

POLITICAL ELITES, DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN, AND PRESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Abstract

This paper integrates the literature on military coups and on “interrupted presidencies” to develop a unified theory of presidential instability. Until the 1990s, many Latin American presidents were ousted by the military. In recent years impeachments and resignations have become more common, but coups have not disappeared completely. What explains such outcomes? We show that politicians with radical policy preferences encourage presidential instability, although the consequences of radicalism vary for the government and the opposition. Radical presidents defy constitutional checks and incite military conspiracies, while radical opponents embrace any form of removal (constitutional or unconstitutional) to oust the president. In order to test our theory, we employ a novel database that contains information on presidents and political parties in 19 countries. We estimate a survival model to assess the competing risks of presidents facing a military coup or a constitutional removal between 1945 and 2009.

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Historically, many Latin America countries have fallen prey to regime breakdown, specifically in the form of military coups. However, since the 1980s military coups have grown rarer while constitutional forms of presidential removal have increased. That is, whereas the earlier type of instability often resulted in the breakdown of the democratic regime, this “new” pattern of political instability threatens only the president. Between 1978 and 2012, 17 constitutional presidents were removed from office through civilian mechanisms such as impeachments, declarations of presidential incapacity, or the call for an early resignation, without a military intervention (Pérez-Liñán 2007).

Are contemporary forms of presidential instability manifestations of the old regional pattern of regime breakdown, or are they a new political phenomenon driven by different explanations? The literature has not offered a complete answer to this question, although recent works have hinted at possible similarities between military coups and civilian replacements. Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010) labeled the new phenomenon “presidential breakdowns” establishing a parallel with old-fashioned democratic breakdowns. Valenzuela (1994) claimed that similar problems in the design of presidential constitutions underpin the two historical processes. Kim and Bahry (2008) treated coups, resignations, and impeachments as part of the same phenomenon. Most authors seem to implicitly accept that coups and presidential downfalls share some common causes, although the limited ability of military officers to intervene in politics in the post-Cold War has brought to the fore the use of constitutional mechanisms to remove incumbents (Pérez-Liñán 2007). Although we do not dismiss this argument, recent military intervention in Honduras (2009) and continued military involvement in civilian affairs in Ecuador indicate that the “old” era of coups and regime breakdown may not be completely over (Taylor-Robinson and Ura 2013).

In this paper, we focus on the radicalization of political elites as one of the main explanations for presidential instability. Irrespective of their ideological leanings, elites with radical preferences are impatient to achieve their policy goals, unwilling to compromise, and reluctant to respect institutional constraints. A radical opposition mobilized against the president’s agenda is likely to conspire in order to terminate the administration. Such conspiracies may involve military or civilian allies, depending on the historical context. In turn, a radical president will seek to bypass the legislature or control the courts in order to impose the administration’s agenda. This strategy usually triggers further radicalization among opponents. And because legislatures and courts are weak actors in the context of a radical presidency, opponents may see military rebellion as the only feasible way to remove the president from office. Thus, we hypothesize that the radicalization of opposition forces will lead generally to the destabilization of democratically elected administrations, while the radicalization of presidents will lead distinctly to military interruptions.

However, domestic forces operate in the context of broader regional trends. In the past, when few countries in the region were democratic, military action against the president was an effective path to pursue radical policy goals. After 1978, the spread of democratization in the region reduced the viability of military adventures and forced radical opponents to find constitutional mechanisms to oust presidents from office. At the present, the political cost of military action is high, and alternative strategies such as congressional impeachments or social mobilization to destabilize the government are a preferred course of action.

In the first part of the paper we review historical patterns of political instability in Latin America and present our hypothesis about the impact of radical policy preferences. In the second section we revise alternative explanations for the ousting of Latin American presidents. An extensive literature has examined the institutional, structural, and economic determinants of military coups (Belkin and Schofer 2003; Collier

and Hoeffler 2006; Fitch 2005; O'Kane 1981), and a smaller literature looks at the causes of the recent wave of presidential impeachments and presidential breakdown in the region (Baumgartner and Kada 2003; Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010a; Pérez-Liñán 2007). With very few exceptions (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010; Kim and Bahry 2008), no one has offered a unified theory or empirically tested the shared as well as divergent causes of these phenomena. We develop a theory linking coups, impeachments, and other irregular presidential exits. In the following section we test the argument with data for 19 Latin American countries between 1945 and 2009. Our conclusions emphasize the consistent peril posed by radical elites for presidential stability. These perils are created not only by radical *opponents*, but also by radical presidents who close the space for democratic politics.

