With notable exceptions, democracy in Latin America has been more stable, long lasting and robust than at any period in the region’s history. Even in Argentina, a country infamous for political instability and its resultant violence, democracy was able to survive the worst economic crisis in the country’s modern history.

Yet, as numerous studies have demonstrated, it would be a mistake to become too complacent, confident that, at long last, democratic regimes have consolidated themselves in almost all countries in the hemisphere. Rising levels of poverty and the highest levels of income inequality in the world, not to mention the ongoing political problems in Colombia and Venezuela—two of Latin America’s oldest democracies—are reasons for ongoing concern. Even if democracy were truly consolidated, what kind of democracy is being consolidated and how durable or viable will these regimes prove to be over the long term? Will they last decades, like Costa Rica’s Latin American version of social democracy? Or will they suddenly collapse after equally long, or even longer, periods of time, as happened in Chile and Uruguay in 1973 and may be happening today in Colombia and Venezuela?

These problems fundamentally reflect the ambiguous nature of citizenship in Latin America today (Oxhorn 2003). While Latin Americans enjoy an unprecedented level of political rights of citizenship, their basic civil rights are increasingly precarious and their social rights of citizenship are being narrowed in scope. It is this contradiction—the apparent inability of citizens to use their political right to vote to find democratic solutions for their most pressing needs—that is perhaps the greatest threat to democracy in the region. At best, it could suggest to Latin Americans that democracy is irrelevant to improving the quality of their lives; at worst, democracy could appear as an obstacle to finding practical solutions to the most serious everyday problems people must confront. Ultimately, the challenge of safeguarding democratic governance in the region reflects the need to improve the quality and meaning of citizenship.

In this chapter, I argue that the principal obstacles to improving citizenship in the region stem from what I suggest is the defining characteristic of Latin American democracy today, what I label neopluralism. Paradoxically, however, the threat will not come from high levels of poverty and income inequality per se, but rather their consequences in terms of how the average Latin American actually experiences democratic governance. After defining neopluralism in the

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1 Forthcoming in Joseph S Tulchin and Margaret Ruthenburg, eds., *Citizenship in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006) I would like to thank Chris Sabatini for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2 This draws on the famous distinction made by T.H. Marshall between three kinds of citizenship rights: civil, political and social. According to Marshall, citizenship rights begin with the granting of universal civil rights and then expand to encompass, first, political rights and, later, social rights. See Marshall, T.H. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
first section of this chapter, I then argue that it limits citizenship rights in three inter-related ways: growing economic and physical insecurity, and the fragmentation of civil society. Equally serious, in the third section of the paper I argue that neopluralism, by its very nature, diverts public attention away from the structural causes of these three problems, opening the door to new forms of extremism and populism as a way of filling a perceived political void. In the concluding section, I speculate on what might be done to reverse these negative trends.

Before proceeding, it is important qualify the following arguments in two important ways. First, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to directly compare the quality of citizenship today with what might have existed in the past. Many of the problems and challenges facing Latin American democracies today are not new, although many may have been exacerbated by trends dating back to the exhaustion of the state-led development model in much of the region beginning in the late 1970s, the subsequent debt crisis of the 1980s and the nature of the recent transitions to democracy. Second, the chapter seeks to highlight an important and very positive feature the current period in comparison to much of the region’s history: the unprecedented spread and relative stability of free and generally fair elections. Indeed, this is the source of the central paradox that the paper addresses: the simultaneous existence of old and new socio-economic problems with meaningful political rights in virtually every country in the region. For this reason, there is an underlying optimism that such problems can be addressed democratically, at the same time that the criticisms of the current period should are not meant to imply romantic image of the past as being in any fundamental sense “better.”

