

# **Introduction: revisiting the “second (short) wave” of democratisation in Latin America, 1943-1962**

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This dossier critically examines the experiments of democratisation in Latin America during the mid-twentieth century, characterised by Samuel Huntington (1991) as part of the global “second (short) wave” of democratisation that occurred after World War II.<sup>1</sup> Between 1943 and 1962, thirteen (out of twenty-one) Latin American countries transitioned to democracy, comprising almost a third of worldwide regime changes that Huntington accounted for during this period. This apparent peculiarity of the so-called “second wave” has received little attention and scrutiny in the scholarship. Huntington (1991, 18-19) only discussed the second wave in passing, while students of democratisation in Latin America (Weyland 2014, for example) who have recently picked up on the “wave” theme have hitherto paid insufficient attention to the region’s experiences with democracy during the mid-twentieth century. This dossier takes Huntington’s periodisation and his (contested) conceptualisation of democratisation waves as a point of entry to examine Latin America’s place in the global democratising trends observed in the aftermath of World War II and the advent of the Cold War. But the articles included in this collection also take critical distance from Huntington’s framework, exploring the concrete experiments with and experiences of democracy in the period from a multidisciplinary perspective. In doing so, they look to improve our

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<sup>1</sup> This dossier brings together a selection of the articles presented in the Conference “The Second Short Wave of Democracy in Latin America, 1943-1963,” held in the University of Oxford (via zoom) on 10-11 June 2021. We are indebted to The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities for funding this event.

understanding of what democracy meant, how it was exercised at the time, who and what drove its expansion, and what were its limits. This dossier shows that the mid-twentieth century occupies a special place in the history of democracy in Latin America, and one that offers fertile territory for future research.

While Latin America is renowned for the revolutionary upheaval and military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s, less is known about the ways in which democracy was discussed, experimented with, and experienced in the two decades that preceded the turn to authoritarianism. This gap is all the more surprising if considered against the observations of contemporaries, for whom “Democracy ha[d] now come to seem inevitable in the Latin American *ambiente*,” (Fitzgibbon 1960, 54). The (re)turn to authoritarianism was not expected. If anything, the overthrow of dictators and personalistic rulers in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela in the second half of the 1950s nurtured the hope that democracy had arrived to stay. In an interview conceded for the magazine *Visión* in 1957, Laureano Gómez, former president of Colombia and signatory of the Pact of Benidorm that paved the way for the restoration of democratic rule in that country, held the thesis that “Latin America is exposed to an interesting and curious political phenomenon, a cycle that resembles a tide” (Agudelo Martínez and Montoya Montoya 1957, 348). If dictatorship had once appeared contagious across the region, the ousting of authoritarian rulers might similarly be said to have prompted a domino effect in the opposite direction. The “facts” – Gómez argued – demonstrated that the “tide” of authoritarianism in Latin America was low and suggested that it would remain as such.

Despite the recognition by contemporary actors that democracy seemed to be gaining ground in the region and their optimism about its prospects, the academic literature about Latin America during the “second wave” of democratisation is scant. This falls in stark contrast with the quantity and quality of scholarship about the “third wave” that followed the publication of

the seminal volumes edited by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986).<sup>2</sup> For many years, Skidmore's (1967) classic work on Brazil stood as a rare case in which historians delved into the "second wave" in detail to explore the trajectory of Latin American democracies. The volume edited by Bethell and Roxborough (1992) was perhaps the first in-depth regional study of democratisation during the period. Largely based on the degree of political competition in the region, the editors identified the subperiod 1944-1946 as a short opening of democratisation followed by its immediate closure amid the onset of the Cold War. Some of the issues examined by the articles in this dossier, such as the expansion of female suffrage and the formation of pro-democracy transnational movements remained largely unexplored in that volume. As one of the contributors to the conference that gave rise to this dossier argued, the "the 1950s are a forgotten decade in the crisis-driven narrative of Cold War Latin America" (Krepp 2018, 94). This dossier subjects to critical scrutiny the overall conclusion of Bethell and Roxborough's volume about the alleged closure for democratisation they held to have occurred with the emergence of the Cold War global order after 1948.

