The quality and diversity of democracy in Latin America: notes on the political theory of Guillermo O'Donnell[1]

La calidad y diversidad de la democracia en América Latina: notas sobre la teoría política de Guillermo O'Donnell

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SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been three decades since Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (1986) initiated a remarkably productive program of research with the publication of *Transitions from authoritarian rule*. The 1980s were a moment of academic consensus on the need to understand democracy in minimal and procedural terms, and to eschew old debates over formal versus substantive democracy. The subsequent shift in scholarly focus from transitions to consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996), however, generated a new debate over whether democracies in Latin America would diverge from or resemble more established democracies. Guillermo O'Donnell (1996), wrote a particularly trenchant critique of the idea of democratic consolidation. The fatal flaw in the idea of consolidation was the teleological assumption of convergence on liberal democracy. The lack of consolidation did not necessarily mean transitions were incomplete, but that democracies emerging in Latin America might be different from those that have emerged in Europe and North America. Democratic theory developed in that context was of limited relevance to Latin America where a "new species" of democracy was emerging, which O'Donnell labeled "delegative."

Whereas much of the democratization literature took representative democracy to be the central object of study, O'Donnell argued that the new democracies in Latin America were polyarchies that lacked liberal and representative features.

> Delegative democracies –he argued–, rest on the premise that whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of

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> office. The President is taken to be the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests… Since this paternal figure is supposed to take care of the whole nation, his political base must be a movement, the supposed vibrant overcoming of the factionalism and conflicts associated with parties (1994: 99).

A key feature of delegative democracy was the lack of mechanisms of accountability: "other institutions–courts, legislatures, for instance–are nuisances that come attached to the domestic and international advantages of being a democratically elected president. Accountability to such institutions appears as a mere impediment to the full authority that the president has been delegated to exercise" (O'Donnell 1994: 99).

O'Donnell was by no means the only scholar to note democracy's defects. Concern about the low quality of democracy led to the proliferation of what David Collier and Steve Levitsky called "democracy with adjectives," that is diminished subtypes of democracy such as illiberal (Zakaria 1997) and defective democracies (Merkel 2004). Since the 1990s, scholars have gone further, suggesting that democratic regimes are being replaced by new forms of authoritarian rule, most notably electoral (Schedler 2006) and competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010a, 2010b; Levitsky and Loxton 2013). In a 2014 debate in the *Journal of Democracy* some scholars proclaimed not only "the end of the transitions era," but also warned of a "democratic recession" (Plattner 2014).[3] It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the resilience of low quality democracy in the region.

2. Quality of democracy

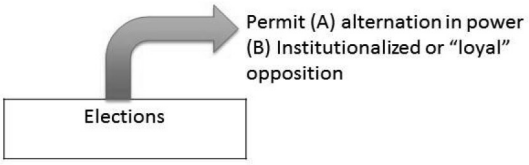
This section outlines the conception of political democracy or democratic regime that has been presented in a variety of publications by Guillermo O'Donnell (2001, 2004, 2010). O'Donnell draws on Robert Dahl's (1973) concept of polyarchy to identify the essential properties of democratic elections; discusses the surrounding or "concomitant" conditions within which the elections are embedded; and, finally, analyzes the kind of state that can guarantee the rights and freedoms of citizens as agents. Disaggregating democratic regimes into their parts, as O'Donnell does, reveals the interdependence of these complex systems and thereby establishes both thresholds that make regimes democratic as well as variations in their quality. This conceptualization of political democracy also provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing electorally-based authoritarian regimes.