1. Radicalism and Presidential Instability in Latin America

Before the third wave of democratization, presidential crises in Latin America usually led to some form of military intervention. Civilian rule was rare, and efforts to construct enduring democratic institutions were frustrated by high rates of instability. Fossum (1967) found that from 1907 to 1966, a period of only sixty years, the twenty republics of Latin America experienced a cumulative total of 105 military coups d'état which increased in each twenty year period: 25 from 1907 to 1926, 34 from 1927 to 1946, and 41 from 1947 to 1966.¹ Writing in 1966, Needler asserted that the coup d'état and the establishment of *de facto* military rule was "the most characteristic feature of Latin American politics" (Needler 1966: 616). Almost a decade later, Lowenthal noted that, "army officers rule in more than half the countries of Latin America; in most of the rest, they participate actively in politics without currently occupying the presidential chair" (Lowenthal 1974: 107). By 1977 only Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela could be classified as democracies. However, since the democratization of Ecuador in 1978, military intervention and coups d'état have dropped precipitously (Dix 1994).

The "new" instability in Latin America is characterized by stable regimes but unstable presidents. Early studies focused on presidential impeachment as the novel mechanism employed to remove the president (Kada 2003; Pérez-Liñán 2007), but forced resignations and alternative legislative procedures have also worked to remove the chief executive while preserving constitutional order (Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010; Valenzuela 2004). This instability has been widespread. Between 1978 and 2012, six democratically elected presidents were impeached by Congress or left anticipating an impeachment: Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil, 1992), Carlos Andrés Pérez (Venezuela, 1993), Abdalá Bucaram (Ecuador, 1997), Raúl Cubas Grau (Paraguay, 1999), Lucio Gutiérrez (Ecuador, 2005), and Fernando Lugo (Paraguay, 2012). Five elected presidents also resigned in the midst of a crisis: Hernán Siles Zuazo (Bolivia, 1985), Raúl Alfonsín (Argentina, 1989), Alberto Fujimori (Peru, 2000), Fernando de la Rúa (Argentina, 2001), Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Bolivia, 2003). Five other interim presidents were unable to complete the terms for which they tried to fill in: Rosalía Arteaga (Ecuador, 1997), Alberto Rodríguez Saá (Argentina, 2002), Eduardo Duhalde (Argentina, 2003), Carlos Mesa (Bolivia, 2005), Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé (Bolivia, 2006). In turn, Joaquín Balaguer (República Dominicana, 1996) resigned after two years as part of an agreement to overcome an electoral dispute. Only three presidents during this period left as a result of military intervention: Jorge Serrano (Guatemala, 1993), Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador, 2000), and Manuel Zelaya (Honduras, 2009), and in the first case because the middle ranks refused to support Serrano's coup against Congress. In no instance was a dictatorship established as a consequence of the overthrow.

¹ Fossum defines a coup d'état to be "any successful deposition of incumbent head of state, civilian, or military, by the military forces, or parts of them, with, or without civilian participation" (Fossum 1967: 228).

Marsteintredet and Berntzen (2008) counted twenty interrupted presidencies (resignation, impeachment, declaration of incapacity) in Latin America since 1978, and several more failed attempts at presidential interruption. This phenomenon appears to be more acute in South America. Hochstetler finds that between 1978 and 2006, 40% of elected presidents in South America were challenged by civilian actors trying to force them from office, and 23% actually fell, whether due to impeachment or forced resignations. Our study identified 19 coups and 15 constitutional removals affecting democratically elected presidents between 1945 and 2009, but only 4 coups and as many as 14 removals took place after 1977.

These facts pose a number of questions. Why are there coups under some circumstances and constitutional removals under others? What are the common causes, and which causes are unique to a single form of presidential instability? Are coups or removals the result of domestic factors or international conditions? The ample literature on coups and the newer scholarship on presidential crisis in Latin America point to some answers.

We contend that the radicalization of political forces is one of the main factors driving both military coups and constitutional overthrows in Latin America. By radicalization we mean, following Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013), a particular pattern of policy preferences. Actors are radical if they pursue policies that are located towards the left or the right of the policy spectrum *and* their preferences are very intense. This means that radical actors suffer steep losses when public policy departs from their ideals. Because of this reason, they are reluctant to bargain and intransigent in defense of their goals. Intransigence has important consequences for presidential instability both when radical forces are in the opposition and when they control the executive branch.

