

Chapter One

Measuring Democracy in Latin America: The Fitzgibbon Index

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In 1945 Professor Russell Fitzgibbon, a UCLA political scientist, asked a panel of ten distinguished U.S. scholars to rank the twenty Latin American republics according to a set of criteria that he felt would measure the extent of democracy in each of the countries. Fitzgibbon added brief “paragraphs of analysis and explanation to supplement each of the criteria in order that the semantic reactions of those being polled might be as nearly uniform as possible” (1951:518). He selected these fifteen standards for defining and assessing democracy:

1. An education level sufficient to give the political processes some substance and vitality
2. A fairly adequate standard of living
3. A sense of internal unity and national cohesion
4. A belief by a people in their individual political dignity and maturity
5. An absence of foreign domination
6. Freedom of press, speech, assembly, radio, and so on
7. Free elections; honestly counted votes
8. Freedom of party organization; genuine and effective party opposition in the legislature; legislative scrutiny of the executive branch
9. An independent judiciary; respect for its decisions
10. A public awareness of the collection and expenditure of funds
11. An intelligent attitude toward social legislation; the vitality of such legislation as applied

12. Civilian supremacy over the military
13. A reasonable freedom of political life from the impact of ecclesiastical controls
14. An attitude toward and development of technical and scientific government administration
15. An intelligent and sympathetic administration of whatever local self-government prevails

Panelists rated the republics separately according to each of the criteria, and the poll results were tallied later with different weights assigned to the various measures. Kenneth Johnson and I, who directed the later polls, eliminated this weighting variance in the 1980 survey and in subsequent surveys, giving equal emphasis to all of the criteria.

Fitzgibbon replicated his canvass at regular five-year intervals through 1970, adding more panelists than his original ten but maintaining the original fifteen criteria (Fitzgibbon 1967, 1956a, 1956b). Kenneth Johnson became associated with the project in 1960 (Fitzgibbon and Johnson 1961), and he assumed sole authorship for the 1975 and 1980 polls after Fitzgibbon's retirement (Johnson 1982, 1976). As the present director of the project, I assisted Johnson in 1985 (Johnson and Kelly 1986) and administered the instrument alone for the two most recent evaluations, those of 1991¹ and 1995. In total, eleven democracy surveys, taken every five years and all adhering to Fitzgibbon's original format, have been conducted since 1945. (See Table 1.1 for ordinal rankings of the eleven surveys.) Ninety-six panelists responded to the 1995 survey.

Although the panel approach is not an impeccable indicator of comparative democracy levels among states, it does have the advantage of utilizing a group of distinguished area specialists for measuring Latin American democracy, making biases or mistakes in individual evaluations less significant. Other data sources, such as voter turnout, for example, or number of elections, as well as social and economic variables, may be no more dependable in studying trends in democracy than the collective and continuous ratings of scholars. The tabulation's longevity and repetition also add to its strength. Two primary disadvantages of the survey method lie in the probable inability of most panelists to accurately assess all of the criteria for all of the countries and in the possibility of the indicators themselves not reliably reflecting the processes of democracy. I will have more comment on these points later.

Over the years, Fitzgibbon, Johnson, and I made a variety of attempts to improve the survey; most were tried only once and not kept. Fitzgibbon added a "provision for indicating self-assessment as to the respondent's familiarity with both [Latin American] states and [the fifteen] criteria" (1967:155). Dropping this technique from later investigations, he lamented: "Perhaps there are deductions to be made from such [familiarity] distribution[s] but the author shies away in timidity from making them" (159).

TABLE 1.1 Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index: Specialists' View of Democracy in Latin America, 1945-1995