The Context: Neopluralist Democracy

In order to understand the principal obstacles to improving the quality of citizenship in Latin America, it is important to first provide an analytical framework for classifying the kind of democracies that are predominant in Latin America today. While a large body of literature has emerged focusing a number of democratic deficits affecting the quality of democracy in the region, the dominant characteristic of Latin American democracies for the purposes of understanding citizenship is what I call neopluralism. Neopluralism is a market-centered pattern of political incorporation. It has replaced the state-centered pattern of incorporation associated with corporatism and the developmentalist state that dominated the region up through the 1970s, and is closely associated with current neoliberal economic policies emphasizing free trade, open markets and a minimal role for the state in both the economy and society. Yet it is not reducible to neoliberalism. More broadly, neoliberalism reflects a combination of growing globalization and the failure of the developmental state in the context of the debt crisis and lost decade of the 1980s—the same factors which largely influenced the adoption of neoliberal reforms in the first place. The pluralist aspect of neopluralism revolves around

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4This is why it is important to emphasize that neopluralism and neoliberal economic reforms are two parallel processes that share similar ideational backgrounds. They rarely, if ever, emerge simultaneously and countries vary considerably in terms of how far neoliberal reforms have

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the belief that the best balance of interests and values within a given polity is produced by some form (however limited) of free competition among individuals in the rational pursuit of their self-interest. In much the same way that the market is characterized in liberal economics, the rational maximization of individual interests (which are reconciled through the mechanism of the market when they conflict) is portrayed as the driving force behind progress. Individual freedom is valued above all, and this requires respect for private property and (ideally, at least) the rule of law (Oxhorn 1998a: 201).

What distinguishes neopluralism from the more traditional pluralist model associated with democracy in the United States (Dahl 1961) is its marked authoritarian bent. Ultimate political authority is essentially decided upon through a free a market of votes. But once elected, officials have few checks on their power and frequently bi-pass representative democratic institutions (O'Donnell 1994; Oxhorn and Ducantenzeiler 1998b). Moreover, a variety of unelected (and unaccountable) power holders, particularly the military, exercise control over key state decisions (McSherry 1998).

The logic of neopluralism, undergirded by market-based economic reforms, permeates entire political systems in a variety of ways. In particular, market principles and market-based incentives come to play a defining role in collective action. An individual’s personal economic resources largely determine the extent and nature of her political and social inclusion. They also directly affect the quality of education, health care and even the legal protection a person enjoys. Just as the state is assigned a minimal role in insuring the smooth functioning of the market in the economic realm, the state largely abdicates its role in providing incentives (both positive and negative) for collective action. The public and private goods formally available at the state level to those mobilized earlier periods, as well as the coercive incentives for the hierarchical organization of economic interests under state corporatism (Schmitter, 1974), no longer exist or have been significantly reduced. Group identities and collective interests lose any intrinsic value, and organizational activity within civil society reflects individual, self-interested decisions to join. A direct consequence of this is that socio-economic inequality has a more pronounced impact on political and economic policymaking, since collective actors representing the lower
classes are less able to serve as counterweights to the predominance of economic interests.\(^5\)

In the context of neopluralist democracy, inequality and high levels of poverty are not direct threats to democracy. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of neopluralism is the way it deflects public debate away from the structural causes of poverty and toward a focus on its most notorious consequences.

**Neopluralism and the Limits of Citizenship**\(^6\)

The structural changes associated with neopluralism adversely affect quality of democratic citizenship in at least three ways. The first is through growing economic insecurity. Economic insecurity threatens democracy by directly decreasing the ability of workers to engage in it, both individually and collectively. This increased insecurity is a direct result of neopluralism’s reliance on the market for determining the best allocation of resources and opportunities for all members of society. As a result, labor codes throughout the region have been modified to generally make it easier for firms to hire temporary workers and fire current employees (Oxhorn 1998a). This new labor market flexibility allows for the maintenance of international competitiveness on the basis of low wages. Moreover, governments increasingly “informalize themselves vis-à-vis their own laws in their quest for even more foreign investment” by creating special production zones that exempt foreign firms from labor legislation and taxation policies applicable in the rest of the nation (Portes 1994: 168). Where existing rights are not taken away outright, their systematic violation is often ignored by the state.

