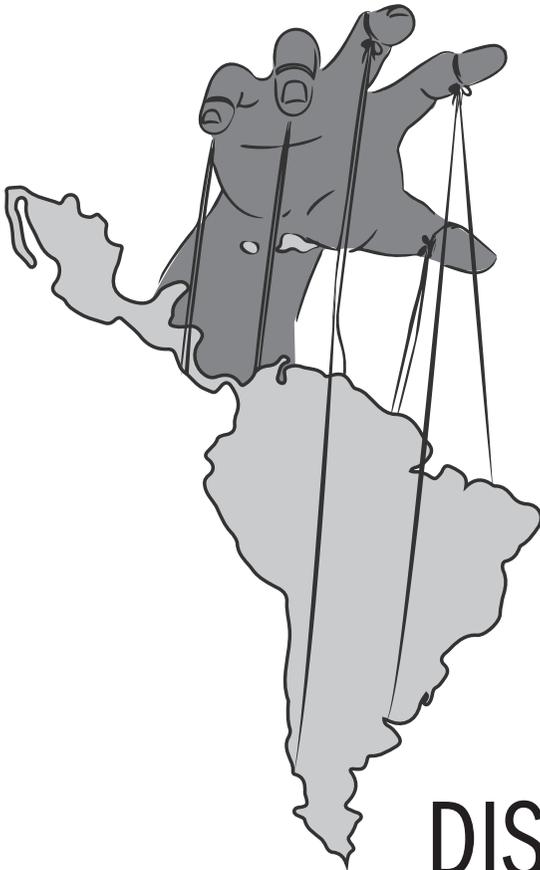


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“People know much more about the backroom deals that sustain policies, and they’re not willing to tolerate it”: An interview with Steven Levitsky

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Professor Levitsky sat down for a conversation with LAPJ editors Patricio Goldstein, Laura Olivera Garrido, and Omar Ghurra on January 29, 2019. What follows is a lightly edited transcript.

LAPJ: Professor Levitsky, thank you for accepting our invitation. We would like to start today with your general political assessment. What has been happening in the political landscape in Latin America in the last few years?

LEVITSKY: That’s a big question. I think that it’s easy to see the glass half-empty. There are a number of problems facing Latin American democracies. Some of them are long-standing problems like inequality, weak institutions, corruption. Corruption is not a new problem in Latin America. It’s very salient today in part because the media, civil society, and institutions are doing a better job of uncovering that corruption. That corruption is not new, but it’s a big problem. Economies are so-so, bad in some places, okay in others. The public support for democratic institutions, democratic politicians, and political parties is quite low, although that’s a problem across much of the world these days. It’s easy to find problems across even the better-functioning democracies in Latin

America, like Chile or Costa Rica. It’s even easier to find problems in the Andes or in Central America. But it’s important not to forget that, despite a very difficult situation, and particularly an international environment that has grown much less favorable to democracy than 20 or 30 years ago, most Latin American democracies continue to survive and in fact have survived longer than ever before in history. In a majority of Latin American countries, democracy today has survived longer than at any other point in history. Given the overall situation, given the challenges of inequality, corruption, and a darkening international environment, the performance of Latin American politicians and political institutions doesn’t get an A, but it hasn’t been terrible either.

LAPJ: After the elections of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, where do you see the future of Latin American leadership?

LEVITSKY: I see Latin America as a big, heterogeneous, diverse place. It’s never been characterized by a single ideological flavor or a single stripe. It certainly goes through waves: It went through a dramatic wave, an economic shift to the right in the 1980s and 1990s driven by the debt

crisis. Governments of left, right, and center had very little choice but to move in a market-oriented direction. But that was a rarity. And then there was a period when there was a striking number of left or left-of-center governments elected in Latin America. But that was unusual. Most of the time you will find within Latin America a diversity of governments. The biggest trend I see right now is that the level of public discontent in most of the region is either high, in countries like say Argentina and Colombia, or very high in countries like Brazil and Mexico. People are angry everywhere. They're intensely angry in places where policy has just failed abysmally, like in Brazil. And when people are angry, they vote the vote incumbents out. It happens to be the case that over the last few years the incumbents in most of Latin America have been left-of-center governments, whether it's the Kirchner-led Peronists in Argentina or the Chavistas in Venezuela, or the PT in Brazil. The incumbents have been left, and so you've seen the electoral defeat of the left. In Mexico there's also a lot of discontent, a lot of anger with the status quo and a widespread perception that both of the main right-of-center parties—PRI and PAN—have failed miserably in terms of solving the country's primary problems. So they voted for an alternative. Mexico and Brazil look like polar opposite cases because in one case they elected a left-leaning populist, and in the other case they elected an extreme right-wing candidate. But the two cases have in common massive policy failure, very widespread public discontent, and a pursuit of significant change on the part of the electorate. It just so happens the left was governing in Brazil and the right was governing in Mexico.