Country	Rank															Totals
	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1991	1995					
Argentina	5	8	8	4	6	7	5	11	3	5	4	7				
Bolivia	18	17	15	16	17	18	17	18	16	14	14	18				
Brazil	11	5	5	7	8	10	9	12	9	6	6	8				
Chile	3	2	3	3	3	2	11	14	14	4	3	4				
Colombia	4	6	6	6	7	6	4	4	5	8	7	5				
Costa Rica	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1				
Cuba	6	4	7	15	18	13	7	6	10	12	16	9				
Dominican Republic	19	19	19	18	14	14	13	8	13	11	13	15				
Ecuador	14	9	10	10	12	9	14	9	11	9	9	11				
El Salvador	13	14	11	12	11	8	10	16	17	19	17	13				
Guatemala	12	10	14	13	13	13	15	17	19	18	19	16				
Haiti	16	18	17	19	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20				
Honduras	17	15	12	14	15	16	16	15	15	17	18	17				
Mexico	7	7	4	5	4	5	3	3	6	7	8	3				
Nicaragua	15	16	18	17	16	17	18	7	12	10	11	14				
Panama	8	11	9	11	10	11	12	10	9	15	10	12				
Paraguay	20	20	20	20	19	19	19	19	18	16	15	19				
Peru	10	13	16	9	9	11	8	5	8	13	12	10				
Uruguay	1	1	1	1	1	3	6	13	4	3	2	2				
Venezuela	9	12	13	8	5	4	2	2	2	2	5	6				

In one instance, Fitzgibbon tested for possible correlations between certain social, cultural, economic, demographic, and political variables and the democracy rankings of his 1961) and 1965 surveys (1967:159—164). But he could not raise significant statistical relationships. Fitzgibbon observed a “bunching” identity with many states not moving far from their original rank positions throughout the extended survey period (1967:165—166). Johnson and Kelly encountered these clusterings as well.

As an additional scale, Johnson culled five “select criteria” from the fifteen (1976:131-132) that he felt might more directly indicate a political side of democracy, that is, freedom of press, speech, radio, and so on (the sixth of the criteria listed earlier); free elections (seventh); freedom of political organization (eighth); an independent judiciary (ninth); and the degree of civilian supremacy over the armed forces (twelfth). Since this extension correlated highly with the complete scale, Kelly dropped this approach in 1991. Johnson and Miles Williams established a “Power Index” that drew upon panelists’ responses to questions relative to the impact of certain groups within the Latin American political milieu (1978:37—47). Likewise, Johnson and Kelly in the 1985 poll added an “Attitudinal Profile of [panel] Respondents” that never saw publication. Neither the Power Index nor the Attitudinal Profile were carried over to later surveys.

Evaluation of the Fitzgibbon Survey

The strength of the Fitzgibbon survey of Latin American democracy, with its life span of fifty years, derives first from its longevity. Few other quantitative projects in academia can boast of this half-century perspective. Consequently we indeed possess ample data to test possible democratic trends and causes; to study the impact of social, economic, demographic, and other variables on democracy since the 1940s; and to isolate the particular forces most influencing constitutional regularity within the various republics.

Another contribution of Fitzgibbon’s approach comes from its panel-of-experts technique. We solicit data from the collective mind of leading scholars, a technique that for the most part provides a reflection of political conditions in Latin America. “Specialists are likely to introduce desirable nuances and balances,” asserted Fitzgibbon, “which are impossible in the use of cold statistical information, even of the most accurate sort” (1967:135). Trusting other statistics, for example, on “civilian rule,” “voter turnout,” “political maturity,” “disorder,” and the like could prove at least as difficult in definition and in reliability of collection.

In addition, we have in Fitzgibbon the built-in advantage of both a conceptual definition of democracy, rendered in his fifteen criteria, and a feasible operationalization process, provided in his panel approach. The data that result have the value of being quantifiable, in both ordinal and interval levels of measurement, so that statistical testing can be utilized. Finally, the whole

procedure possesses a dynamic quality, staying open to adjustment and likewise remaining available for replication by others.

To be sure, there are also drawbacks in the survey. Do the panel experts in fact exhibit clear enough insights into the true character of Latin American politics and government? Can they all show close familiarity, for instance, with the Haitian court system, the Bolivian mode of government administration, and the like? Most students of Latin American democracy cannot possibly keep attentive to all events in the south, nor do our panelists. Instead, they must rely upon common images, some of them certainly imperfect, having originated in the North American media or in memories of past Fitzgibbon surveys. Furthermore, because a large percentage of panelists have classified themselves as “liberal” (as seen in the 1985 Johnson—Kelly Attitudinal Profile), certain governments, for example, in Cuba and Nicaragua, may rank higher on the scale and others lower as a reflection of scholars’ biases. We admit to these deficiencies; yet we respect the survey approach and readily accept its data as reflective of general democracy comparisons among Latin American states.

