The structural origins of coups in Latin America

One of the perennial themes that political scientists have attempted to address is the origin of political coups in Latin America. A plethora of explanations have been proposed, from O’Donnell’s theory regarding industrialization and Kornbluh’s theory on CIA involvement, to voluntarist approaches such as Stepan’s explanation of the failure of the Goulart presidency. In attempting to explain why countries such as Chile and Brazil experienced military interventions, this paper does not attempt to generalize about the origins of coups; it rather seeks to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches and develop an effective framework through which to understand the drastic political events in Latin America. In particular, this paper will argue in favor of structural arguments such as the ones proposed by O’Donnell, and against voluntarist theories. This paper will use the case study method to analyze the outcomes in six Latin American nations, namely Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. For the purposes of this paper, the term “coup” shall be used to describe “a sudden and decisive change of government illegally or by force” (Princeton 2010).

In his work, “Toward an Alternative Conceptualization of South American Politics,” O’Donnell describes the crisis caused by the exhaustion of the Easy Stage of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). Throughout Latin America, two cases of coups which are clearly attributable to the crisis of ISI include Argentina and Brazil. He describes that in the first stages, ISI brought great prosperity to many Latin American nations and that it initially satisfied both the popular and business sectors. Nevertheless, at a certain point the Easy Stage of ISI became “exhausted” (since it is expensive to import the capital goods necessary for ISI), resulting in sizeable deficits and inflation. Argentina and Brazil suffered severe inflation, with average rates of 23.2% and 60% respectively between 1960 and 1965. In order to continue economic growth,
the sole solution was to attract foreign investment and promote a business friendly climate, which would require austerity measures that would cause unrest among popular sectors.

Thus, once the Easy Stage of ISI became exhausted in Brazil and Argentina, there was a gap between what governments could offer and what the popular sectors and organized labor desired, paving the way for what would come to be known as the “coup coalition.” Prior to the crisis of ISI, the political influence of the popular sector had increased dramatically, and according to O’Donnell, “high modernization generated increasing rates of popular political activation” (250). The popular sector thus started being viewed as a threat, and a coup coalition was created which included members of the elite, the middle-class, and US-educated technocrats who perceived the democratic system as dysfunctional and who desired regime change. It was in this context that the coups in Brazil and Argentina took place in 1964 and 1966 respectively, and the increased tension and polarization between the coup coalition and popular sectors resulted in what can be described as a period in which “all political actors operated more and more on the basis of pressure and threats” (249). The crisis of ISI in Brazil and Argentina is neatly summarized by O’Donnell when he describes that:

Horizontal industrial growth advanced much further in Argentina and Brazil than in the other South American countries. But this growth was severely limited and of short duration. When it was over it left a heritage that included the breakdown of the populist coalition, new policy issues, a profoundly modified social structure, and many shattered illusions. In a fundamental sense, after reaching in this way the high point of modernization of their “centers,” Argentina and Brazil have had to deal with “problematic spaces” that have crucial aspects that are significantly different from those of their preexpansion period and from the present problematic spaces of other, less modernized South American countries. (247)

While the argument of the exhaustion of ISI clearly outlines the foundation for the coups in Brazil and Argentina, in order to fully understand the military interventions that occurred in other Latin American nations, two central explanations that must be included in this analysis are the presence of integrative party systems as well as international factors.

Integrative party systems are the motive why coups did not occur in Mexico and Venezuela, and can be described as systems where parties converge on the center. In contrast to
a polarized party system in which the right and the left are alienated from each other, integrative party systems do not estrange neither the elite nor the popular classes, and help to protect the interests of all groups. In Mexico, this was accomplished through the PRI, which despite its roots in the popular sector, shifted toward the center in the late 1930s. Through its shift to the center, the PRI was able to satisfy the demands of workers and peasants without alienating the elite classes; and the result was that a) there was no attempt to overthrow the government and b) the PRI won all gubernatorial elections until 1989. Another similar case where integrative party systems prevented a coup from occurring was in Venezuela, where the two dominant parties, the AD and COPEI forged the Punto Fijo Pact. Essentially, although each party would maintain its own particular ideology, the Punto Fijo Pact ensured cooperation and moderation, and each party renounced on the most extreme aspects of their agendas. What the pact effectively accomplished was ending the polarization that existed in the political climate and shifting the balance of power toward the center.

While the presence of integrative party systems helps explain why no coups occurred in Mexico and Venezuela they can conversely explain the violent regime changes that occurred in Peru and Chile. In contrast to Venezuela and Mexico, throughout Peru there was extreme party polarization. On one end of the political spectrum, president Belaúnde and his left-wing Acción Popular party supported programs such as land reform and the regulation of oil. On the other end of the spectrum the conservatives and APRA forged an alliance which would attempt to block in Congress the policies initiated by the left. The result of this extreme party polarization was political stalemate which served as the catalyst for a peasant rebellion that erupted, as well as the left-wing military coup that took place in 1968.
Chile suffered a fate similar to that of Peru, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s it was palpable that politics in the nation was becoming increasingly polarized. Despite the election of the moderate, center-left candidate Eduardo Frei in 1964, pressures from the conservatives eventually obliged him to adopt a right-wing ideology. The polarization between the right and the left in Chile culminated in 1970 when the Marxist candidate, Salvador Allende won the election and attempted to implement sweeping socialist reforms. Despite the success of the early part of his presidency, the subsequent economic downturn and inflation that occurred (which can be partly attributed as well to the exhaustion of the Easy Stage of ISI described earlier) caused massive protests among the middle and upper classes. Parties such as the Christian Democrats refused to cooperate with the Allende government, and the result was a dysfunctional, polarized political system which ultimately resulted in the 1973 coup by Pinochet.