Radical Opponents. Radical forces in the opposition are likely to dismiss the right of democratically elected administrations to implement unacceptable policies and to question the legitimacy of incumbent presidents when they try to do so. Irrespective of their ideology, radical actors may be recalcitrant (if they defend the status-quo) or transformative (if they seek to change it). Thus, elected presidents may confront challenges from the right and from the left, when they try to alter existing policies and when they try to preserve them. For example, right-wing opposition forces plotting military coups were recalcitrant when they sought to preserve the legacies of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic in 1963, and they were transformative when they sought to dismantle the legacies of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. In turn, leftist forces calling for the downfall of elected presidents were recalcitrant when opposing the adoption of convertibility policies in Ecuador in 1997 and transformative when seeking to dismantle neoliberal policies in Bolivia in 2003. Under those circumstances, political leaders become “disloyal” opponents (Linz 1978), willing to employ the most effective way to terminate the administration. Thus,
H1: Radical opponents are more likely to plot military coups as well as constitutional removals of elected presidents.

Radical Governments. The role of radical opponents in the destabilization of elected presidents is intuitive and straightforward. The role of radical presidents in their own demise, by contrast, is more complex. When radical forces control the executive branch, they are likely to ignore institutional constraints in order to impose the administration’s agenda. Radical governments use executive prerogatives to by-pass the legislature, take advantage of legislative majorities to gain control of independent courts, or summon constituent assemblies to reshuffle both the legislature *and* the courts. They also invest public resources to organize networks of mass support and to fund loyal media outlets. These actions strengthen the position of the executive and weaken the ability of veto players to block presidential initiatives.

Institutional encroachment by radical governments has several important consequences. To the extent that the playing field becomes skewed in favor of the incumbent, the democratic process is eroded (Levitsky and Way 2010). Elections become less competitive, legislatures become more pliant, and courts become more docile. In extreme cases, this process of democratic erosion leads to the instauration of an authoritarian regime, but this is not always the case (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013). Because institutions of accountability are weakened, moderate opponents lose the most important means at their disposal to constrain the government. In this context, radical opponents emerge as the dominant voice against the administration. Linz (1978) described this process as the “abdication” of the moderates, but in most cases moderates do not abdicate; their politics are rendered ineffective by the polarization of other leaders (Bermeo 2003; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013). Unable to employ institutional means to remove the president from office, an increasingly radicalized opposition is likely to ponder a military alternative. For this reason,

H2: Radical governments are more likely to fall to military coups than to constitutional removals.

2. Alternative Causes of Coups D'état and Removals

Coups and constitutional removals, however, are not only explained by the politics of radical groups. There is a broad literature examining the causes of coups and presidential crises in Latin America, although it generally focuses on one phenomenon or the other. Some authors (Kim and Bahry 2008; Valenzuela 2004) treat both events indiscriminately as part of the same phenomenon. Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) distinguished between the two patterns and concluded that economic performance and civil society mobilization have an important impact on the likelihood of both presidential and democratic breakdown. However, there are many additional explanations in the coup and impeachment literatures that have been shown to be empirically significant. These explanations, summarized in Table 1, invoke international forces, economic predictors, political factors, and social variables.

Table 1. Summary of Explanations for Coups and Constitutional Removals

Military Coups	Constitutional Removals
International	
Diffusion effects (Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Fossum 1967; Pitcher, Hamblin, and Miller 1978)	Regional constraints on coups encourage use of constitutional mechanisms to remove president (Pérez-Liñán 2007).
Economic	
Level of development (Londregan and Poole 1990; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003; O'Kane 1981; Przeworski et al. 2000)	Level of development (<i>inter-branch crisis</i>) (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010; Helmke 2010)
Economic growth rate (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010; Londregan and Poole 1990; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003; O'Kane 1981; Przeworski et al. 2000)	Economic growth rate (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010)
Political	
Institutional design (<i>perils of presidentialism</i>) (Linz 1990; Linz and Valenzuela 1994)	Institutional design (<i>presidential crises</i>) (Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010; Valenzuela 2004)
Multipartism creates deadlock (Mainwaring 1993; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997)	Legislative shield (Hochstetler 2006; Negretto 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007)
Coup "trap" (Belkin and Schofer 2003; Dix 1994; Londregan and Poole 1990; O'Kane 1981)	Executive Scandal (Pérez-Liñán 2007; Waisbrod 2000)
Social	
Civil society mobilization (i.e. strikes) (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010; Fossum 1967; Putnam 1967)	Popular protest (i.e. street demonstrations) (Álvarez and Marsteintredet 2010; Hochstetler 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007)

International Forces. A long line of research has invoked international diffusion as an explanation for military coups. Using a data set of Latin America coups from 1907 to 1966, Fossum (1967) showed that a “neighbor effect” exists between “top dog” neighboring countries—that is, economically and militarily important countries in the regional context. Pitcher, Hamblin, and Miller (1978) found support for the diffusion of violence in general, but less so when applied specifically to their data set of coups. However, Brinks and Coppedge (2006) noted that countries tend to change their regimes to match the average degree of democracy or non-democracy found among their contiguous neighbors. They also confirmed that countries tend to follow the direction in which the majority of other countries in the world are moving. Gleditsch (2002) documented patterns of regional diffusion, while Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013) showed that regional diffusion is crucial to understand the wave of democratization in Latin America after 1977.

