In *Comparative Latin American Politics*, emeritus professor of political science Ronald Schneider gives us a reflective account of the region’s political development. This is not a text geared toward undergraduates. Its format provides a glossary, list of acronyms and excellent maps but none of the other bells and whistles – sidebars, illustrations, lists of related websites and films – that have become standard in introductory volumes designed for a generation raised on visual imagery. Rather, Schneider’s book is the sort that graduate students and professors of Latin American politics might add to their collection as a useful reference.

The author confines his examination of political development to seven countries with sizeable economies and the bulk of the region’s inhabitants – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. The material on Brazil is exceptionally rich in detail. By contrast, Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean are absent, such that the volume misses their distinct patterns of political development marked by U.S. hegemony.

The chapters are organized by case, with Brazil, Mexico and Argentina treated individually and the other four countries uncomfortably grouped. The material includes a smattering of light case comparisons, but systematic cross-case analysis is confined to two short concluding chapters that identify past political development patterns and extrapolate future options. In an implicit critique of recent texts concerned mainly with the region’s ideological shift to the left, Schneider’s inquiry emphasizes not just where the region has arrived but how it got there. The first one hundred pages take us from independence to 1930, and the remainder works forward to 2010.

As with any overview, some specialists may decry the lack of depth in their area of expertise while general readers may find themselves bogged down in detail. On balance, Schneider has made judicious choices about what to include, as is evident in his brief but thoughtful handling of such studied episodes as Chile’s Allende government. He adroitly captures the essence of myriad governments, and writes with considerable dry humor about the motives and machinations of ambitious political leaders. A stronger theoretical framework would have helped guide the reader to what was important amid the flurry of names, dates and political acronyms from centuries past.

Schneider’s account eschews post-modernist deconstruction. He relies heavily on standard measures – census data for demographics, electoral outcomes for political sentiment, GDP for economic development – without questioning their bias. He is cognizant of the need to debunk prevailing myths, such as the notion that Latin American countries share a sense of regional unity, but presents other contested ideas as fact. For example, his portrayal of Latin America as a Catholic and Hispanic region, while largely accurate, obscures the new political importance of diverse ethnic and religious groups.

Schneider draws freely on an eclectic mix of analytical frameworks, borrowing concepts and hypotheses from the literatures on political culture, political economy, democratization theory, modernization theory, state formation and leadership studies. At base, Schneider seeks to understand Latin America’s movement toward democracy and whether it marks a permanent end to authoritarianism. Adopting a path dependent approach that encompasses both structure and agency, he finds that economic changes were accompanied by social transformation that generated political struggles through which new groups gained power in an evolving dialectic. Yet Schneider’s conclusions are not determinist; leaders’ choices mattered, and political culture evolved through immigration rather than imposing a binding constraint on democratic development.

Revisiting political development classics, Schneider finds support for old hypotheses about instability resulting from weak political institutionalization, and democratic development stemming from urbanization and economic modernization in an uncertain, non-linear and long-term process. Without necessarily employing the discourse, he taps more recent works on state-society relations and institutions, sharing scholars’ concerns about delegative democracy and unresponsive weak states. However, Schneider’s emphasis on formal politics, especially elections, law and policy, runs counter to trends in the democratization literature, which is now critical of procedural democracy as low quality and urges attention to informal institutions.
Normative discussions of concepts like transitional justice, collective memory and transnational networking have no resonance in Schneider’s account of democratic development. His treatment of Argentina’s Dirty War, for example, says little about the human rights violations that took place or their social and psychological impact, focusing instead on the policy dilemma posed by prosecution of military officers accused of committing abuses. Despite lengthy coverage of the populist period, Schneider also neglects newer literature on social movements and neopopulism. Perhaps in part because his case set excludes Bolivia and Ecuador, demands for inclusion by indigenous groups and the poor, and their potential for sustaining neopopulist leaders, go unexplored.

Time lends perspective. Right-wing hopes for market-based prosperity and leftist faith in revolution both have been tempered by poor outcomes. Extremist solutions have given way to pragmatism. Schneider emerges optimistic that Latin American leaders have learned from the region’s past experience, and helps his readers do the same.

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