The consequences of this have been significant. Latin American economies grew approximately 15 percent in the first half of the 1990s, yet unemployment also rose, while real wages fell. This is in part because 90 percent of all new jobs created in the 1990s were in the informal sector (Vilas 1999: 15).\(^7\) Not surprisingly, poverty rates have remained persistently

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\(^5\) I will discuss some of the consequences of this for citizenship and democracy in the next section.

\(^6\) I am not arguing that these problems are necessarily new or that the previous state-centric development model was somehow was able to avoid them. Instead, I am arguing that they are qualitatively different (and frequently quantitatively worse) compared to Latin America’s past, at the same time that neopluralism’s embrace of embrace of universal political rights opens up new possibilities for resolving both “new” and “old” problems relating to democratic citizenship that may not have existed in the past. For more on this point, see Oxhorn, Philip. 1998a. Is the Century of Corporatism Over? Neoliberalism and the Rise of Pluralism. In *What Kind of Market? What Kind of Democracy? Latin America in the Rise of Neoliberalism*, edited by P. Oxhorn and G. Ducantenzeiler. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Park.

\(^7\) Chile is a partial exception, with real wages showing moderate growth between 1992 and 1995. Yet among the poorest 10 percent of workers, the proportion earning less than the minimum wage increased from 48 percent to 67 percent. Moreover, the overall pattern of income distribution at best remained the same, and may even have worsened during the same period. See Altimir, Oscar. 1998. Inequality, Employment and Poverty in Latin America: An Overview. In *Poverty, Inequality in Latin America: Issues and New Challenges*, edited by V. Tokman and
The percentage of poor households did decline as a result of economic growth, but only by 2 percent, from 41 percent to 39 percent in the mid-1990s. This is substantially higher than the 35 percent rate experienced during the early 1980s, and represents approximately 210 million people—50 million more than the average for the entire decade of the 1980s. In what Inés Bustillo, Director of CEPAL’s Washington Office, the “lost half decade,” Latin American standards of living have stagnated since 1997 and 10 million more people have been added to the region’s poverty rolls. Employment is no longer a guarantee of even a minimal standard of living. For example, 70 percent of all poverty is accounted for by low wages in Argentina (Vilas 1999: 17). More generally, the region’s poor performance in poverty alleviation reflects extremely skewed patterns of income distribution (Koreniewsicz and Smith 2000: 13). These trends reflect structural problems in the economy that can be corrected only through state intervention. As Díaz concluded:

...an important portion of the poor in the 1990s work and receive regular wages. However, their employment is precarious, unstable and subjected to authoritarian labor relations. This means that poverty no longer is generated by “exclusion” from the system, but is reproduced thanks to the exploitation of the workforce. The consequence is that economic growth will not by itself solve problems of poverty or inequality, but will more likely reproduce them (Díaz 1991: 89).

These same trends are also responsible for the weakening of labor movements, one of the principal representatives of the lower classes throughout the region. Workers in the informal sector and most free trade zones are only rarely organized (Barrera 1999; Organización Internacional del Trabajo 1996). Declining union membership and organizational fragmentation have combined to reduce the collective bargaining power of organized labor, independently of legal changes designed to have a similar effect (Organización Internacional del Trabajo 1993: 29). Increasingly, organized labor has become a narrowly self-interested actor, competing with other groups in civil society in the pursuit of the particularistic interests of its reduced

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8These figures are taken from Koreniewsicz, Roberto, and William C. Smith. 2000. Poverty, Inequality, and Growth in Latin America: Searching for the High Road to Globalization. Latin American Research Review 35 (3):7-54. As the authors note in their comprehensive review of the issues and debates concerning the relationship between economic growth, poverty and inequality, poverty rates again began to rise as a result of the 1999 recession that affected most of the region.