International constraints to the feasibility of coups also had profound implications for the proliferation of constitutional removals. Region-wide changes in ideational trends and in the orientation of international organizations led to a transformation in the feasible set of strategies available to radical actors. As more countries democratized and military rule met with greater resistance from regional organizations and from US policymakers, radical opponents abandoned the military option and looked for constitutional mechanisms to remove undesirable presidents from office (Pérez-Liñán 2007). The different patterns of presidential overthrow observed after 1977 reflect these changes in the structure of political opportunities for radical elites.

Economic Conditions. The theoretical links between some variables and political instability is almost uniformly strong. As Table 1 shows, level of economic development and economic growth are shared causes of coups and impeachments (although the non-coup literature broadly links these factors to inter-branch crisis rather than impeachment in particular). As early as the 1960s, Finer (1962), Needler (1967), and Luttwak (1969) found economic underdevelopment to be a near necessary condition for coups, and Londregan and Poole (1990) note that poverty is the common denominator in almost all cases in their extensive data set. O’Kane (1981), meanwhile, finds that coups tend to be the drastic response to an unstable and hopeless economic situation. For these authors, poverty is not only a sign of broader policy failure and institutional weakness, but is a direct cause of social and political discontent (Needler 1966). More recent scholarship agrees (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2003; Przeworski et al. 1996; Przeworski et al. 2000). Przeworski, Alvarez et al. (2000) highlight the importance of reaching a threshold of economic development in order to avoid instability, while Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2003) show that economic performance variables such as economic growth rate have high predictive capabilities in terms of presidential crisis.

In contrast to this extensive literature, there is little beyond Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) that tests for economic determinants of impeachment. In a sample of Latin America, Helmke (2010) finds that the higher the per capita GDP, the lower the chance of an interbranch crisis, although she does *not* find statistical evidence to support the theory that higher economic growth inhibits the same type of crisis. Meanwhile, Pérez-Liñán (2007) does not find such things as inflation and unemployment to have a statistically significant effect on the probability of an impeachment crises in Latin America. It appears that evidence of economic determinants of impeachment crises is at best mixed.

Political Institutions. The literature presents explicit theoretical links between a number of institutional factors, such as divided government and party fragmentation, and democratic breakdown as well as presidential removals. In a classic argument, Linz and Valenzuela argued that presidentialism possesses inherent characteristics propitious for political instability due to the fixed terms of office and

competing sources of legitimacy for each branch of government (Linz 1990; Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Valenzuela 2004).² In a refinement of this claim, Mainwaring claimed that presidentialism combined with multi-party systems (which generate minority governments) promote intractable legislative-executive conflict (Mainwaring 1993; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997).

Other scholars are less certain about the “perils of presidentialism” (Marsteintredet and Berntzen 2008; Shugart and Carey 1992). The empirical results are also inconclusive. Cheibub (2002), for example, does not find a significant statistical relationship between divided government and democratic instability in Latin America, and Helmke (2010)—who operationalizes divided government as the president’s share of lower house—finds no impact on provoking interbranch crisis.

The effect of legislative majorities is less controversial in the case of impeachments. Even in the presence of serious media scandals, a president may survive with a “legislative shield” that protects him or her against the formal impeachment process (Hinojosa and Pérez-Liñán 2003; Hochstetler 2006; Negretto 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007). Negretto (2006) shows that minority government, particularly one without the median voter in congress, is particularly susceptible to collapse. Pérez-Liñán (2007) uses a pivotal player model to show how successful and unsuccessful impeachments in Latin America hinge on whether the president controls key legislators. For example, Colombian President Ernesto Samper survived accusations of financial links to narcotraffickers and the subsequent impeachment process in 1996 by relying on the loyalty of his legislative majority (Hinojosa and Pérez-Liñán 2003). It is straightforward to assume that possessing the quorum to avoid a successful impeachment depends not only on the size of the president’s party in congress, but the size and discipline of the president’s coalition.

Other accounts of coups and constitutional removals invoke political explanations without explicit institutional mechanisms. For instance, Finer (1962) and Putnam (1967) hypothesized that a single coup could cause erosion of a society’s political culture and lead to the greater possibility of a future coup, and O’Kane (1981) and Londregan and Poole (1990) found that coups are more likely to occur in countries where there had been a previous coup. In turn, Pérez-Liñán (2007) and Waisbord (2000) show that media scandals are a common factor linking all cases of impeachment, but not necessarily other forms of constitutional removal.