In recent years, historians have begun to look into the history of democracy through the lens of contemporary actors' own understandings and experiences.<sup>3</sup> In his regional study of post-war Western Europe, Martin Conway explored how democracy was discussed and how it eventually, in various forms, became "part of Europe's identity" (Conway 2020, ix). This dossier was partly inspired by Conway's approach to the historicization of the meanings of and experiences with democracy. But the articles that follow also shy away from Eurocentric and diffusionist accounts of the history of democracy, calling into question the "when and where"

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<sup>2</sup> When the second wave is mentioned in the "transitology" literature in the social sciences, it is typically as a prelude to the authoritarian turn of the 1960s, or to denounce the undemocratic nature of transition pacts (i.e. Hartlyn 1988).

<sup>3</sup> See Innes and Philip (2013) and the articles of the special issue in this journal about the history of democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century (c.f. Posada-Carbó, 2020)

of its “invention” and looking beyond the “great power perspective on world history” (Markoff 1999, 660-61). As Markoff makes clear, “not everything happened first in a great power” (*ibid*). Given the plurality of experiments in democracy across Latin America during the period of the second wave, the region offers rich empirical ground to explore the competing meanings of and experiences with democracy beyond the North Atlantic world in the aftermath of World War II.

To what extent is Huntington’s metaphor of the “wave” a useful analytical tool to study democratisation experiments and experiences in mid-twentieth century Latin America? Jorge Nallim opens this dossier by confronting Huntington’s conceptualization of waves of democratisation in the context of the historiography about the government of Juan Perón in Argentina (1946-1955). Nallim argues that while the notion of the second wave of democratisation might apply to Latin America in an abstract general sense, Peronism poses theoretical and historiographical challenges to Huntington’s explanatory model. These challenges, Nallim suggests, lay bare the analogy’s empirical limitations for understanding “the contents, meanings, and trajectory of democracy in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America”. Not only the geographical boundaries between “foreign-inspired” drives for democratisation and “local realities” are blurred by the use of the wave metaphor, but the model’s narrow focus on regime change prevents it accounting for the “fluid historical and ideological contours” of regimes that defy clear-cut categorizations as democratic or authoritarian, such as Peronism in Argentina, the post-revolutionary government in Mexico, and Gétulio Vargas populist rule in Brazil.

In the aftermath of World War II, liberal democracy was not the only game in town. The definition of democracy was itself an object of contention. Jonathan Madison examines what contemporary actors understood by democracy through the lens of the reconstitutionalization in Brazil that followed the deposition of Vargas in 1945. Madison challenges the standard

narratives that depict the drafting of the 1946 Constitution as a muted and restricted democratisation process. He instead forwards the argument that the composition of and the discussions in the constitutional assembly exhibited a vibrant competition between various definitions of democracy that both overlapped and diverged. Madison's paper elucidates the way diverse democratic ideologies and socioeconomic conditioning factors influenced the genesis of a new democratic regime.

Any assessment of democratisation in mid-twentieth century Latin America would be incomplete without considering the enfranchisement of women. The articles by Maria Elvira Álvarez Gimenez and Isabel Castillo showcase that, by the 1950s, women's suffrage had become a normative standard for democracies in the region. Álvarez Gimenez examines the process leading to women's obtention of the right to vote at the national level in Bolivia in 1952. Her article adopts a long-term view, exploring the active role the feminist movement played in achieving those outcomes. It traces the movement's history from the 1920s, charting its evolution through the 1930s with the impetus given to women's enfranchisement by their involvement in the Chaco War. In these decades, the feminist movement kept alive in public debate the question of who had the right to vote, paving the way for the enfranchisement of women in the local elections of 1947 and their active participation in the power struggles leading to the National Revolution of 1952. Bolivia provided a case of democratisation in which the growing inclusiveness represented by the enfranchisement of women was correlated with a higher degree of political competitiveness. Castillo explores in a region-wide study this relationship between inclusion and competition, using Robert Dahl's two-dimensions of democracy to evaluate what the timing of women's enfranchisement can tell us about democratisation in Latin America during the second wave. Using data from fourteen countries, coupled with a detailed discussion of particular cases, Castillo typifies different sequences of democratisation in this period: the "revolutionary path" (high inclusion and competition), the

“competitive path” (high competition, followed by inclusion) and the “authoritarian path” (inclusion without competition). Because universal suffrage was rare before 1945, Castillo argues that “looking at degrees of inclusion is most relevant when analysing democracy in mid-twentieth century Latin America.”