According to O'Donnell, free, competitive, egalitarian, decisive, and inclusive elections are at the core of any political democracy. Based on a powerful critique of Joseph Schumpeter's apparently minimalist concept of democracy, defined as a method by which individuals acquire the power to make political decisions by competing for votes, O'Donnell showed that minimalist theorists assume or take for granted a set of conditions that are necessary for the kinds of elections he is describing. There are a set of conditions that are necessary for elections to be free and competitive on an on-going basis (not a "one-off event") (O'Donnell 2010: 18). On-going competitive elections implies alternation in power between government and opposition. A central feature of political democracy is the possibility of removing top officials from office by means of free and

3 See also Diamond (2015). For an earlier view, see Carothers (2002); and for a dissenting view, see Levitsky (2015).

fair elections; and any election in which alternation in power is not an option cannot be considered democratic. A crisp formulation of this position is Adam Przeworski's (1990: 10) aphorism: democracy is "a system in which parties lose elections." There are parties, they compete in elections, incumbents can lose, and the losers have a role in opposition. The rule of the people does not necessarily mean direct participation in democratic self-government, but rather that the people have a say in decisions regarding who shall govern them. As summarized in Figure 1, democracy implies elections, which permit alternation in power, and this implies that there is both an elected government and an institutionalized (that is, "loyal") opposition.

Figure 1. Electoral Component of Democracy: Alternation and Opposition



An important feature of this definition is that it does not identify democracy with a particular institution or set of institutions. For example, it does not define democracy solely in terms of elections. This is crucial, because the definition of democracy as an electoral system would beg the question: what makes elections democratic? It would also confuse means and ends. Elections are important because they are a method of institutionalizing the alternation in power between government and opposition. At the same time, this definition is realistic and has significant implications for institutional design. In a large-scale mass society, it is quite simply inconceivable that democracy would not involve elections–but they must be elections of a particular sort. They must enable contestation and alternation in power.

What this means in terms of specific institutions varies but, generally speaking, most theories of democracy acknowledge the importance of a common set of institutions. They are considered to be core properties of political democracy because without them neither contestation over nor alternation in power would be meaningfully possible. First, there are elected officials: those who hold public office do so by means of elections. Second, there are free and fair elections. Third, the suffrage is inclusive of all competent citizens. Fourth, all qualified citizens have the right to run for office. The electoral component features of political democracy are described in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Electoral Component of Democracy: Institutions

Each of these elements forms part of Dahl's "polyarchy" (the rule of the many) and can be justified as necessary because democratic contestation and alternation in power

would be impossible without them. Yet they are not sufficient. The proper functioning of such a system requires additional conditions. Thus, for the electoral regime to guarantee contestation for an alternation in power, there are, additionally, what O'Donnell called "concomitant" or "surrounding conditions." These denote the rights and freedoms necessary to ensure that elections are meaningful–i.e., non-fraudulent, fair, decisive, and institutionalized. They include such rights and freedoms as freedom of expression, association, and access to alternative sources of information. This is the full definition of polyarchy (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Polyarchy

Polyarchy–including both the electoral component and surrounding rights and freedoms–is what most democratic theorists would characterize as a minimalist or procedural definition of democracy. The relationship between an electoral regime and its surrounding conditions is one of extraordinary complexity. O'Donnell parses these conditions from the core features of an electoral regime for a specific reason–namely, the surrounding conditions enable the electoral regime to perform its functions, however, the specific content of these rights and freedoms is impossible to establish in advance. The protection for liberal rights and freedoms is crucial to democracy, not by definition but because they are necessary for the meaningful functioning of the electoral regime.

Many further refinements have been made to this minimum. Students of Latin American politics have added another condition: that elected officials are not subject to control by non-elected officials, whether, for example, by the presence of authoritarian enclaves in the state (Garretón 1989: 51-62), or overt military interference in civilian affairs. The mandates of elected officials should not be arbitrarily cut short by unelected officials. In addition, Steve Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010b) have argued that a level playing field for the opposition should be included in our definition of democracy. A level playing field implies that the opposition has fair access to the media, and access to justice in the event that political rights and freedoms necessary for elections to be non-fraudulent, fair, decisive, and institutionalized. It also implies that the government cannot use state resources to tilt the playing field in favor of incumbents. The fully "precised" definition of polyarchy, including both negative and positive properties of the concept, are displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. "Precised" Definition of Polyarchy

I agree that the uneven playing field is an important modification, provided the meaning of uneven is defined in relation to contestation and alternation in power. Given the advantages of incumbency, the playing field is rarely equitable in any democracy. We need to know when the playing field is so uneven that a country can no longer be considered a democracy. That is fairly easy to establish, at least in theory: it is the point at which the possibility of alternation in power and institutionalized opposition is no longer guaranteed. Knowing when this point has been reached is often, however, a matter of political judgment.