Social Mobilization. The last major coup-specific theory is that of civil society mobilization in terms of general strikes. In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, social mobilization increased in many countries, mainly on the Left but also on the Right (i.e. right-wing women in Chile under the Allende government). The coups that brought bureaucratic-authoritarian governments to power, especially in the Southern Cone, were supported by the bourgeoisie specifically to “stop the chaos” of social mobilization (O’Donnell 1988). Given this link, it is logical that Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) find that general strike activity in the previous year has a positive impact on the chances of democratic breakdown. This finding seems consistent with our more general argument about radical oppositions.

Popular protest is also a crucial factor for constitutional removals. Hochstetler (2006) finds that the presence or absence of large street protests demanding the resignation of the president is *crucial* in determining their fates, and Pérez-Liñán (2007) argues that the escalation of public discontent fuels mass protests that encourage impeachment proceedings against the president. Like scandals, civil society mobilization in the form of popular protest has grown in number and size as civil liberties have increased

² More broadly, Huntington (1968) argued that weak political institutions are insufficient for channeling citizen participation and increase the probability of a coup.

across the region. Furthermore, unlike the executive scandal, mobilization of civil society has a stronger link to regime breakdown in the literature.

3. Analysis

We use an event history approach to model the competing risks of different types of presidential exit in Latin America. Our units of analysis are administration-years ($n = 711$) for all democratic regimes in nineteen Latin American countries between 1945 and 2009.³ We excluded authoritarian cases because theories about constitutional removals were not conceived for authoritarian incumbents.

The dependent variable, *presidential exit*, comes from an original dataset covering every recognized political leader in Latin America since 1944. It measures yearly outcomes for each president: no exit (coded as 0), or exit via military coup (coded as 1), or exit via constitutional removal, including cases of impeachments, declaration of incapacity, and early (involuntary) resignations (coded as 2). All other forms of exit, including the normal completion of the president's term, death in office, or resignation for health reasons, were treated as censored cases. Our sample includes 15 coups and one constitutional exit (the resignation of Alfonso López in Colombia in 1945) before 1978, and 4 coups (Bolivia 1980, Ecuador 2000, Venezuela 2002, and Honduras 2009) and 14 removals after 1977.⁴

3.1 Independent Variables

Our main independent variables, *opposition radicalism* and *government radicalism*, are not easy to measure. We relied on data collected by Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013). The authors worked with a team of researchers who prepared country reports that following specific coding rules. All reports relied on multiple historical sources to identify the most important set of political actors described by the historiography of each period. The actors identified were individuals (the president, other prominent leaders) or organizations (parties, social movements, trade unions, military factions) that played an important role in the competition for power. The reports discussed 1,460 political actors for 290 administrations in 20 countries between 1944 and 2010.

Using historical sources, researchers coded political actors as "radical" when they met any of the following conditions: (a) expressed uncompromising goals to achieve leftist or rightist policies in the short run, or to preserve extreme positions where they were already in place; (b) expressed willingness to subvert the law in order to achieve some policy goals; or (c) opposition actors undertook violent acts aimed at imposing or preventing significant policy change. Radical actors were given a score of 1. If they were divided or ambiguous about those positions, they were coded by researchers as "somewhat" radical and given a score of 0.5; otherwise they were coded as not radical and given a score of 0 (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013). We computed the average level of radicalism for government and opposition actors in each administration-year. See Table 2 for summary statistics of all independent variables.

³ Presidents were observed at January 1st of each year, and selected only if the political regime was coded by Mainwaring et al. (2007) as a democracy or semi-democracy. The countries covered by the study are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela

⁴ Venezuela 2002 was treated as an event because another administration took office, even though President Chávez returned to power within two days.

Table 2. Summary Statistics for Independent Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Radical opposition	711	0.29	0.32	0	1
Radical government	711	0.21	0.30	0	1
Diffusion	711	0.55	0.21	0.13	0.83
Per capita GDP (t-1)	711	2.83	1.92	0.60	9.89
Per capita GDP growth (t-1)	711	0.02	0.04	-0.14	0.16
ENP House	711	3.48	1.63	1.00	9.45
Coalition	711	0.51	0.50	0	1
Riots	711	0.53	1.09	0	12
Anti-government demonstrations	711	0.76	1.33	0	9
Time in office	711	2.81	1.67	1	10

Our indicator measuring the diffusion of democratic regimes in Latin America captures the proportion of democratic regimes in the region (excluding the country in question) during the previous year. We employed the Mainwaring et al. (2007) classification of political regimes, counting semi-democratic regimes as one-half. The scores for this variable changed considerably over time, from an average of 0.33 in 1945-77 to 0.67 in 1978-2009 (with an overall historical minimum of .13 and a maximum of .83, as shown in Table 2).