LAPJ: The Bolivian elections are passing unnoticed as a major event in the region. After losing the 2016 constitutional referendum that would have allowed him to run for reelection, Evo Morales got a favorable ruling from the country's highest court to run for a fourth term in office. In the lines of your recent book, *How Democracies Die*, this move could mean a

major step towards authoritarianism in Bolivia. What are your thoughts on the country's situation?

LEVITSKY: Chavez did it. Chavez held in 2007 a referendum trying to change the constitution to allow himself to be president for life. He lost that referendum and held another one a year or two later and won that one. Bolivia is one of the countries with the weakest institutions in all of Latin America. Bolivia has had more than 20 different constitutions since its independence. It's averaged more than one constitution per decade. So the political rules of the game in Bolivia over two centuries have never been strong and the consequences are devastating for democracy, the rule of law, and economic development. You cannot make either democracy or capitalism or any kind of economy work without a strong institutional foundation. Bolivia has never had it. Bolivia has had a degree of political stability and economic success over the last decade, but unfortunately Evo Morales is destroying in many respects what could be a very positive legacy by bending institutions yet again to hold on to power. So when you rewrite the constitution to allow yourself to be reelected, that's one thing, but then you try to change the rules again a second time, and you create an institutional process for that, are defeated, and yet break those rules again. That is devastating behavior in terms of weakening institutions. Whether he will get away with it or not, political scientists are not good at predicting how this is going to result. Evo is a very talented politician. His rivals are not particularly strong and the economy is okay, so he's got a fighting chance.

LAPJ: The region has not been able to agree upon a unified approach to the political crisis in Venezuela and Nicaragua. What do you think will happen in those countries?

LEVITSKY: In general, Latin America rarely acts in a united way on anything. There were aspirations that Latin America would act in a coherent way vis-à-vis the debt

back in the early 1980s. There have been many, many aspirations. There was hope among more market-oriented types for a free trade agreement in the Americas in the early 1990s; that failed. It's very difficult for 18 or 19 sovereign states with different interests, different sizes, different economies, different relationships with the United States, different relationships to the global economy, different relationships to China, and with different levels of political stability and instability. Eighteen, 19 different states, very diverse, to get them to cooperate on anything is extremely difficult. I think that much of the time our expectation or hope that they might is an illusion. I don't think we should expect Latin American states to cooperate.

I think the degree of cooperation that that the right-of-center wing of the region has achieved in opposing the Maduro government in the last few weeks has been fairly impressive. In my own opinion, I think that regional pressure is very important for sustaining democracy over the long haul. So I've been very disappointed in Latin America's very weak response to Venezuela's slide into outright dictatorship in the last five years. I would have liked to see Brazil and Argentina and other governments act more forcefully when they were governed by the left a few years ago, and they didn't. Leaving the Trump administration's behavior aside, the response of Latin American governments in the contemporary period, even though it's only some of them, it's not all of them, is a positive thing and it's making it harder for Maduro to hang on to power.

LAPJ: Your most recent book *How Democracies Die* is focused on the rise of authoritarianism in the United States and how it resembles the fall to authoritarianism in other countries. This past month, the dispute over the budget to build a border wall has put the government in a very costly shutdown. At the time of this interview, the government reopened for three weeks to try and reach an agreement, but the word emergency looms around Trump's speech, and threatens to

override the power of Congress. What is your opinion on this—are the “guardrails of democracy” strong enough to protect the country?