A final dimension of the definition of democracy is necessary to include before we begin to analyze the diversity of types of regimes: the constitutional state and its apparatuses. Typically, the concept of democracy is treated as a type of political regime. The concept of regime refers to "patterns, formal or informal and explicit or implicit, that determine the channels of access to principal governmental positions; the characteristics of the actors who are admitted and excluded from such access; and the resources and strategies that they are allowed to use for gaining access" (O'Donnell 2001: 14). We have argued that for the electoral regime to ensure contestation over and alternation of power there must be a set of surrounding rights and freedoms. These are guaranteed and enforced by the state. It follows that democratic regimes require a particular kind of state. The constitutional and democratic state is one that enforces and guarantees the rights of citizenship that are necessary to the electoral regime. This substratum of democracy was first captured by O'Donnell with the notion of horizontal accountability, by which he meant the arrangement of public institutions in such a way as to ensure that the various agencies of the state were both by law and in practice required to hold each other accountable such that those in power must be answerable for their actions.

Although horizontal accountability is not a necessary feature of democracy, few democracies can survive for long without such an institutional underpinning. In institutional terms, horizontal accountability implies the separation of powers (the independence of the judiciary, legislative initiative and autonomy, and an executive branch that complies with the rules created and enforced by the other deliberative branches of

power). It also implies a lawful state, or *estado de derecho,* in which nobody is above the law; and this includes the armed forces, which must be non-deliberative and obedient (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Polyarchy and Horizontal Accountability

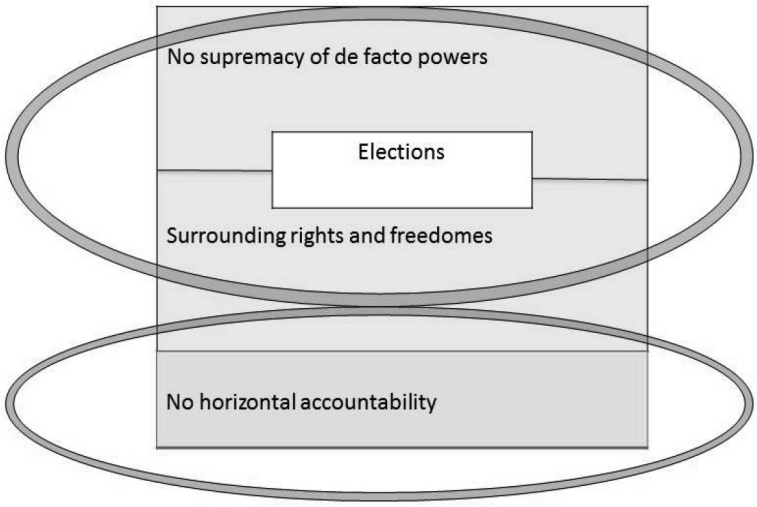
3. The diversity of democracies

Political democracy entails polyarchy's electoral components, surrounding rights and freedoms, and the "full institutional package" includes horizontal accountability. Some of the diversity in democratic regimes we observe in Latin America involves diminished subtypes of political democracy. These include delegative democracies, illiberal democracies, and other defective democracies, as well as hybrid regimes that occupy the gray zone between democracy and authoritarian rule. But some of the diversity arises from the absence of a democratic state.

O'Donnell's focus on the state is a valuable corrective the overly-narrow focus on democratic regimes. It can also provide a theoretical justification for distinguishing between defective democracy and electorally-based authoritarian regimes, including so-called "competitive authoritarian regimes." This framework allows us to address problems inherent in the idea of competitive authoritarianism.