In order to control for the effects of economic growth and total level of development on presidential exits, we included per capita GDP (measured in thousands of 2005 US dollars), and the economic growth rate, measured as the proportion of change in per capita GDP. Figures for 1960-2009 were taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) database. To impute GDP figures for previous years, we used growth rates from Penn World Tables, Angus Maddison's Economic Development index, and the Oxford Latin American Economic History Database (OXLAD). Both variables were lagged one year to avoid endogeneity problems.

Two institutional variables were computed using multiple historical sources. To assess the perils confronted by multiparty presidential democracies, we computed the effective number of parties in the lower house, using the Laakso and Taagepera (1979) index. This measure weights the size of political parties according to the proportion of seats they control. Scores above 2.5 indicate multipartism, but values in our sample ranged from 1.00 (Guatemala in 1946) to 9.45 (Brazil 2004-5). Because coalition governments may moderate the problems of multipartism, we also included a dichotomous variable capturing multi-party cabinets. Information was gathered from multiple sources (Altman 2000, 2001; Database on Political Institutions; Deheza 1997; Political Handbook of the World).

The social protest and mobilization variables were taken from Arthur Banks' Cross-National Time-Series Data Archives. We employed the number of violent riots per administration-year and the number of peaceful anti-government demonstrations per administration-year (data is coded based on *The New York Times*). The number of riots per administration-year ranges from zero to 12—in Venezuela in 1960—with a mean of 0.53. The number of anti-government demonstrations ranges from zero to 9, with a mean of 0.76. Given the structure of the competing risks model and the limited number of events of each type, we have not included in the analysis variables that were only relevant for a particular type of outcome (e.g., the coup trap or executive scandal).

3.2 Estimation

Because we are modeling the survival of presidents in office using administration-years as units of analysis, we employ a discrete-time event-history model (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004: 70). To the extent that we wish to examine the possibility of two feasible and independent events rather than a single hazard, we estimated a competing risks model using a multinomial logit (MNL) estimator with robust standard errors clustered by country. Alternatives to modeling competing risks include the latent survivor time model and the Stratified Cox approach, but neither is well-suited to the data; the former applies to continuous dependent variables while the latter is better suited to instances in which the “individuals” in the model are able to experience multiple events over the course of observations (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004: 166-182). The MNL model for competing risks is appropriate here since it is best applied to discrete-time data whose individuals (administrations) experience only a single event in the course of their lifetimes. The only major assumption in this modeling choice is that of independent competing risks, that is, that the hazard associated with each of the different risks is independent from that of the other risks, conditional upon the effects of the independent variables.

The most general way to account for duration dependence in discrete time event history models is to incorporate time dummies (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998). However, there are drawbacks to this approach, principally because the temporal dummies quickly consume degrees of freedom as the number of time points increases, but also because substantive interpretation may be difficult. Instead, it may be advantageous to transform the value of duration time through the natural log or polynomials in order to generate a more parsimonious characterization of time dependency (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004: 75). We follow Carter and Signorino (2010), including the years in office elapsed for any given administration, t , its squared value, t^2 , and its cubed value, t^3 in the regression. As the authors show, this cubic polynomial approximation is trivial to implement and avoids problems such as quasi-complete separation in the data.

3.3 Results

Unlike other types of event history models, competing risks MNL parameters are interpretable as a logit model. The log-odds coefficient is not easily interpretable, but the sign of the coefficient shows the direction of the impact on the dependent variable. Table 3 presents the results of the analysis. For robustness, model 3.1 reports only the effects of opposition radicalism (plus all control variables), model 3.2 reports only the effects of government radicalism, and model 3.3 reports the full specification. The results lend support to our main hypotheses: higher levels of radicalism among opposition forces have destabilized presidential administrations, irrespective of the particular form of resolution. By contrast, government radicalism expands the risk of military coups, but not the probability of impeachments or anticipated resignations. Radical governments preempt institutional maneuvers to remove them from power, and opponents find in armed rebellions the only viable way to terminate the administration.