Moreover, labor union elites have often bargained with elected governments over concessions intended to preserve their own individual status and institutional position through control over worker pension funds, government posts and so on, in exchange for their acquiescence to legislative changes curtailing organized labor’s effective power (Buchanan 1997; Murillo 1997; Zapata 1998). This has further weakened organized labor by contributing to a growing distance between the union rank-and-file and their leaders.

Aside from the obvious effect of economic insecurity on the capacity of workers and other economically disadvantaged groups to participate in the public sphere, another important consequence has been the erosion of their will to participate. As Vilas notes, the growing phenomenon of the working poor is radically altering what he calls “the culture of work.”

The idea of employment as the means which permits a living to be earned…is now diluted by the evidence that having a job does not necessarily permit one to live better. The vision of the union as the instrument of the defense of rights and access to benefits is likewise losing ground. The idea of belonging to a group of fellow-workers is brought into question by fragmentation. The sentiment of solidarity with fellow workers is undermined by the competition for all against all for a decent job (Vilas 1999: 20).

Under these circumstances, the necessity of day-to-day survival may make public participation and collective action seem, at best, a luxury one can no longer afford and, at worst, a wasted effort. As Victor Mejía, President of the Association for Community Development in San Salvador, explained, there is an unavoidable decline in organizational activity when “the people in the communities are thinking about what they will eat today, despite all their other problems” (Personal interview, San Salvador, May 1997).

Rising crime rates and the predominant responses to them reflect the second way in which neoplasialm threatens the viability of democracy. Crime rates, in part fed by growing economic insecurity, have risen substantially in almost every country in the region. This has lead to the criminalization of poverty, a marked increase in state repression and the de facto marketization of the rule of law.¹¹

¹⁰ In many countries, organized labor traditionally represented a more privileged segment of the popular sectors. See Portes, Alejandro. 1989. Latin American Class Structures: Their Composition and Change during the Last Decades. Latin American Research Review XX (3):7-39. What has changed is organized labor’s ability to represent the lower classes politically, including workers. What also may have changed is its willingness to try, given the fact that the existence of a large informal sector is a major threat to its ability to organize large numbers of workers collectively.

To deal with rising crime rates, the poor are often targeted by police efforts to control crime in what amounts to criminalizing poverty. As Pinheiro (1999:2) explains, “…the poor continue to be the preferred victims of violence, criminality, and human rights violations” (Pinheiro 1999: 2). Despite recent transitions to democracy and a substantial reduction in the systematic violation of human rights by the state (with the exceptions of Peru and Colombia due to ongoing civil wars), the overall level of state violence in these countries has generally not declined. Instead, it has undergone a qualitative change, as it is no longer directed against the political opposition, but the poor (Méndez 1999b: 19-20). Moreover, the military is increasingly becoming involved in basic law enforcement, particularly in the growing area of drug-related crimes (Kincaid and Gamarra 1996; McSherry 1998). In some cases, the criminalization of poverty is even formalized into law. For example, the elected government of El Salvador passed several laws (portions of which were eventually declared unconstitutional) in March 1996 which stipulated that individuals were to be considered potential criminals subject to imprisonment and the loss of basic rights simply because of their appearance (Oxhorn 2003).

What is most surprising is the lack of opposition such trends generate. Because the poor remain the principal victims of crime, even laws like those in El Salvador generally receive widespread popular support among the poor (Méndez 1999b; Neild 1999). This was the case with the laws in El Salvador. Similarly, a 1998 poll conducted by the Wall Street Journal (April 16, 1998: A15) found that fears of social violence, corruption and upheaval led more than a quarter of the respondents in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela, as well as a majority in Ecuador, to state explicitly that they preferred more authoritarian governments.

