When I told people I was writing a history of democracy in Latin America, I encountered some skeptical reactions. One person joked, “Well, that will certainly be a short book.” Another asked, “Is there any such thing?”

This book is longer than they (or I) expected. It shows that those questions set too high a standard for Latin America compared to the rest of the world. As a countercurrent to a deserved reputation for almost five centuries of overwhelming authoritarianism, the region exhibits a protracted and profound history of struggles for democracy. True, the result is mainly a tale of thwarted aspirations and dashed dreams, but it is also a journey toward progress.¹

I was drawn to this topic by the tidal wave of democratization that took place from the late 1970s to the 2000s. Many people welcomed that tsunami in the aftermath of the previous harsh dictatorships. It showed that democracy could prosper in Latin America, that previous experiences with that political system may have been underestimated, that there should be significant antecedents for the present paradigm, and that if democratic institutions are so worthy of study now they must have been in the past. Indeed, most of the concerns about democracy in recent years are not new, but they are issues that have consumed the region ever since independence.

In the last two decades, a new generation of graduate students in political science also lured me into this subject. Trained in the discipline in the new institutionalism and rational choice theory, they asked me to help them study democratic institutions in contemporary Latin America. As a seasoned Latin Americanist, I of course warned them that this endeavor was a colossal waste of time. Any fool knew that democratic institutions in the region rarely functioned properly and seldom lasted long. However, as those rules and organizations increasingly survived and elicited compliance from the 1980s to the 2000s, I had to go along with my students’ desires to probe such issues.

But then I ran into another problem. When the students discovered how political institutions functioned currently, they naturally asked me how that
compared with their operation in earlier periods. This forced me to admit that I really knew very little about the matter. My cohort of historians and political scientists had not paid much attention to the question due to the often deplorable record of democracy in the region. Realizing that maybe democratic institutions were more important than I had thought, I decided that their history was a topic ripe for exploration. As an historian in a political science department, I found the project intriguing.

This book makes three broad contributions to understanding the evolution of Latin American democracy. First, it provides a comprehensive history of the region’s efforts at democracy over two centuries in multiple countries. Second, it shows that most general theories of democracy can not adequately explain its trajectory in Latin America without a deep analysis of the historical context and causes. Third, it takes an interdisciplinary approach by weaving together the normally separated research on Latin American democracy by historians and political scientists.

By connecting the pioneering but seldom integrated work by historians and political scientists, this study links the past and the present across two disciplines. Although mainly historical in structure and methodology, it incorporates and addresses many of the current issues about democracy in political science. It bridges the two disciplines by emphasizing an institutional, rather than a sociocultural, approach to the history of democracy. It establishes that the ideas, behaviors, and institutions typical of Latin American democracies have deep roots.

An interpretive synthesis is, by nature, based mainly on secondary sources. This book owes an enormous debt to a treasure trove of older and newer literature. Four genres proved exceptionally useful. First, many sometimes overlooked classic books by both historians and political scientists still provided valuable insights. Second, another fruitful place to dig was largely forgotten academic writings from the 1950s to the 1970s, when political studies were shifting from descriptive, narrative, and institutional approaches to quantitative, theoretical, and behavioral methods. Third, the recent outburst of democratization has inspired an avalanche of sophisticated theoretical and empirical analyses by modern political scientists. Fourth, a new generation of historians has produced ground-breaking research on what democratic politics meant to ordinary people in bygone years, especially through elections.

This book offers an original combination and reinterpretation of these four bodies of work. It also rests on primary materials, including constitutions, laws, data on elections, polls, and coups, and statements by political
actors, thinkers, and observers. The footnotes reference these items and indicate the extensive key literature.

For analytical purposes, this book organizes countries mainly by geography from north to south. It uses that format because the sub-regions exhibited special characteristics and experiences with democracy. Historically, Mexico, Central America (except for the democratic oasis of Costa Rica), the Caribbean, and the Central Andes suffered far more authoritarianism than did the relatively democratic Northern Andes (especially Colombia) and Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay).