Table 3. Competing Risks Models of Coups and Constitutional Removals

Outcome	3.1		3.2		3.3	
	<i>coup</i>	<i>removal</i>	<i>coup</i>	<i>removal</i>	<i>coup</i>	<i>removal</i>
Radicalism (opposition)	3.159** (1.072)	0.997* (0.539)			2.786** (1.090)	1.070** (0.542)
Radicalism (government)			2.302** (0.782)	0.072 (0.961)	1.548** (0.669)	-0.234 (1.033)
Diffusion	-2.898** (1.172)	3.371** (1.585)	-4.137** (1.281)	3.009* (1.729)	-3.191** (1.196)	3.275** (1.661)
Per capita GDP (t-1)	0.038 (0.256)	-0.019 (0.187)	-0.069 (0.226)	-0.077 (0.193)	0.067 (0.244)	-0.020 (0.185)
Growth (t-1)	-4.283 (6.401)	-8.714 (10.119)	-2.447 (4.957)	-9.243 (10.185)	-3.059 (6.091)	-9.053 (10.460)
Number of Parties	0.318** (0.108)	0.181* (0.096)	0.317** (0.078)	0.177** (0.088)	0.343** (0.107)	0.183** (0.091)
Coalition government	-1.063 (0.763)	0.134 (0.468)	-0.751 (0.549)	0.251 (0.505)	-1.111 (0.770)	0.147 (0.480)
Riots	0.237* (0.135)	0.176** (0.067)	0.217 (0.164)	0.203** (0.067)	0.172 (0.178)	0.163** (0.069)
Demonstrations	0.365** (0.175)	0.367** (0.118)	0.392** (0.151)	0.410** (0.129)	0.340** (0.167)	0.381** (0.112)
t	2.641 (1.816)	0.760 (0.921)	2.290 (1.978)	0.734 (0.879)	2.529 (1.834)	0.770 (0.911)
t ²	-0.481 (0.433)	-0.287 (0.255)	-0.366 (0.468)	-0.280 (0.247)	-0.437 (0.438)	-0.289 (0.253)
t ³	0.026 (0.029)	0.024 (0.018)	0.015 (0.031)	0.022 (0.018)	0.022 (0.029)	0.024 (0.018)
N	711		711		711	

Note: Entries are multinomial logistic coefficients (standard errors clustered by country).

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05

However, the results in Table 3 prove that regional conditions strongly shape the distribution of feasible strategies: coups were likely in historical periods when few countries in the region were democratic, while constitutional overthrows became more likely once the region was populated by democratic regimes. This result suggests a substitution effect, by which radical oppositions have selected the less costly strategy to remove incumbents in each historical period.

In all models growth and per capita income have insignificant effects, which suggest the need to rethink some insights in the literature (Finer 1962; Luttwak 1969; Needler 1966; O'Donnell 1988; O'Kane 1981). The evidence also indicates that presidentialism and multipartism remains a “difficult combination” for incumbent presidents: presidents are more likely to be ousted (by coup or impeachment) when the party system in congress is fragmented, and the available data does not indicate that cabinet coalitions are sufficient to preclude this risk.

Finally, the results of the social mobilization variables are generally consistent with the literature and theory. The number of riots in an administration-year has a positive and statistically significant effect

on constitutional removals, while the number of anti-government demonstrations has a positive and statistically significant effect on both coups and constitutional removals. Given the claims by Fossum (1967), Putnam (1967), and Álvarez and Marsteintredet (2010), we would have expected a stronger effect of riots on military interventions. But given the limited quality of comparative protest data, we are reluctant to draw major conclusions from this null finding.

In order to provide a substantive interpretation of the results, we calculate the predicted probability of presidential removal during any given year, allowing the three main explanatory variables—*radical opposition*, *radical government* and *diffusion*—to vary, while all controls are held at their observed values (Hanmer and Kalkan 2013). For every hypothetical configuration of values set for the three variables, we estimate predicted probabilities of a military coup and constitutional removal for all observations in the sample (based on Model 3.3). The mean estimates for the 711 observations are reported in each row of Table 4.

Table 4. Predicted Risk of Coups and Constitutional Removal

Diffusion	Opposition	Government	Risk of	
			Military coup	Removal
No democracies	No radicals	Not radical	.024	.002
		Radical	.093	.002
	All radical	Not radical	.227	.005
		Radical	.500	.002
All democracies	No radicals	Not radical	.001	.049
		Radical	.005	.039
	All radical	Not radical	.014	.115
		Radical	.059	.091

Note: Entries are mean predicted probabilities for 711 observations in the sample (based on Model 3.3). All other variables are held at their observed values.

The first four rows in Table 4 represent hypothetical situations in which no other country in the region is democratic (*diffusion* = 0) and the remaining rows represent situations in which all countries are democracies (*diffusion* = 1). Each of those blocs is divided into scenarios in which no opponent (*radical opposition* = 0) or all of them (*radical opposition* = 1) are radical, and each scenario is in turn segmented into cases in which the government is moderate (*radical government* = 0) or not (*radical government* = 1). Fixing those values allows us to estimate the risk of military coup or constitutional removal for the 711 observations under eight counterfactual configurations.

