

CURRENT DEBATES

Sebastián Mantilla Baca and Gerardo L. Munck (2013)

La calidad de la democracia: perspectivas desde América Latina

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Reviewed by Sabina Morales Rosas

Social Science Research Center Berlin

Inspired by the study of Latin America, the volume edited by Sebastián Mantilla (Director of the Latin American Center of Political Studies in Ecuador and editor of the *Revista Latinoamericana de Política Comparada*) and Gerardo Munck (Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California) presents an encompassing collection of the latest debates on the quality of democracy (QoD). This research agenda became particularly salient for the study of Latin American political regimes after transitions from authoritarian rule in the 1980s and 1990s gave birth to 'gray-zone' regimes—those that are neither full autocracies nor full democracies. Particularly for the youngest democracies, elections alone tell little of how other institutions of the political regime develop and work. The QoD agenda aims to overcome constraints imposed by those traditional approaches of democracy based solely on free, fair and regular elections. They open the regime discussion up to the complexity of its multidimensionality.

The essays are written by some of the most distinguished experts on the QoD debate in Latin America. The book resembles an

anthology that tackles the key conceptual and methodological questions of QoD from different perspectives. In this regard, the volume is a meaningful contribution to enlarge the QoD research agenda. It provides important concepts to address the multiple dimensions of political regimes that have moved away from authoritarianism. Most importantly, it elaborates on its setbacks and limitations.

Following the introduction, the reader finds eight chapters organized in three parts: The first part concentrates on theoretical issues, the second part on methodological challenges, and the third one elaborates on the relationship between QoD and democratic governance. The edition is to a certain extent *sui generis*; Some chapters are in Spanish, some in English.

The introduction by Mantilla clarifies that QoD understands regime dimensions neither as linear nor as continuous, but as a set of synchronic features that together can assess the extent to which a country exhibits the attributes of the democratic ideal type. Despite the general understanding that the QoD agenda should capture a

regime in its multidimensionality instead of focusing on elections, Munck points out that there is little agreement on a concept of QoD, its actual dimensions, and its potential explanatory factors. He argues that scholars normally choose a flawed conceptual strategy. They typically use the minimal definition of democracy (elections) as a baseline and afterwards add a set of dimensions that make that minimum core one of good quality. Dimensions are often added to the list without any justification. As a consequence, he argues, concepts of QoD lack consistency. He proposes to tackle this problem by building the concept in the opposite direction: By first defining QoD on the basis of democratic values and afterwards deducing its institutional dimensions.

Marcus Melo contributes to the theoretical discussion by stressing the 'assessment problem'. He notices that the assessment of QoD can be deeply affected by the normative horizon adopted by QoD definitions. If normative frameworks are not explicitly recognized, the assessment of the QoD can be mistaken. Melo addresses this problem by analyzing two different institutional designs of a particular dimension of QoD. These are a majoritarian and a representational design of the dimension of accountability. He shows that the criteria for assessing accountability under each institutional design differ substantially.

A procedural concept of democracy and its normative horizon are usually pointed out as responsible for some of the shortcomings of the literature on QoD, as Munk and Melo highlight. However, other concepts, e.g., democratization, consolidation and

so on might also influence the way QoD is conceptualized. Sebastián Mazzuca addresses this problem and argues that presenting QoD as a continuation of a process of democratization (pointing towards a successful transition) obscures its explanatory factors. To overcome this problem, he suggests to "bring back the State" and to rely on the literature on bureaucratization to formulate meaningful causal hypotheses on the dimensions of QoD.

The second part of the volume presents three different ways to approach empirical research on QoD. The first proposal puts forward the idea of an index combined with case studies. Daniel Levine and José Molina explain their alternative index based on five dimensions (electoral decision, participation, responsiveness, accountability, and sovereignty) to measure the QoD. This index seeks to overcome the deficits of existing ones. Their index stems from their book *The Quality of Democracy in Latin America* (2011), in which they also provide in-depth case studies of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

The second proposal suggests testing explanatory factors to study QoD empirically. Mikel Barreda presents a two-step analysis. The first step involves using factor analysis for identifying latent variables of QoD. These are democratic rights and responsiveness. In a second step, an exploratory regression analysis is conducted. He concludes that: a) Democratic rights are positively affected by experience with democracy and negatively affected by electoral volatility; b) Per capita

income and interpersonal trust have a positive effect on responsiveness, while income inequality and closed electoral lists have a negative one; c) Ethnic cleavages have no significant impact on any of the dimensions.

The third proposal for the empirical study of QoD suggests going beyond the boundaries of the political regime and stressing the notion of political agency behind the concept of citizenship. In this vein, Jose Vargas-Cullell proposes a conceptual matrix that considers the rules to access and exercise the power that is delegated (to the elected representatives), but also the rules of access to and exercise of power that is not delegated (the one that stays with the citizen, i.e., inclusion and participation). He shows the benefit of his framework in the analysis of Central American democracies.

The last two chapters explore the relation between QoD and democratic governance. Guillermo Cejudo explores the effect of democracy on the quality of government—understood as the effectiveness of policy implementation. He finds that constraints to the executive power remarkably improve the quality of government in Latin American countries. Scott Mainwaring, Timothy Scully, and Vargas-Cullell compare QoD and democratic governance as concepts. They highlight that, compared to QoD, democratic governance enables us to study policy outcomes of democratic governments. Whether QoD should include policy outcomes is still an open discussion.

Although the volume was inspired by Latin American democracies, its contributions

are conceptual and methodological rather than empirical. The expert reader will not be disappointed by its theoretical and conceptual thickness. For that reason, QoD scholars interested in other world regions will equally benefit from reading the book. However, readers looking for well-documented case studies should rather consult Levine and Molina (2011). Those interested in further conceptual developments towards comparative data should look at Bühlmann et al. (2011). Finally, in this volume beginners will find a good introduction to key concepts, authors, and problems of QoD.

References

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