remarks**

Looking at the political trends in Latin America since independence, democracy began with the top-down promotion of oligarchic dictatorships, followed by a century of upheaval and struggle. Now, democracy has become the institutional norm in Latin American countries. But for the people of Latin America, although democracy has arrived, the fruit of democracy is still not ready to be savored, and the fruit is still sour, and there is even a risk that it will be blown away by the wind and rain in advance. On the long road of democratic development, the people of Latin America will be fearless because of their belief in democracy, but also silent because of their practical interests, and they will continue to be entangled and compromised in the process, trying to find a balance between conservatism and radicalism in the development of the system. The illiberal democracy that has emerged in the process of democratic development is not only the result of the poor development of democracy in its early years, but also the optimal state that democracy has found in the century-long practice of its development; this "optimal" state is not perfect, but it has at least achieved a certain balance, a state that satisfies the upper rulers and the middle and lower classes

for the time being.

The democratic development process in Latin America is generally a positive concept, but very often it has a neutral meaning. This is because the process of political development in Latin America is often characterized by the political phenomenon of economic crises leading to regime change, but not to the promotion of democratic development. There is still a lot of uncertainty about the future democratic development process in Latin America. The ambiguity of Latin America's economic future is intertwined with a series of social problems such as poverty and security, which predetermines that the road of Latin America's future political development will not be a straight path. The world has never had a historical experience or a real-life data to prove that moving towards democracy will lead to prosperity. Moreover, in the process of social development in Latin America, democracy has always acted as a mediator of class conflicts, a pretext for rulers to whitewash social peace, and the most perfect reason for European and American forces to interfere in Latin America. Although the Latin American people are accustomed to turn to the existing government dissatisfaction in the face of crisis, and begging for democracy as a "magic weapon", but when the democratic

government in the face of the out-of-control reality is unable to cope with the people feel cheated will not be mercilessly denied or even overthrow it, without taking into account that the thorny social realities are not a system can be easily and quickly resolved. The Latin American people are accustomed to a change of power. Latin Americans are used to solving crises by changing power and seeking shelter from strong men in politics. However, democratic crises are common, and strong men do not always appear, so Latin American democracy has a long way to go on the path of political development, which is full of uncertainty.

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