Democratisation in mid-twentieth century Latin America also involved the opening of spaces for public deliberation, in which democracy was itself the object of discussion. Rodrigo López-Martínez’s contribution focuses on the relations between Argentine intellectuals and democracy during the period 1955-62, paying close attention to the journal *Contorno* (1953-59). A medium that circulated in the transition from Peronism, to the Revolución Libertadora and the democratic restoration with the Frondizi government, *Contorno* provided López-Martínez a vantage point to review this ambivalent and oscillatory period of Argentine democracy seen from the lens of public writers, reconsidering the often-problematic links between intellectual life and politics. From initially supporting Frondizi’s government to voicing their frustration with the type of democracy it represented, *Contorno*’s writers adopted and redesigned the *essay* as a discursive platform for political action and, inspired by the Sartrean “engagée” model, redefined the image and role of the intellectual itself. His article illustrates that cultural initiatives and public debates were “vital in creating and circulating notions of democracy beyond the limits of established regimes.” Also focusing on public forums, but this time on a supranational scale, Nicolás Prados Ortiz de Solórzano analyses two congresses on democracy organised in Latin America in 1950 and 1960, both held under the title *Conferencia Interamericana Pro Democracia y Libertad*. His article examines how a group of activists and politicians from different countries across the region attempted to chart a democratic and anti-imperialist political position independent of the superpowers. These conferences served as a forum to delineate a common definition of democracy for the continent,

reflecting regional idiosyncrasies. What this paper reveals is an ideological current which, in espousing both anti-imperialism and anti-totalitarianism, defied the Cold War paradigm.

Laurence Whitehead's article closes this dossier with a regional overview of the experiences with democratisation in mid-twentieth century Latin America, subjecting to critical scrutiny attempts at subsuming them under the synthetic label of a "wave." As Whitehead's acute analysis of the cases and cross-country studies included in this dossier suggests, the fragmentary nature of the experiments with democracy that were undertaken across the region during this period, and their variety in terms of geographical location, temporality, political form and transnational linkages, renders moot the task of searching for a common causal explanatory factor — let alone the external shock of the Allied victory in World War II implied by Huntington's wave metaphor. If anything, Whitehead argues, after the war "the international context for the region was permissive, rather than prescriptive," which provides a clue to appreciate the degree of experimentation with understandings and practices of democracy observed from the late-1940s, as well as the disparate, and on occasions contradictory, political alliances that were behind them. "For those who cannot resist loose maritime metaphors, rather than a tsunami or cascade or coordinated wave, a series of eddies and counter currents would better characterize the fluid and unstable panorama of the upheavals of the 1940s." (Whitehead in this dossier). More broadly, Whitehead's article reveals the pitfalls of the physics envy — the tendency to import analytical models from the physical sciences to study the social world — that underlies the use of synthetic metaphors, such as waves, tides and currents, to single out the connectedness of socio-political processes across the region. Devising new analytical devices that account for temporal and spatial connectedness, without suffering from the same problems of the "wave" metaphor, remains central for understanding democratisation in mid-twentieth century Latin America as something more than a set of disjointed national

experiences. This argument reinforces this dossier's call for more engagement and collaboration between social scientists and historians working on democracy during this period.

While the aforementioned contributions help to shine a light on the nature of Latin America's experiences with democratisation in the mid-century period, much remains to be uncovered. Between 1940 and 1960, three continental conferences were held by leading political figures of the region to meet and discuss the definition, perils, and future of democracy in Latin America. New constitutions adopted in the 1940s granted suffrage to women and/or indigenous populations, or strengthened the rights and bargaining power of labour unions, as well as the growing middle-classes. This drive for democratisation and its eventual demise in the 1960s promises further key insights, not only into our understanding of how and why democracy succeeded or failed; but also on the very definition of democracy, its language, limits, and relationships with other issues such as development or modernization. Reading this "wave" in a global context, for example, may drive us to question why democratisation during this period was successful in Europe, but less so in Latin America; what role the larger Cold War played in the tensions between reform and revolution; and how the legacies of this period reverberate in current understandings and debates over democracy and its meanings.

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