Public support for repressive police policies involves more than just a simple fear of growing crime rates. Abuse of the legal system by elites, corruption and widespread perceptions that officials enjoy a certain level of impunity regardless of what they do has also undermined trust in legal institutions. Throughout Latin America, with the exception Chile, public confidence in the judiciary is alarmingly low. This is particularly true for low income groups, including the poor in Chile (Garro 1999: 279). It reflects not only the continued distrust of state institutions caused by high levels of abuse under authoritarian regimes, but also the fact that such practices do not end with the transition to democracy. Laws and personnel are held over from the authoritarian regime and are difficult to change. People become accustomed to pursuing extra-legal remedies for their grievances. Moreover, elected officials have contributed to the

pervasive lack of confidence in judicial institutions through their own political intervention in the courts (Méndez 1999a). As a result, people are reluctant to cooperate with law enforcement agencies, even to the extent of reporting crimes. In Chile, for example, up to half of all burglaries and thefts go unreported, despite the fact that this is the only country in the region where most citizens approve of police performance (Neild 1999: 5).

This lack of citizen cooperation leaves few alternatives to applying more violence because effective law enforcement and crime prevention are dependent upon community involvement. Yet repressive police measures ultimately do little to improve the image of law enforcement agencies. Instead, there is a real danger that the situation will only be exacerbated as local communities further withdraw from the legal community. As Neild warns:

> it is precisely the record of authoritarian policing that built up social control and repressive functions at the expense of criminal investigation and crime prevention [and] generated the high levels of public mistrust that exist today. There is a real danger of a vicious circle in which a failure to act reinforces public perceptions that government is weak, while overreaction with “war on crime” and “fire force” policing measures leaves the impression that little has changed and will, in the end, only deepen the loss of confidence in the formal justice system (Neild 1999: 13).

The criminalization of poverty and resort to repressive police methods also reflect the widespread marketization of the rule of law. Basic civil rights are in effect allocated according to people’s “buying power.” Although equal protection under the law exists on paper, the poor cannot access it because of their limited economic resources. The state is incapable (because of corruption and its own lack of resources) of filling the void. Instead, legal systems serve to further reinforce structural problems of inequality and social exclusion. As Pinheiro argued, “police and other institutions of the criminal justice system tend to act as ‘border guards,’ protecting the elites from the poor...Middle class and elite crimes,” including corruption, fraud, tax evasion, and the exploitation of child or slave labor, however, are ignored by judicial systems which focus on the crimes committed by the poor (Pinheiro 1999: 4-5). At the same time, particularly among the relatively well-off, there is an increasing privatization of law enforcement throughout the region as people purchase personal security by contracting private police forces. For those who lack the economic resources to hire armed guards or pay corrupt judges and police in order to attain justice, taking justice into one’s own hands in the form of vigilantism or “popular justice” is a growing phenomenon (Neild 1999).

Rising crime and the increasingly violent and arbitrary responses to it inevitably have harsh consequences for the quality of democracy. As potential victims of crime, people can lose their “sense of minimum security...which allows them to look for alternative ways to improve their situation” (Personal interview, Victor Mejia, San Salvador, May 1997). After all, why “bother” to strive to move a head if one can so easily lose everything?

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12The vulnerability of the poor only increases as a result of their poverty. For example, “Juan,” a street vendor in Santiago, Chile, in 1986 was barely able to make ends meet selling newspapers and periodicals near the central downtown metro station—a choice spot given its location near the University of Chile and downtown offices. When he was robbed by neighbors in his own shantytown, he was cut off from his suppliers. Months later, when he somehow managed to save
of developing countries in various parts of the world demonstrate that high levels of crime not only diminish economic opportunities for the poor, but also lead directly to decreases in school attendance, community investment in housing and infrastructure, and participation in community-based organizations (Neild 1999). Looking beyond the local level, the result is not only an erosion of public confidence in state institutions, but the perpetuation of fear of them. The increased role played by the military in internal policing only serves to exacerbate neopluralism’s authoritarian tendencies, further reducing the space for popular sector participation in the public sphere assuming the poor are even willing to try.