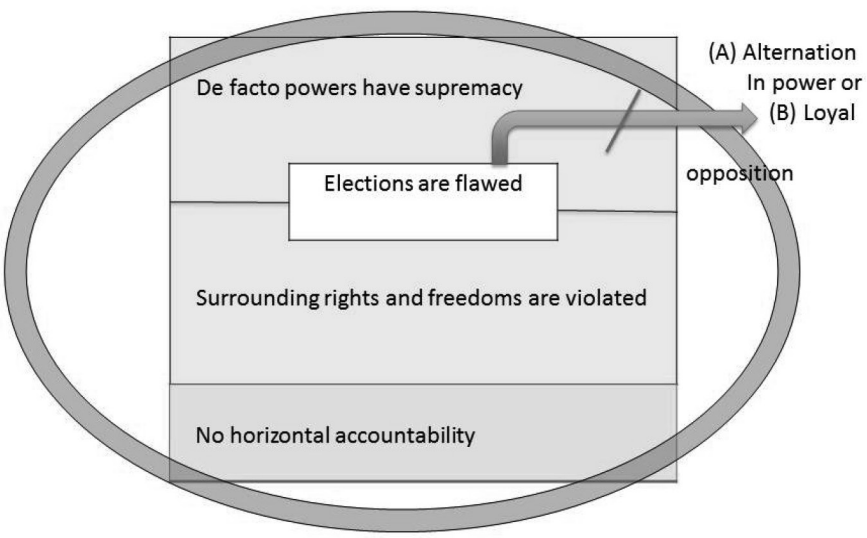
Delegative democracies are polyarchies without horizontal accountability, as illustrated in Figure 6. They are an example of what Merkel calls "defective democracies." A delegative democracy is a polyarchy (that is, it meets the demanding conditions, including surrounding rights and freedoms, necessary to hold non-fraudulent, fair, decisive and inclusive elections) without horizontal accountability. In other words, it is a democratic regime that lacks key features of a democratic state. A delegative democracy is a type of democracy but one that does not perform in the same way as a democracy in which mechanisms of horizontal accountability are in operation.

Figure 6. Delegative Democracy



Electorally-based authoritarian regimes have attracted considerable scholarly attention. One widely adopted variation is "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way). Like delegative democracies, these regimes lack horizontal accountability. This, however, is not what makes them non-democratic. The crucial differences between delegative democracies and an electorally-based authoritarian regimes include lies in one of three conditions, each of which is sufficiently serious to prevent alternation in power and institutionalized opposition: (1) flaws in the electoral component of the regime; (2) violations of surrounding rights and freedoms; (3) and the existence of *de facto* powers within the regime (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Electorally-Based Autoritarianism



First, an electorally-based regime may have flaws in the electoral component. Elected officials may not be allowed to hold office, may face interference by non-elected officials, or may have their mandates interrupted; elections may not be free or fair; or

significant segments of the citizenry may be excluded from voting or running for office. Critically, these flaws must be sufficient to call into question the validity of the electoral outcomes, specifically, the possibility of alternation in power and institutionalized opposition. Only then can we say that the electoral component forms part of a non-democratic regime. Correspondingly, a regime in which there is no alternation in power and institutionalized opposition is one in which we would expect to observe the entrenchment of de facto powers and alternative mechanisms of succession.

Second, there may be violations of surrounding rights and freedoms. Again, these violations must be of sufficient scope and magnitude as to undermine the possibility of alternation in power and institutionalized opposition. Violations of political and civil rights and freedoms are commonplace in many democracies around the world, including exemplary ones. Although there are good reasons to expect democracies to do a better job of protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, it would be a mistake to insist that the correspondence be considered definitional. By the same token, violations of rights and freedoms should not be taken *eo ipso* as a breach of democracy. It is important to recognize that democracies can commit violations of rights and freedoms, and sometimes do so in shocking ways. Violations of rights and freedoms only impair democracy to the extent that they undermine the goods democracy seeks to provide. This important distinction enables us to differentiate abuses of rights that may be condemnable but are innocuous to democracy from those that neutralize democracy.

Third, democracy may be undermined by *de facto* powers that seek to perpetuate themselves in power within the state despite their lack of electoral legitimacy. They may thwart the will of the people by dishonestly counting votes, excluding candidates or voters, or stripping elected officials of their powers. Or they may harass and bully the opposition in ways that make it impossible for the opposition to function effectively. To provide greater concreteness to this analysis, and demonstrate its utility, we may consider the case of Venezuela.