From the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, striking continuities prevailed in the countries most and least likely to be democratic. This book concentrates on those South American republics with the most extensive history with embryonic, oligarchic, restricted, or full democracies. These countries also provided a great variety of regimes, trials and tribulations, and bibliography.

While emphasizing general trends, this study applies its concepts and questions to numerous other Latin American countries. It employs diverse examples from all sub-regions to illustrate patterns and deviations. In many instances, institutions did not move forward in unison or congeal to form a democratic regime. Nevertheless, isolated advances, such as constitutional or electoral innovations, merit examination. For these purposes, the chapters draw examples mainly from Peru and Brazil, and to a lesser extent Mexico, Ecuador, and Bolivia. They devote little attention to the small and historically undemocratic countries in most of Central America and the Caribbean, with the exception of Costa Rica.

The cases examined intensively also reflect the quantity and quality of scholarly literature. The farther back in time, the more uneven the coverage, particularly for the minor countries. Therefore, the chapters up to the 1930s must rely heavily on scattered, partial, and monographic information to unveil historical trends.

The abundant multi-national data on institutions for the period from the 1980s to the 2000s, and to a lesser extent for the 1930s to the 1970s, are simply not available for earlier decades. Consequently, it is impossible to construct reliable, long-run, systematic, comprehensive, comparative cross-national tables on regimes, institutions, and practices for the deep past. Nevertheless, pulling together case studies from those distant years sheds invaluable light on the ancestors of contemporary Latin American democracies.2

This book arranges all the above materials in chapters by historical eras characterized by distinctive experiences with democracy. Beforehand, the
two introductory chapters provide a critical overview of democratic theory, practice, history, and institutions in Latin America from 1800 to 2006. They also summarize the essential conclusions of this study.

Thereafter, each chronological chapter first examines a particular period’s history of democratic trends, causes of success or failure, and ideas about democracy. Then each chapter uses the framework, though not the methods, of contemporary political science to concentrate on the development of political institutions: constitutions, centralism, presidents, legislatures, judiciaries, elections, and political parties. Among institutions, this volume privileges elections because they were the most important measure of and force behind the growth of democracy, particularly for the common people.

Chapter 3 covers the independence period—skimming the colonial political legacy of three hundred years, and then exploring the subsequent frustrations in forging new republics from the 1810s through the 1820s. Chapter 4 excavates the archaeology of democracy amidst the rubble of the post-independence authoritarian and semi-democratic governments. It also investigates the blossoming of a few efforts at constructing stable constitutional orders from the 1820s through the 1870s.

Chapter 5 examines the much sturdier oligarchic republics from the 1880s through the 1920s, during Latin America’s first great epoch of liberalism. Most of those highly elitist, protected democracies collapsed during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Chapter 6 assesses the heyday of popular democracies from the 1930s up to the 1970s, when populism incorporated many average citizens into legal participation, until exceptionally repressive dictatorships terminated that upsurge of the working classes.

Following the authoritarian regimes of the 1960s and 1970s, Chapter 7 reaches a climax with the tsunami of neoliberal democratization from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. That unparalleled wave built upon the legacy of two hundred years of struggles for democracy. That high point concludes an unfinished story of not only many disappointments but also extraordinary achievements with democracy. Chapter 7 closes with an assessment of today’s challenge of how to make the latest protected democracies really serve the disadvantaged popular majority they claim to represent. Finally, Chapter 8 reviews in a brief compass the construction of Latin American democracies over two centuries.

As I traced this history, I received tremendous help from writings by and conversations with other scholars, both professors and graduate students, in Latin America and Europe as well as in the United States. I am especially thankful to my research assistants, Scott Morgenstern, Elisabeth Hilbink,
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As has been true for over forty years, my wife, Susan, also contributed scintillating insights and unwavering support. I am eternally beholden to her. This book is dedicated to our children.
Map of Latin America