Further, rarely does one see recent mention of the Fitzgibbon polls in the extant literature on democracy and Latin American politics. Nor do the polls seem to have influenced public policy or to have contributed to scholarship about democracy itself, despite the fact that the survey panelists, recognized scholars in the field themselves, have regularly participated in the project.

Nonetheless, for the next survey, in the year 2000, the panelists and I will probably update the survey instrument. We may eliminate certain of the rating criteria, among these, for example, the fifth, “An absence of foreign domination,” and the thirteenth, “A reasonable freedom of political life from the impact of ecclesiastical controls.” Other criteria may be altered and new ones may be added. The larger Caribbean countries might be included and the process for selecting panelists changed. Fortunately, the dynamic quality of the Fitzgibbon method allows for this flexibility.

Analysis of the Survey

Table 1.2 shows the cumulative democracy standings for the eleven Fitzgibbon surveys in Table 1.1 when the ordinal positions of each country are summed and the totals ranked.²

Costa Rica ranks first, having scored first since the 1965 poll. Uruguay stands some way below in second place. A clustering arises among the next five republics, only seven points separating Mexico from Argentina. Cuba and Peru match each other’s positions, as do Panama and Ecuador, and a bunching appears among Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. Paraguay and Haiti occupy in the lowest positions of the survey.

Shifts in rank positions among the Latin American states for the eleven surveys, similar to Fitzgibbon’s earlier bunching phenomena, showed countries consis—

TABLE 1.2 Cumulative Democracy Rankings, 1943—1995

1. Costa Rica (16)	11. Ecuador (116)*
2. Uruguay (36)	12. Panama (116)*
3. Mexico (59)	13. El Salvador (148)
4. Chile (62)	14. Nicaragua (157)
5. Colombia (63)	15. Dominican Republic (16)
6. Venezuela (64)	16. Guatemala (163)
7. Argentina (66)	17. Honduras (170)
8. Brazil (88)	18. Bolivia (180)
9. Cuba (114)*	19. Paraguay (205)
10. Peru (114)*	20. Haiti (220)

*Rank ties broken by summations of raw scores for all years except 1970.

tently positioned on the democracy spectrum over the years. For my testing of variance as shown in Table 1.3, I have used the measures of range, or the difference between highest and lowest rankings, and standard deviation, or the extent of spread of republics from their mean average position on the scale.

Based on the extent of variation from poll to poll, three groupings of countries appear in the table. A first group, with lower ranges and standard deviation scores, includes Costa Rica, Paraguay, Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti, Mexico, Honduras, and Ecuador. All of these except Ecuador rated either among the four highest on the scale or among the four lowest. With the exceptions of Bolivia and Colombia, none experienced major revolutions or prolonged domestic turmoil that could translate to major shifts in position from survey to survey. In the cases of Bolivia and Colombia, political disruptions came soon after Fitzgibbon initiated his surveys, and both nations restored their own brands of stability soon after the mid—1950s.

A second group contains four republics, Guatemala, Argentina, Brazil, and Panama, which hold a middle position on the democracy standings between seventh and sixteenth position. Reflective of moderate variation, these nations weathered alternating periods of stable regimes and political change.

The final group, Cuba, Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador, represents the highest level of shifting. All suffered major transformations during the survey years, when democracies alternated with dictatorships and revolutions replaced subjugation. The status of each, frequently changing, ranged from second (Uruguay) to fourteenth (Nicaragua) and fifteenth (the Dominican Republic).

Changes in democratic images by panelists seem to reflect governmental and political transitions within the respective countries. Costa Rica, Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Haiti continued in much the same stance throughout the fifty years, whereas Cuba, Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Venezuela, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic underwent significant political transformations. For evaluating democracy in Latin America, it appears that