The latter point underscores the third way in which neopluralism restricts the scope of citizenship rights in much of Latin America: the fragmentation and atomization of civil society. Popular sector organizations often remain small, atomized and dependent on external (state and/or non-governmental agencies) largesse. Their efficacy so essential for understanding the impact of the public sphere thus remains severely circumscribed.

This fragmentation reflects a variety of factors associated with neopluralism, including the demobilization of popular sector organizational activities during democratic transitions (Oxhorn 1998a; Oxhorn 2003). Efforts to reform both the state and society to conform more closely to market principles have often exacerbated this problem. Social welfare reforms, for example, emphasize helping people participate in the market by targeting those most in need of assistance until they can resolve their situation through participation in the labor market. This can generate political apathy as people’s efforts are devoted to participating in the market, and they have less time and perceived need to become politically active. State agencies frequently play popular organizations off against one another in a competitive scramble for limited resources, particularly when social welfare budgets remain tight in order to curtail government spending (Cardoso 1992; Eckstein 1988; Gay 1990; Piester 1997). Decentralization of social welfare services, moreover, can further fragment potential popular social movements, restricting popular sector organizational activity to narrowly circumscribed communities. At the same time, popular sector mobilization is often circumscribed by fear of provoking a backlash from authoritarian elements in the state, particularly the military, leading to further withdrawal from the public sphere (McSherry 1998; Oxhorn 1995). Combined with problems of social organization created by increased economic insecurity and the effects of anti-crime efforts, the public space available to Latin America’s lower classes is quite limited, while their ability and willingness to try and occupy it remains in doubt.

The recent experience of Chile underscores the challenges posed by neopluralism in the region. The strength of Chile’s political parties and state institutions, not to mention its economic success and democratic stability, suggest that it would be the least likely country to experience the general problems of citizenship I associate with neopluralism. Yet the policies of state reform and the neoliberal development model which undergird neopluralism had their earliest, and in many cases most complete, expression in Chile beginning with the military regime and were carried through during the transition to democracy. Nor is Chile immune to more general trends.

The necessary money to purchase a new stock to sell, he had already lost his choice location at the corner of the metro exit and was forced to move elsewhere to a less “lucrative” spot on Santiago’s crowded downtown streets.
of globalization, as well as the exhaustion of its state-centric development model, which further contribute to the emergence of neopluralism. In practice, all of this has meant that neopluralism has been both slower to emerge and less authoritarian than in most other countries of region. Yet neopluralism, even in its more moderate form, is in many ways at the root of Chilean democracy’s most important challenges. These problems revolve around what the United Nation’s Development Program (UNDP) in their 1998 Chile Human Development Report concluded was the “paradox” of Chilean development: “a country with notable economic development where the people do not feel happy” (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 1998).

Chile experienced an average annual economic growth rate of 6 percent through the end of 1998 (when Chile, as well as the rest of the region, entered into recession). This thrust Chile to the highest position (number 34) of all Latin American countries according on the Index of Human Development (United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 1999). Over a million and a half people were able to escape poverty in just seven years, as the poverty rate declined from 46.6 percent in 1987 to 28.5 percent at the end of 1994. By the end of 1998, Chilean government statistics showed poverty had declined even further, to just 21.7 percent of all families when government financial support is included (Santiago Times, June 11, 1999). Inflation remained in check and unemployment hit new lows. Yet according to its 1997 survey of human security (long before there was any indication Chile would be heading into a deep recession at the end of 1998), the UNDP found that there was an “important dissonance between [Chile’s] objective achievements and the perception of the people (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 1998: 3). In one poll on which the report was based, taken in the Southern zone of Santiago, for example, almost 83 percent of the respondents said they were not happy, regardless of their impression of the country’s economic situation.