4. Venezuela under Chávez and Maduro: electorally-based authoritarianism?

Venezuela at the time of writing (September 2016) is in a crisis brought about by the failure of the Bolivarian revolution to adhere to principles enshrined within its own constitution–principles inherent, in fact, in any constitution.[4] The Venezuelan political system has degenerated beyond delegative democracy. President Hugo Chávez, elected in 1998, portrayed himself as a leader capable of unifying the brave Venezuelan people (*el bravo pueblo*) against a corrupt political establishment. Socialized by conspiratorial circles within the military, Chávez had very little appreciation for the critical role that opposition plays within any constitutional and democratic regime, not only to offer a vi-

4 This section has been updated from my essay "Venezuela: the failure of the fifth republic," London School of Economics, IDEAS, March 20, 2014. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/ideas/2014/03/venezuela-the-failure-of-the-fifth-republic/ See Vivas (2016) for a good analysis of the crisis. He warns of the possibility that Venezuela might become an openly authoritarian regime: "Given the closer alliance with the military factor in the government, there could be an explicit march toward a more drastic authoritarian rule, including closing down of the National Assembly (or cutting down its budget, as was suggested by Maduro in early August), imprisoning a greater number of opposition leaders, and imposing martial law in different parts of the territory."

able electoral alternative to the existing government, but also to inquire into the actions of government officials, to criticize them when appropriate, and thereby to ensure that those in power are held to account in public between elections. Moreover, the political system that Chávez sought to overthrow was based on a power-sharing pact, the *Pacto de Punto Fijo*, that made alternation in power a formality with little substance.

The opposition to Chávez initially came from the beneficiaries of the older regime. They were not prepared to play by the new constitutional rules of the game. Since neither side recognized the legitimacy of the other, the emerging order failed to produce the essential goods that any democratic constitution must generate if it is to endure and become institutionalized, by which I mean to attain value for the participants in the political process–namely, alternation in power and loyal opposition. From the outset, the defective democratic regime in Venezuela has been impaired by these original flaws. Overtime, these flaws have become increasingly manifest as Venezuela politics has polarized between government and opposition outside of the constitutional order, especially as the government has lost support over time. Thus, there has been an erosion of the integrity of the electoral regime, persistent and growing violations of fundamental rights and freedoms, the entrenchment of *de facto* powers within the state apparatus, the spread of corruption and encroachment, and the neutralization of mechanisms of accountability, both vertical and horizontal.

The negative dynamic in which the government and opposition have been enmeshed dates to the origins of the regime. Put briefly, Chávez minimized the role of the opposition in the constituent assembly that wrote the 1999 Constitution; the opposition, in turn, attempted to topple Chávez in a botched coup attempt in 2002. Chávez subsequently hardened his position, cracking down on critical media and reinforcing popular organizations; a chastened opposition organized a petition to recall Chávez by referendum. Chávez fought and prevailed, using every trick in the book; a demoralized opposition boycotted the 2005 legislative election and then was trounced in presidential elections the next year. Chávez radicalized his revolution; the opposition unified, and organized its best effort to challenge Chávez at the polls in 2012, followed by an even stronger result against Nicolás Maduro in 2013.

Maduro might have read his narrow margin of victory in 2013 as evidence that he needed to reach out to the opposition and broker a truce. Instead, he was more worried about sustaining the internal cohesion of his coalition, particularly among hardliners, and he continued to confront and attack the opposition. A fraction of the latter threw its support behind student protests in February 2014, using #LaSalida as their slogan, implying the impossibility of alternation in power within the current regime. This led to the arrest and detention of prominent opposition leaders and street battles that went on for a week. 43 people died between February and April.