The table underscores three important conclusions. First, under adverse international conditions (prevalent during the Cold War), the risk of military coups is high (ranging between 2% and 50% per year) and the probability of a constitutional removal is very low. By contrast, in a context favorable to democracy the cost of military insurrection is too high, and the probability of a constitutional ousting increases, ranging between 4% and 12% per year. Second, radical oppositions create government instability in the form of either coups or constitutional removals. In a region otherwise populated by dictatorships, a democracy with a moderate government would confront a yearly risk of military coup of about 2% when the opposition is moderate and 23% when it is radical. In a region populated by democracies, the same president would confront a probability of constitutional removal of about 5% if the opposition is moderate and 12% if it is radical. Finally, the table suggests that radical governments block (slightly reduce) the chances of a

constitutional removal, and thus channel opposition efforts towards military insurrection. In a favorable international environment, a radical opposition would create a risk of military coup of about 1% when the government is moderate and 6% when the government is radical. In a hostile international environment, those estimates would rise steeply to 23% and 50%, respectively.

The data suggest that impeachments and other legal procedures to remove presidents are similar to military coups d'état in many ways, but take on a constitutional cloak in a democratic context. So while a pattern of presidential instability may persist in Latin America, the regional context has been important to direct the resolution of presidential crises toward constitutional outcomes. Underlying this removal—under whichever guise—is the common thread of radicalization of opposition groups. However, increasing radicalization of government forces in several countries should be a reason for concern, because the closure of constitutional venues redirects radical opponents towards military conspiracies.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

We developed a unified theory of constitutional and unconstitutional presidential instability, and tested the theory using a competing risks model that examines the impact of economic, political, and social variables on an original data set of all Latin American presidential exits from 1945 to 2009. The key contribution of this piece is to analyze causes of all types of presidential exit in Latin America rather than each category separately, to show the convergent and divergent factors that affect presidential transfers of power.

An ample literature has examined the causes of coups and to a lesser degree, causes of presidential impeachment and other forms of presidential removal. Yet with few exceptions, research has not examined the causes of these phenomena together. Our challenge the way many Latin American politicians, pundits, and journalists view contemporary episodes of political instability across the region.

For example, rather than understanding the 2009 military coup in Honduras as an anomaly, our findings suggest that military intervention was a likely outcome. According to Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010b, 180) President Zelaya progressively moved towards the left of the ruling Liberal Party: “Radicalized, his political decisions started to cause friction with the vice-president, his own party, Congress, and the business sector.” Driven partly by internal disputes about succession, party leaders abandoned the president and sided with the more recalcitrant sectors of the opposition. The president insisted in conducting a popular plebiscite to reform the constitution against the opposition of Congress, the Supreme Court, and military officers. Legislators threatened to remove Zelaya, but a constitutional reform had eliminated the impeachment procedure in 2002. In the end a military operation overthrew Zelaya in June 2009 (Taylor-Robinson and Ura 2013). In this context, the predicted risk of coup anticipated by our model (3.3) for Honduras in 2009 is 11%, while the risk of constitutional removal is just 4%.

Likewise, the “express impeachment” of Paraguayan president Fernando Lugo in June 2012 illustrates the role of a radicalized opposition and of the broader regional context in dictating the resolution of a presidential crisis. Like Zelaya, Lugo confronted an alliance of opponents increasingly intransigent with the leftist orientation of his administration. And just as in the Honduran case, disputes about succession within the ruling coalition triggered the departure of his allies in Congress. Lugo, however, was not a radical president—until mid-June he governed in coalition with the center-right Liberal Party. However, facing a hostile Congress and criticism resulting from clashes between landless peasants and the police, Lugo was ultimately impeached and removed from office (Cerna Villagra and Solís Delgadillo 2012). Anticipating condemnation from other countries in the region, the new administration underscored that the

impeachment procedure had been conducted within the constitution, but members of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) suspended Paraguay until an elected administration took office in 2013.

Our findings indicate that in contrast to some of the established literature (Hochstetler 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007), all types of presidential exit are caused by a *common* factor: the radicalization of the opposition. An increase in social mobilization resulting from radicalization may serve as a common mechanism to activate presidential instability. However, regional trends determined the particular impact of radicalism on the political regime. This is consistent with prior findings in the literature. For example, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2003) and Pérez-Liñán (2007) explain the decrease in democratic breakdowns in Latin America since the early 1990s partially through the changing post-Cold War international context (changes in U.S. foreign policy, the importance of the Organization of American States, the position of the Catholic Church, etc.).

At the same time, our findings provide evidence that radical presidents block the institutional channels that allow opponents to defy the government. This strategy disempowers moderate opponents, but directs radical ones towards armed insurrection. This process, erroneously described by Linz (1978) as an “abdication” of the moderates, in fact reflects a dynamic of polarization that expands the risk of military coups (Bermeo 2003). In a regional context in which several governments have signaled growing levels of radicalism in the early twenty-first century, this result is undoubtedly a source of concern for the future.

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