Samuel Handlin, *State Crisis in Fragile Democracies: Polarization and Political Regimes in South America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Tables, figures, appendixes, bibliography, index, 332 pp.; hardcover $99, ebook $80.

Recent years have seen the growing accumulation of studies of the so-called left turn in Latin America. Amid that body of scholarship, this book stands out in several ways. It focuses on the full range of outcomes, including not only cases with "radical" and "moderate" left governments but also those in which left governments have not come to power. It also explores not only the political coalitions that came to power—the initial "left turn" outcomes—but also the implications for regime trajectories; as Handlin writes, a "major question of interest for this book" is "why populist episodes in some countries have produced democratic erosion while such episodes in other countries have merely been conducive to pathologies such as delegative democracy or presidential impeachment" (17). In short, this is an ambitious study. It is also a careful, well-written, and empirically rich book.

Against the predominant body of explanations for variation in "left turn" outcomes that emphasize economic factors, this book focuses on two oft-neglected features of the context in which the new left governments emerged: a crisis of state institutions in objective and subjective terms, and what Handlin calls "the infrastructure of left-wing political mobilization" (6). Together, these two factors determine whether existing political arrangements are displaced by outsiders, and whether those outsiders polarize politics or come to power through more pragmatic means.

This provides a parsimonious and convincing account for why countries in South America followed one of three paths in the post–Cold War era. In cases (Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia) in which a state crisis generated space for outsider politicians and an existing left-wing infrastructure existed for their use as they rose to power, these outsiders polarized politics both on a left-right spectrum and by leveraging antisystem appeals. Where, as in Paraguay and Peru, the state crisis created space for outsiders but no left-wing infrastructure existed, outsiders came to power without either centrally emphasizing ideological appeals or engaging in the fundamental alteration of regime institutions. And in cases like Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile, more stable and effective state institutions precluded the emergence of outsiders, and the left turn unfolded through the rise to power of existing political parties of the left.

These three political paths (what Handlin calls "three lefts rather than two," 240) each have had consistent patterns of legacies for political regimes. Polarizing outsiders brought the erosion of representative democracy, cases with more pragmatic outsiders have seen the erosion of horizontal accountability and the emergence of interbranch crises, and the last path has brought stronger representative democracy. Handlin traces these trajectories through a detailed comparison of Brazil and Venezuela (chapters 3–5), followed by more concise but nevertheless compelling and detailed accounts, in chapters 6–8, of the six other countries mentioned above, following in each case how the post–Cold War political arena was transformed by his two crucial variables and tracing the implications for whether a "left turn" occurred and for the regime outcomes that ensued.

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To understand the argument in more detail, it is useful to define the two core independent variables more carefully and to follow Handlin's careful elucidation of the mechanisms by which they shape the outcomes. State crisis is defined (38) as a context with two core necessary features: low levels of state capacity and "deep dissatisfaction with the functioning of basic institutions (such as the judiciary, bureaucracy, police, and congress) and government in general." Handlin argues that though the former component tends to change slowly—most states in the region have long been weak in objective terms—the latter, subjective, component "was likely driven by more conjunctural conditions in the 1980s and 1990s" (40).

This shift in attitudes toward existing institutions was "a key factor undermining existing actors and opening up possibilities for outsiders" (41) because it provided a second issue dimension, in addition to the left-right spectrum, on which politicians not tied to existing political institutions could differentiate themselves by appealing to voters as outsiders. In this context of state crisis that creates space for outsiders, the existence of infrastructure for left-wing political mobilization, in the form of political parties of the left or strong left-wing social movements, plays a central role in the coalitional behavior of those outsiders. Where strong left infrastructure exists, outsiders can leverage it to build new movements on the left rather than having, as in its absence, to compromise and forge more centrist alliances.

As this discussion suggests, instead of treating them as two logically parallel independent variables, Handlin's argument is characterized by nested causation: the state crisis variable determines whether outsiders become important political actors, and the presence or absence of left infrastructure determines the "form" those outsiders take. As he suggests at various points (see p. 246 for the clearest statement), this is an account of a new critical juncture for party systems and regime dynamics in contemporary South America. Yet the explicit deployment of a critical juncture framework highlights a few implications of the argument that are not clearly developed in its current form. It explains the absence of a "no state crisis, weak left infrastructure" category that would put countries on a fourth path; this combination is logically irrelevant, since the "left infrastructure" variable matters only in the context of state crisis. (Thus I believe Handlin is mistaken [p. 8, n. 3] in treating this path as logically possible but empirically absent in his universe of cases.)

Additionally, since state crisis provides a context for outsiders to emerge, an explicit critical juncture framework can explain why Handlin sees longer crises (which provide more opportunity for outsiders) as more severe. Furthermore, the end of such a crisis may mark the closing of a window of opportunity for altering the political spectrum. This may help to explain the serial emergence of successive outsiders in Peru, where state crisis continues to be salient, and to generate predictions about whether contemporary crises of existing political institutions in Brazil and Chile in fact have the potential for outsiders to emerge.

Handlin's book is an impressive contribution to a growing literature on the left turn. It goes beyond most existing works in its empirical ambition, in terms of the number of cases it covers. In addition to its empirical contribution, it is exemplary in its analytic transparency, both in its approach to explicit process-tracing inference

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and in the appendixes that define and operationalize the core variables in a detailed and transparent manner. Moreover, and perhaps most important, it makes an important analytical move in linking state-level variables to regime-level outcomes. Though the study of Latin American politics has (properly, in my view) begun to pay significant attention to state capacity, Handlin's book represents one of the first major efforts to link its study to other central elements of politics in the region, rather than treating variation in stateness simply as an object of interest in its own right, as descriptive context, or as an explanation for institutional weakness.

Yet here lies, in my view, the one core shortcoming of the book. Handlin is surely right that objective state weakness characterizes much of contemporary Latin America, and he is correct to distinguish that objective feature from the subjective component of his concept of state crisis. But while this subjective dimension of "public discontent with the 'political class' or 'government' more generally" (271) is both substantively important and analytically interesting, it ought to be theorized in its own right, rather than labeled as a feature of a broader and analytically imprecise concept like "state crisis." Handlin is correct, in other words, to emphasize a broader and more fundamental crisis of political institutions than do similar accounts (e.g., Seawright, *Party System Collapse: The Roots of Crisis in Peru and Venezuela*, 2012) that point to corruption and failures of representation, but it remains unclear to me that this is a crisis of the state rather than of political institutions. Nor does it seem that the objective component of state weakness is in fact necessary, except insofar as it makes the subjective component more likely. Furthermore, one wonders whether this subjective discontent should be conceptualized in terms of its depth or salience among relevant social sectors, or as a proportion of overall mass public opinion.

The potential importance of these seeming quibbles becomes apparent when one looks at contemporary Chile, where a subjective crisis of discontent with existing political institutions and the "political class" exists, for a certain slice of the population but not more generally, in the absence of anything resembling objective state weakness. If contemporary Chile sees the emergence of an outsider (and note that Handlin's framework would predict massive polarization, given the strength of Chile's left infrastructure), surely one would be stretching the concept of state crisis to apply it to that setting. This suggests the need for greater conceptual clarity in theorizing the legitimacy and performance crises of institutions of representation and authority that, as Handlin notes, provide a propitious context for the massive political change that his book so carefully explores.

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