In December 2015, the opposition won control of the legislature in mid-term elections, setting the stage for a major confrontation between government and opposition. The battle pitted a new legislative majority in the National Assembly against an incumbent executive, a compliant supreme court, and the nation's electoral authorities. The outgoing President of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, called the election an "electoral coup" and convened a "communal parliament" in accordance with the Organic Law of the Communes, saying he would "never hand over the Revolution." He threatened

to govern "within the people" in a "civil-military union." The opposition dismissed these gestures, insisting that the communal parliament would have no legislative power.[5]

A more serious threat to the opposition came from the 32 magistrates Supreme Judicial Tribunal, Venezuela's supreme court which heavily stacked in favor of the government. Although the opposition won a 2/3rds majority of seats, the court hastily suspended four deputies from the state of Amazonas on the grounds of electoral irregularities in an ill-disguised attempt to limit prevent the National Assembly from being able to exercise its full powers. At the same time, Maduro issued a presidential decree to strip the powers of the legislature to oversee public finances (giving the government direct control over the Central Bank).[6]

Notwithstanding the supreme court decision, the new deputies were sworn in on January 6. This led the ruling PSUV to appeal to the supreme court which, on January 11, ruled National Assembly in contempt. Cabello suggested the court should assume the functions of the legislature, an act that role opposition said would amount to an "*autogolpe*."[7] Instead, Maduro declared an emergency, which gave him full legislative powers– an encroachment on the National Assembly that was little short of an *autogolpe*.[8] From this point onward, Venezuela faced a major legitimacy crisis. The opposition continued to pass laws in the National Assembly, including an amnesty law, and a law that would strip certain supreme court judges of their positions, all of which were struck down by the supreme court.[9] Lacking recourse within the legal system, the opposition denounced Venezuela's supreme court before Organization of American States, saying it was little more than a "law firm" for the executive.[10] This led to an inconclusive debate in which the members of the Permanent Council of the OAS were unable to reach an agreement to invoke the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

The biggest challenge for the opposition was to figure out a way to remove Maduro from office. There were four major possibilities: (1) to pursue a recall referendum; (2) a constitutional amendment to shorten the presidential term of office; (3) a constituent assembly to re-write the constitution; (4) resignation of the president in response to political pressure. Each option presented different difficulties.[11] The option that became the major focus of opposition activity during much of 2016 was a recall referendum. The problem with this option was that the government was in a position to place a series of hurdles in the way of the opposition in order to drag out the process for as long as possible. A recall vote would have to be held before the end of January 2017 in order to result in new elections. Under Venezuelan law, a recall vote held past the mid-term point in the president's mandate would result in the president's number two taking office for the remainder of the term. In an effort to build political pressure on the government, the opposition convened multitudinous marches, but it was far from clear that this sort of pressure would have any effect other than to harden the resolve of the executive. There

5 "Venezuela: fast-tracking the communal state," *Latin American Weekly Report*, December 17, 2015.

6 "Venezuela: a sinking ship," *Latin American Weekly Report*, January 7, 2016.

7 "Venezuela: amid the tensions a glimmer of hope," *Latin American Weekly Report*, January 14, 2016.

8 "Venezuela: Maduro declares emergency," *Latin American Weekly Report*, Jan 21, 2016.

9 "Venezuela: amnesty law threatens institutional standoff," *Latin American Weekly Report*, March 31, 2016.

10 "Venezuela: Henry Ramos Allup ups the ante against TSJ", *Latin American Weekly Report*, July 21, 2016.

11 "Opposition divided on bid to remove Maduro", *Latin American Weekly Report*, March 10, 2016.

were reports of over a thousand public employees losing their jobs as a result of signing petitions for a recall vote.[12]

In the dangerous game of chicken between the government and the opposition both sides sought to work within and outside institutional channels, but neither acknowledged the legitimacy of the other side's claim to office nor exhibited any willingness to negotiate or compromise. Although the conflict was more intense under Maduro than under Chávez, the lack of appreciation for the need to recognize the legitimacy of the other was a feature of politics during the so-called Fifth Republic that never was resolved.

Considered from the standpoint of O'Donnell's theory, Venezuelan elections fell short of being free, competitive, egalitarian, and decisive. There are elections in Venezuela, and they are non-fraudulent, but they are neither fair nor decisive. The Venezuelan government has grossly violated the surrounding conditions necessary to guarantee: (1) the possibility of alternation in power; and (2) the guarantee that a government will govern democratically, and the opposition will accept the results of elections, because it has a legitimate voice and a stake in the system. Violations of fundamental rights and freedoms have been well documented by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2009), and these violations have included restrictions on the right to participate and run for office as well as to exercise an electoral mandate without arbitrary interruptions. It is clear that these violations are made possibly by the lack of judicial independence and the rule of law, as well as the lack of civilian supremacy over the armed forces.

