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Leslie E. Anderson, *Democratization by Institutions: Argentina's Transition Years in Comparative Perspective*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Tables, bibliography, index, 304 pp.; hardcover \$75, paperback \$34.95, ebook.

Leslie Anderson's *Democratization by Institutions* asks one of the most fundamental questions in political science: under what conditions do countries become democratic? Through a case study of Argentina's transition years (1983–99), Anderson argues that institutions can play a role in securing and deepening democracy. Her approach illuminates not only the factors that make democracy possible, but also the processes through which policy change can lead to higher levels of democracy. In other words, this book studies why we observe democracy in some places and not others and how this outcome is obtained.

Anderson, building on her earlier work, starts out with a puzzle: what explains democratic progress in Argentina in the absence of high levels of social capital or robust civil society support? For Anderson, the answer lies in the institutional structure of the republic. As she puts it:

Argentina shows that democratization by institutions is possible. . . . Institutional democratization was gradual, avoiding extreme disruption and violence. . . . Working within these institutions provided society with a *process* for addressing problems as they emerged. . . . Indeed, where civil society does not provide the impetus for democratization, institutions become the only option, short of international intervention, as for example, after defeat in war. (232, emphasis in original)

Anderson looks at the institution of the presidency as a source of innovative ideas and reformist vision during the early years of Argentina's new democratic era. In particular, the bold use of presidential prerogatives and skillful attempts at securing the cooperation of other actors were crucial factors in achieving democratizing reforms in this heavily presidential system. The author's perspective on the virtues of presidentialism certainly sets her apart from other scholars of Latin American politics, who usually make more negative assessments of this aspect of the region's institutional design. As she explains, "the failure of checks on power" can sometimes be "salubrious for democracy" (158). Indeed, the narrative identifies junctures at which the author wished the presidency had been more assertive in its pursuit of reforms. An implicit conclusion is that the country did better when presidential initiatives were not stifled or challenged by strikes, protests, or congressional opposition.

In exploring the interaction between presidential prerogatives and displays of political virtuosity by members of the executive branch, Anderson provides a lens through which to think about the interplay between formal institutions and informal practices in Latin American democracies. The main empirical chapters of the book look at key policy debates in the areas of civil-military relations, labor legislation, economic liberalization, and education during the presidencies of Raúl Alfonsín (1983–89) and Carlos Menem (1989–99). To do so, Anderson relies on extensive field research undertaken over the last two decades, during which she conducted numerous interviews, embarked on a careful reading of media sources, and tackled a content analysis of congressional debates and presidential decrees. Some of the interviews date back to 1993, and a few key political players were interviewed on several occasions, deepening the author's understanding of evolving political processes.

The focus on these policy debates offers rich data about the microdynamics of Argentine politics during the democratic transition. Some of the case studies also produce novel insights into understudied policy domains, such as education, thereby providing a fresh assessment of the legacy of both presidencies. It is not always clear, however, how policymaking in these areas relates to the democratization process. Whereas solving the military question in the 1980s and early 1990s was directly related to the future stability of democracy in Argentina, the extent to which reforms to the higher education system or labor representation structures are connected to regime outcomes requires further justification. The analytic value of the concept of democratization suffers if any policy discussion or any aspect of the political process—regardless, for example, of the years that have passed since the transition—is seen as part of "democratization." A crisper definition of the dependent variable is therefore needed in order to know when democratization ends and normal politics begin.

This conceptual point is related to questions regarding the book's broader theoretical contribution. Anderson defines democratization by institutions as a different "mode" of transition; different, for example, from democratization via revolution. The process she identifies is one characterized by bargaining over policy and clashes between key actors, as well as debates about what should be the appropriate checks on presidential power. Although opposition to presidents' initiatives is often interpreted as the result of enduring authoritarian enclaves, this certainly lies in the eye of the beholder. One person's obstructionist strike is another person's struggle for rights. Moreover, when all of this takes place within the contours defined by the country's constitutional scaffolding, the fundamental issue that arises is whether these processes have enough specificity to constitute a distinct type of democratization or whether they are in fact the bread and butter of democratic politics that political scientists interested in Latin American parties, legislatures, or courts have documented extensively.

A final point relates to the treatment of alternative explanations. As mentioned, the author argues that political culture, in particular a robust civil society, cannot explain democratization in Argentina. Where social capital is low, the impetus for democracy has to be found elsewhere. This portrayal of Argentine civil society is, however, open to interpretation. In particular, there are ways that Argentine civil society stands out in terms of its vibrancy and democratizing import. Argentine NGOs, for example, have been pioneers of strategic litigation and other forms of *cabildeo* in Latin America, leading to a critical expansion of the sphere of civil, political, and socioeconomic rights. Moreover, mobilizations in support of democracy and against authoritarianism, sponsored variously by social movements, most political parties, unions, and grassroots organizations, arguably played a crucial role in bolstering political stability at various moments of crisis since 1983. This, of course, does not challenge the book's broader point about the role of institutions—and the interactions they structure and facilitate—in fostering democratic consolidation. This is obviously not incompatible with the presence of robust civil society support for democracy. The real question going forward, therefore, is how do we better understand the interaction between these two factors?

Democratization by Institutions engages with important questions for scholars of Argentina and Latin America more generally. The book makes an effort to place the main case study in broader comparative perspective, not only with reference to other countries in the region but also by comparing and contrasting the Argentine presidency with its U.S. counterpart. Students and researchers alike will find it informative and stimulating.

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