LEVITSKY: Americans are fortunate in several senses. Our institutional guardrails, both formal ones and informal ones, are much stronger than in Brazil or Mexico, or even some of the stronger democracies in Latin America. And, a big difference between the United States and say Venezuela, or Bolivia, or Hungary, or Turkey, is that the United States has a very strong opposition. It's very hard for an authoritarian president to use a majority to steamroll the opposition the way that the Chavistas did in Venezuela in the early part of the 21st century, or what Orban has done in Hungary. The opposition, as they showed in 2018, is still very strong and that's going to limit Trump's ability to move in a typically authoritarian direction. I think that our democracy though is still in danger, although the manifestation of that may be somewhat different. I mean, what we discussed in our book as the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance continue to be eroding and continue to be very weak. And so, in that context, without this norm of restraint, without this basic mutual toleration between parties, we are now in a situation of divided government. We did not have divided government when we wrote the book. So there, we worried about a Republican majority. Now, divided government places greater constraints on Trump, which is good, but I think is likely to lead to the kind of institutional warfare between different powers of the state that we have seen in places like Paraguay, Peru, and Ecuador in recent years. It is not going to be that extreme, but we see things like increasing ideas of impeaching the president, blocking the president's every move, and, if the president doesn't get his way, seeking to circumvent the Congress. This can very easily, as we see, descend into total dysfunctionality. The U.S. system of constitutional checks and balances is in many ways a brilliant design, but it only works if they are complemented,

reinforced by, informal norms of mutual toleration and forbearance. Without them, something like the United States begins to look more and more like Ecuador. I don't want to exaggerate—the United States is nowhere near Ecuador—but the level of dysfunctionality that we are seeing now, where the government is shut down for more than a month because the president does not get what he wants in Congress, that is disastrous. So we are not out of the woods yet.

LAPI: Where democracies have died—Venezuela—or might die—Brazil—how do you think they can be reinvigorated?

LEVITSKY: What we argue in the book is that it is far more likely today that democracies die at the hands of elected leaders. So it is less likely that you get a Pinochet-style military coup where the Constitution is dissolved, and Congress is dissolved, and political parties are suspended, and you have an outright dictatorship, although Venezuela is getting close to that. It's much more likely that you get an elected leader working behind a facade of democratic institutions, employing democratic institutions, like we see in Bolivia; and yet, moving slowly and incrementally in an authoritarian direction. We saw that clearly in Venezuela, we saw it in Ecuador under Correa, we've seen it tragically in Nicaragua, we have seen a bit less but to some degree in Bolivia, and that could happen in Brazil. The good news, though, is that these regimes tend to be pretty unstable. They continue to rely on democratic institutions, they continue to rely on elections, they continue to tolerate opposition, they for the most part do not just ban opposition. Governments have to maintain a degree of public support; even if the elections are not fair, they still have to go out and win them. And, particularly in countries with pretty weak states, countries with pretty uneven economic performance, it is hard for governments to maintain public support for very long. And so these regimes tend to be pretty unstable. The commodities boom, which

lasted for a little over a decade, was an unusual period. My grandmother could have been re-elected in the Andes in 2007 or 2008. If the economy is growing eight percent, nine percent, if mineral prices are above the clouds, it is very, very easy to maintain public support and be re-elected. And so, it looked for a while like the Bolivarian regime was indestructible. But, when growth comes down to two percent or sometimes below zero, presidents lose support pretty quickly and it's hard to hold on to power. And so, we saw that it was very difficult for even somebody as popular and as powerful as Rafael Correa to consolidate power. It's true that Ortega and Maduro hang on to power, but their regimes are completely disgraced, they're completely illegitimate, and they're no longer a model for anybody—nobody wants to copy Venezuela anymore. So even though democracies are very precarious in Latin America today, there is no successful alternative model. The authoritarian alternatives are quite weak. So even if a country like Brazil, and I hope it does not, or Mexico, which also seems not too likely, were to slide into what I would call a competitive authoritarian sort of a hybrid regime, the likelihood of consolidating that or it becoming sort of permanently authoritarian does not seem very high.

LAPI: We've been talking about the sad cases, but a country like Peru, for instance, is showing a somewhat positive move towards more democratic institutions, with more checks and balances and even a positive reform of the judiciary. What do you think made this happen? What was the tipping point in this move towards a better democracy?