Venezuela lacked what Guillermo O'Donnell (2010: 26) called an "institutionalized wager," according to which each citizen, despite disagreements with others, respects the right of every citizen to vote and be elected. These rights are not negotiable; they are inalienable and imprescriptible. And they are backed up by an organizational guarantee: the rule of law under the separation of powers (Cameron 2013).

The lack of key features of democracy should find a reflection in the emergence of positive properties of authoritarian regimes. In the voluminous literature on authoritarian rule there has been a common thread. In authoritarian regimes a coalition of non-elected officials rules by means of the exercise of coercion. Such governments cannot be removed by means of elections. They may be military or civilian, or a combination; they may also include technocratic and corporativist elements. Indicators of authoritarianism might include: armed *colectivos*; the presence of a politicized military throughout the bureaucracy; corrupt cliques that do not want to lose privileges. These elements must be strong enough to come together to prevent alternation in power and they must deny the opposition the opportunity to play the role that is normal in a democracy: constructive or loyal critic and government-in-waiting. "In democracies the opposition is an organ of popular sovereignty just as vital as the government," writes Guglielmo Ferrero. "To suppress the opposition is to suppress the sovereignty of the people" (cited in Sartori 1987: 32).

The power of the military in Venezuela is a critical factor. The tendency to rule by decree under emergency powers, the creation of powerful military offices to which civilian ministries must be accountable, the fact that many government ministries and governorships are run by military officers, and that generals are in control over the supply and distribution of food, and control the ports, combined with the inevitable corruption, nepotism, and cronyism that tends to accompany unaccountable power, suggests that

12 "No to dialogue, no to referendum" *Latin American Weekly Report*, July 21, 2016.

there are *de facto* powers in Venezuela that simply could not survive a change in government without either fleeing the country or risking jail time.[13]

We know from the transitology literature that hardliners in the regime and radicals in the opposition often reinforce each other, and that successful transitions involve coalitions between soft-liners and moderates (Przeworski 1992). To build such a coalition demands great leadership skills on both sides, but it is possible. The agenda for reform includes respect for human rights, press freedom, political rights of the opposition, restoration of the separation of powers, as well as citizen security and the rule of law. Given that the constitutional democratic order has been seriously impaired, the situation in Venezuela calls for the flexible and proactive use of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.[14] The alternative is a fundamental breakdown of political order.

5. Advantages of the quality of democracy research program

Chief among the advantages of research on the quality of democracy is that it generates understandings of the meaning of the practices and institutions of democracy from an internal perspective. It shares with interpretive research generally a focus on that which we can know only by understanding the purposes and intentions of the actors themselves. If we adopt such a standpoint, the critical function of an electoral regime lies above all in making meaning of voter intentions: an election is a collective decision about who shall govern. Such a decision is subjective, symbolically-mediated, and open to interpretation. The outcome of an election–whether it can be judged free and fair, whether it confers legitimacy upon the winner, and whether it is accepted by the losers–cannot be reduced to objective rules or external conditions. The goal of institutionalizing elections is to channel contestation within institutions that are themselves reliably uncontested; and a well institutionalized election will be *decisive* (O'Donnell 2010) in the sense that it brings campaigning to an end–not an end that everyone will necessarily like, but one that all accept as valid.

Another advantage of this research tradition is that it captures the diversity of democratic regimes. This is illustrated by O'Donnell's insistence that the content of concomitant rights and freedoms cannot be specified *a priori*. One has only to think of the right to bear arms, or rights of reproduction or sexual orientation, to appreciate the wide variation of rights and freedoms in contemporary democracies. There are different views on how to balance diversity and accommodation of minorities against the claims of individual liberty and equality before the law, for example. These tensions cannot be resolved according to any standard external to the perspectives of the participants: at stake is the essentially contested meaning of democracy itself (Gallie 1955-1956). Latin American democracies tend to be strongly majoritarian (O'Donnell 1996): they are often more concerned with breaking the tyranny of minorities than with avoiding the tyranny of the majority. When they embrace liberalism and republicanism, these traditions are adapted to local conditions. Thus, there are *criollo* versions of liberalism and republican-

13 "Military assumes wider powers," *Latin American Weekly Report* July 14, 2016.