In the context of Chile, another structural factor which contributed to the coup was the international context, and in particular the Cold War and the involvement of the CIA. As a result of its containment policy and fear of the spread of communism, the United States government instantly viewed Allende as a threat. In his paper, “Destabilizing Democracy: The United States and the Allende Government,” Kornbluh describes the efforts by the CIA to topple the Chilean Marxist regime. According to him, although the United States most likely did not directly plan the military intervention that ultimately toppled the regime, it created what Korbluh calls the “coup climate.” CIA actions included attempting to cut off international aid to Chile, as well as funding the newspaper, *El Mercurio* and political parties such as the Christian Democrats. While it is debatable whether international factors played a decisive role in the Chilean coup, it is clear that actors such as the CIA helped to foment the anti-Allende sentiment that served as the basis for the violent regime change.
Despite the structural arguments described up to this point, some might argue in favor of voluntarist, leadership-centered approaches as an alternative to explaining the coups that occurred in Latin America. Nevertheless, in contrast to the success of the structural explanations described above, the voluntarist approaches including those that will now be discussed are extremely weak and provide little basis for comprehensive theories.

In his paper, “Political Leadership and Regime Breakdown: Brazil,” Alfred Stepan attempts to demonstrate “the special role that a political leader can play in bringing a regime to a final breakdown point” (132). He claims that the coup which occurred in Brazil was in large part due to mistakes that Goulart made during his presidency as well as his leadership style and personal characteristics. He claims that Goulart overestimated his political strength (especially in relation to Congress), that he demoralized his military supporters with his ambiguity and indecisiveness; and that he surrounded himself with advisers who did not accurately represent their respective institutions. Stepan writes that “at the political level, the outcome of his political acts, strategies, and style of politics was to finally erode existing support to the regime” (133).

Despite the fact that Goulart may have been partially responsible for precipitating the military intervention that occurred in Brazil, fundamentally structural reasons were the root causes of the coup, which would have taken place regardless of who had been in power. Even Stepan himself admits the importance of structural factors, and mentions that there were “changes in the Brazilian political system in the years before the regime breakdown and especially between 1961 and 1964” (111). The nub of the critique to the voluntarist argument is that prior to Goulart, three successive presidents had capitulated: Getúlio Vargas committed suicide, and Janio Quadros and Juscelino Kubitschek resigned. Effectively, Brazil had become ungovernable, which was partly due to the exhaustion of ISI and the impossibility of
implementing austerity measures without dissatisfying the popular sector leftists. While Goulart’s ineffective leadership style may indeed have expedited the fall of the regime, a coup was inevitable regardless of who was president.

In addition, throughout countless occasions it has been observed that leadership and the actions of individuals can do little to counteract structural trends in a nation or region. One salient example of this is the Foco strategy after the Cuban revolution. This approach proved inefficient, and despite the efforts of charismatic individuals such as Che Guevara and support from Fidel Castro in Cuba, in some regions Focos were not able to recruit any peasants at all. The failure of the voluntarist, leadership-centered approach to stimulate change is best described by Jorge Castañeda in his paper, “The Cuban Crucible.” He claims that leaders “did not make revolution happen in Latin America. Where [they] tried to force things, [they] failed miserably…However, where a propitious environment and Cuban support coincided, revolution triumphed” (89). Thus, as Castañeda describes, leaders alone cannot initiate change and can only achieve their goals in the context of a “propitious environment.”

Proponents of the voluntarist approach might also argue that the foundation for the integrative party system in Venezuela was the leadership of party officials. Nevertheless, while the clairvoyance of politicians certainly contributed to the success of the Punto Fijo Pact, ultimately what allowed the Pact to effectively accomplish its objectives was the abundance of oil. Through oil revenues, the government was able to finance and co-opt all significant political parties as well as the military. In the period between 1972 and 1975, the state’s revenue had tripled; and without this additional income it is unlikely that the government would have been able to appease all actors and prevent a climate of political polarization.
The final argument against a voluntarist approach can be simply summarized as follows: if leadership was at the heart of the coups in Latin America, why was the Latin American continent plagued by such a high number of military interventions in such a diverse array of countries? The countries in the region which experienced coups throughout the second half of the twentieth century include Argentina (multiple times), Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Paraguay, etc. Leadership cannot be the main factor that contributed to the Latin American coups, since while leadership can potentially explain a military intervention in a single nation; it is unlikely that countries throughout an entire region would all have experienced an “epidemic” of poor leadership in the same time period.

To conclude, this paper has tried to explain the origins of coups throughout Latin America in terms of structuralist arguments. In particular, three structural features were examined and their role in the coups (or lack of coups) that occurred: the exhaustion of the Easy Stage of ISI, international factors, and integrative party systems. Together, these three factors help determine why nations such as Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Peru experienced violent regime changes while others such as Venezuela and Mexico did not. In contrast, voluntarist approaches provide a weak framework in which to understand the occurrence of coups. Leaders can at most aggravate tensions inside a political system, although poor leadership is rarely a root cause of military interventions. While this paper does not discuss all factors leading to a coup (such as the “new professionalism” doctrine proposed by Stepan), and certainly does not attempt to generalize about the origins of military interventions; it does attempt to promote the superiority in the logic of structuralist arguments over voluntarist ones as a framework through which to analyze the outcomes that occurred.
WORKS CITED


Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (The New Press, 2003), Ch1 (pp 1-6); chapter 2.