LEVITSKY: Well, I'm not so optimistic about Peru in the long run. I would say that this is the most successful democratic period in Peruvian history and that's great, but it has mostly been a democracy by default. It's been a democracy because basically all the political actors, all the parties, all the figures in politics, with the partial and short-lived exception of Fujimorismo,

everybody is weak. It's not that nobody wants to be Rafael Correa or Evo Morales, it's that nobody's been strong enough to do it since Fujimori's fall in 2000. Now, what happened in Peru is that there was massive discontent with the status quo, just like in much of the region, but what was different is that the Fujimoristas managed to get this crazy majority in Congress and they clearly emerged both as the bad guy and the status quo. And so, what Vizcarra was able to do as president before he was in power long enough to become unpopular (because ever since the fall of Fujimori, Peruvian governments have been unbelievably unpopular, every single one of them), was to mobilize public anger not against the government for the first time, but against those who were in Congress and in control of the judiciary. So this anger about corruption, rather than being directed at the government, was actually directed at the most authoritarian force in Peruvian politics. It was mobilized by somebody who looks like he is relatively clean and relatively democratic, and mobilized to weaken a force that really was threatening democracy. I had hopes that Fujimorism would become a more pragmatic political force, but it simply didn't. They brought down PPK [former Peruvian president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski], and I think they were trying to sort of climb their way into power. So public anger was used to weaken the Fujimoristas. Whether that can be sustained and whether this will actually lead to positive institutional reforms, I think remains to be seen. But there was a pretty ugly mafia in power in Peru, primarily in the judiciary, and we don't know what's to come, but we know those guys are getting thrown out. So it creates an opportunity for reform. That's as far as I would go in terms of my optimism.

LAPJ: This magazine is mainly intended for students of public policy in Latin America. How do you think the study of comparative politics can be useful for future policymakers?

LEVITSKY: I think one of the key lessons for budding policymakers, particularly in Latin America, is always that, to put it simply, they have to take politics into account. I mean, you guys are a third or fourth generation of technocrats and you're much more politically savvy and much more embedded in democracy than those in the 1970s. But the first generation of technocrats in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s came back and they had their economics degrees, but they had no idea how to take politics into account. They had learned their economic models on the chalkboard at MIT or Chicago, and then they got home and they saw populist politicians, and unions, and people protesting in the streets, and congressional deal-making, and corruption, and they had no idea how to deal with that, and they had no patience for it, and they went running to Pinochet. And I don't think that is a very viable solution. Technocrats have to learn how to achieve their policies through politics, and that means understanding how politics works. One of the central issues that I push in my classes is making the state work. Even the best-intentioned policymakers, completely honest, fully informed, got all the best practices on their laptop, if you don't have a functioning state you are not going to be able to implement those policies, and if you implement them on the ground they are going to be implemented badly, and people are going to dislike it, and they are going to resist and it is not going to be sustainable. So policy has to be built on a state that works. You don't learn how to build a strong state in your in your MPA program, because nobody knows how to do it. But it is something that has got to be taken very, very seriously, and I think it has only been taken seriously in the last couple of decades.

The other thing is building a political coalition behind reforms. That's often messy, it's often difficult, but just having the right ideas, I think policymakers have now learned in Latin America, is nowhere near enough. It takes a lot of political creativity, that's something that Vizcarra has done very well, and it takes a lot of

political work to build coalitions. A problem that we're facing right now, is that the way that democratic policymakers built their coalitions in the 1990s and early 2000s, even the best ones, was through practices that are kind of gray in terms of their legality and their legitimacy. I'm talking about patronage, clientelism, and corruption, not even necessarily massive corruption, although in Brazil it was massive. In a country like Brazil, in a country with extreme inequality, a million problems, an extreme political fragmentation, if you want to govern in democracy you have to work very, very hard to build and sustain a coalition. Cardoso did it, Lula did it, but they did it at a certain cost. They did not do it in a way that, if the public were to inspect it closely, looks very nice. And the problem is that public citizens

are much more aware of what's going on behind the scenes in politics today because of the media, because of independent judiciaries, because civil society is more active. All of those things are very positive. But, the fact of the matter is people know much more about the backroom deals that sustain policies and they are not willing to tolerate it. And so, the kinds of corrupt practices and deal-making that helped to sustain policies in Brazil in the 1990s and early 2000s are no longer acceptable. And so, politicians, you guys, your generation, is going to have to learn how to actually build and sustain democratic coalitions without giving everybody a free hand in the state, and I don't think anybody really knows how to do that yet. But those are the kind of things we study in comparative politics.