14 The case was made by Luis Almagro, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, in a letter dated May 30, 2016, to Mr. Juan José Arcuri, the Chairman of the Permanent Council of the OAS, and Ambassador of the Argentine Republic to the OAS. See the OAS website: http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/OSG-243.en.pdf [last accessed on 7/15/16]

ism, as well as popular versions these traditions which, to all outward appearances, may look like variations on populism.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary democratization research in Latin America has its origins in the study of transitions in the 1980s. Considerable effort has since been made to understand the main features of democratic regimes in Latin America. The discussion of the consolidation of democracy gave way to a powerful research agenda based on the idea that democratic regimes in Latin America would not necessarily look the same as those in early democratizers in Europe and North America. In a series of publications Guillermo O'Donnell (1994, 1996, 1999, 2010) played a central role in developing this research agenda.

O'Donnell argued that Latin American democracies would have many of the same formal institutional features that we observe in democracies around the world–elections and electoral institutions, in particular. However, so-called minimalist theories of democracy developed in the context of the early democratizers, that limited their attention to these features, in fact assumed the presence of a set of conditions that were often left implicit, and which in the Latin American context were often non-existent or very unevenly present. These include certain kinds of rights and freedoms as well as state institutions able to enforce them. To grasp variation in the quality and diversity of democracy, including the distinctive properties of democracies outside the originating countries, required a careful reconstruction of democratic theory. This was, above all, the task of O'Donnell's final book.

In this paper I have illustrated part of the logic of O'Donnell's analysis in a way that serves a couple of purposes. First, I am interested in sharply specifying the electoral component of a democratic regime. This is one of the most useful features of O'Donnell's work. A critical lesson is that democracy enables alternation in power, which further implies an institutionalized role for the opposition. This is, I believe, at the core of what O'Donnell called a realistic understanding of democracy. Our definition of democracy should not be so demanding as to be useless for the purposes of analysis because it imposes unrealistic standards but nor should it be so minimal as to be specious.

Second, I am interested in illustrating the logic behind O'Donnell's effort to distinguish the electoral component of a democratic regime and its surrounding conditions. It is especially important to keep this distinction in mind as the literature on democratization moves into a discussion of hybrid regimes, particularly electorally-based authoritarian regimes. We are increasingly designating as authoritarian regimes with an electoral component, and this imposes upon the analyst the requirement of setting out the conditions under which elections fall short of the conditions necessary for us to classify a regime as a democracy.

Third, O'Donnell's work has an extremely interesting relationship with liberalism. On the one hand, O'Donnell embraced liberal values and principles in politics. On the other hand, he recognized that contemporary democratic regimes are the reflection of the confluence of distinctive traditions which include liberalism, republicanism, and democracy itself. In other words, O'Donnell was fascinated by the ways in which liberalism both prepared the conditions for democracy and simultaneously imposed limitations on it. O'Donnell consequently does not make the mistake of defining democracy as a regime in terms of liberalism. O'Donnell did not accept that democracy must be liberal democracy, even if that was the regime he preferred. Understanding the ways in which

liberalism comes to be an accepted part of a democratic system was too interesting a problem to be dismissed by definitional sleight of hand.

How we assess the state of democracy in Latin America reflects the lens through which the region is viewed. Today, there is a lively controversy over whether the region is experiencing backsliding and regression or progress toward greater inclusion. By disaggregating the concept of democracy into its electoral component, surrounding rights and freedoms, and the role of the constitutional state, it becomes apparent that our assessments depend not only on which dimensions of democracy we are analyzing, but also how we understand the interplay of these dimensions. O'Donnell was often harshly critical of the everyday challenges of democracy in Latin America, at the same time that he expressed cautious optimism about the longer term trends in region and the possibility of the construction of states and regimes what would be less cruel, arbitrary, and exclusionary.

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