TABLE 1.3 Country Variations in Rank Orders from All of the Surveys

Country	Highest Rank	Lowest Rank	Average Position	Range	Standard Deviation
Costa Rica (1)	1	3	1.5	2	2.2
Uruguay (2)	1	13	3.3	12	11.4
Mexico (3)	3	8	5.4	5	4.0
Chile (4)	2	14	5.6	12	15.2
Colombia (5)	4	8	5.7	4	4.3
Venezuela (6)	3	13	5.8	11	12.9
Argentina (7)	3	11	6.0	8	7.3
Brazil (8)	5	12	8.8	7	7.6
Cuba (9)	4	18	13.0	14	17.3
Peru (10)	5	16	10.4	11	9.6
Ecuador (11)	9	14	10.5	5	6.2
Panama (12)	8	15	10.5	7	5.9
El Salvador (13)	8	19	13.5	11	10.9
Nicaragua (14)	7	18	14.3	11	11.7
Dominican Republic (15)	8	19	14.6	11	11.6
Guatemala (16)	10	19	14.8	9	9.6
Honduras (17)	12	18	15.5	6	5.2
Bolivia (18)	14	18	16.4	4	4.7
Paraguay (19)	15	20	18.6	5	5.3
Haiti (20)	16	20	19.1	4	4.6

the panelists' survey decisions and the historical events of Latin America tended roughly to agree.

I assembled an array of forty variables³ to test for possible statistical linkages between the democracy positions of Table 1.2 amid certain national traits of the twenty Latin American republics. Enlisting the Spearman rho coefficient as a preliminary barometer of associational strength, I found that these variables revealed very high bivariate correlations with the democracy rankings:

- telephones per capita .82
- urbanization .80
- electrical energy consumption per capita .80
- general energy consumption per capita .78
- physical quality-of-life index .77
- daily newspaper circulation per capita .76
- tractors per hectare .74
- public education expenditures per capita .73
- gross national product per capita .73

All nine variables indicate a strong positive correspondence between democracy amid socioeconomic status. On a per capita basis, countries exhibiting more

telephones, higher electrical energy and general energy consumption, greater daily newspaper circulation, higher public education expenditures, and a higher gross national product appeared consistently more democratic. Likewise, urban states with higher literacy and life expectancy and lower infant mortality rates ranked higher on the democracy scale.

To carry these comparisons further, I grouped all nine of the variables together within a stepwise regression procedure in order to assay a more concise prediction of democracy. This technique possesses the advantages of controlling for spuriousness amid of reducing the number of variables for simpler utilization. From this endeavor, an R^2 score of .84 arose, consisting of the two variables, *daily newspaper circulation per capita* and *tractors per hectare*. Consequently, these two variables accounted for 84 percent of the variance among the nine traits in forecasting democracy in Latin American. Democracy seems to be present wherever substantial per capita newspaper circulation and strongly mechanized or tractor-oriented agriculture exist.

At first glance, the appropriateness of both indicators, newspaper circulation and tractor usage, seems to be justified. The first shows social maturity and political openness, the second urbanization and agricultural reform. Still, for inure certain explanations we probably need further probing into both variables; we probably need to ask, for example, what sorts of newspapers were surveyed amid how peasants were compensated for the agrarian development. This, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Other variables appeared less relevant to democracy. Racial homogeneity, population density and growth rates, size of territory and population—all demographic traits—showed minimal correlation. Military variables likewise showed no special linkage to constitutionalism. With the exception of public education expenditures per capita, as noted earlier, other educational traits did not sway democracy ratings. As in Fitzgibbon's findings (1967:161), political variables, too, did not correlate strongly with the democracy rankings.

Conclusions

The Fitzgibbon panel technique offers a unique study of democracy in Latin America, its findings contributing, we feel, to an understanding of the political processes in the region since the middle 1940s. My analyses of the cumulative surveys seem to indicate that democracy is amenable to being measured through the personal images and references of specialists and that democracy appears to be associated with certain of the social and economic qualities of Latin American nations.

If, in fact, democracy, for whatever reason, connects closely to higher levels of newspaper circulation and to agrarian mechanization, then could not this correlation offer insight into policy directions for citizens and government administrators? Leaders both within and outside of the United States who favor democracy and its political benefits would profitably heed and support this point.

Notes

1. I missed 1990 because of my teaching and researching in Paraguay as a Fulbright scholar. Kenneth Johnson encouraged me to resume the surveys upon my return despite the one-year lag.
2. I summed ordinal figures instead of interval figures because of the subjective nature of both democracy and the Fitzgibbon panel method. The ordinal fit seemed to me more appropriate. In addition, I could not locate interval figures for the 1970 index.
3. Most variables come from Kurian 1979. Although a newer edition of this book exists, I chose the first edition because it approximated the midpoint of the total survey period.

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