This dissonance stemmed from the high level of insecurity perceived by the majority of Chileans. This insecurity had three sources according to the UNDP study. First was what the authors identified as “fear of the other,” including ones’ own neighbors, which transformed the “the city into a hostile territory” (p. 3). The second source of insecurity was people’s fear of economic exclusion. Finally, the report found the pervasive impression that “things were out of control,” a “fear of the senseless” stemming from perceptions of urban disorder, drugs and “diffuse experience of ‘chaos’” (p. 3).

Two good examples of these subjective feelings of insecurity that are difficult to fully comprehend from more objective indicators of the reality people face deal with crime and healthcare. Almost 80 percent of respondents to the national survey felt it likely that they would be the victim of robbery in a public space, and 60 percent feared they would be robbed in their home. Such fears, however, seemed far removed from reality in that over the pervious 12 months, only 17.4 percent of the respondents reported that they or someone in their household had been robbed in the street without violence, and 6 percent said they or a family member were robbed in a public place in a violent act. Only 6 percent of respondents reported that they or a family member had been robbed in their home.13 Similarly, a substantial majority of respondents

13It is important to note that the media’s coverage of crime likely contributed to such insecurities. I am indebted to Chris Sabatini for reminding me of this important point.
(with the exception of respondents in the highest income bracket) said they did not trust either the public or private healthcare systems to provide opportune attention of good quality and, in particular, they doubted their ability to pay for it. This is despite the fact that per capita public healthcare expenditures more than doubled from 1989 to 1996 and “today the population has the best levels of health in its history” (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 1998: 7-8).

Such high levels of insecurity created, according to the UNDP report, “a noticeable weakness in the daily sociability of Chileans” (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 1998: 6). Two-thirds of the respondents expressed serious doubts about the ability to organize their neighbors or receive help from them. Most tellingly, almost no one thought they would receive help if attacked in a public place. Civil society remains weak and fragmented, incapable of retaking the initiative it had demonstrated during the 1980s under the military regime (de la Maza 1999; Oxhorn 1995). For example, on average less than 2 percent of eligible voters participate in elections for local neighborhood councils (Juntas de Vecinos) institutions that were first established and legally recognized in the mid-1960s (Posner 1999: 70). Instead, political parties have dominated Chilean politics with a noticeable inability to resolve these problems. In effect, the transition resulted in a “… political framework that does not stimulate participation and is increasingly elitist” (de la Maza 1999: 24). Even the women’s movement, which been a key actor during the years of authoritarian rule and was able to firmly place gender relations on the political agenda after the transition, has been largely displaced from political influence.\footnote{This is despite often glaring inequities. For example, Chile has one of the lowest levels in the region of representation of women at all levels of government, and while the average earnings for men are $19,000 per year, women earn on average just $5,000. See Pedro Serrano in The Santiago Times, August 6, 1999.}

These problems are in many ways a direct reflection of the limits of Chile’s economic success. Although poverty reduction has been dramatic since the return to democracy, the pace of poverty reduction had already slowed markedly after 1994,\footnote{An average of 560,000 people per year rose above the poverty line from 1990 to 1996. That dropped to just 155,000 per year on average from 1994 through 1998. Santiago Times, June 11, 1999.} and poverty still remained significantly higher than the 17 percent poverty rate of 1970 (Rosenfeld and Marré 1997: 20). Moreover, this substantial reduction in poverty was achieved without significantly reducing the high levels of income inequality inherited from the military regime. As early as 1994, inequality even showed a slight increase as economic activity slowed (Altimir 1994; Barrera 1998; Ministerio de Planificacion y Cooperación (MIDEPLAN) 1995). This negative trend continued through 1998 (before the onset of the last recession), with government statistics from December 1998 showing that the richest 20 percent of households were earning 57.3 percent of total income, up 0.2 percent from the last survey conducted in 1996, while the poorest 20 percent of households saw their share decline 0.2 percent to just 3.7 percent of total income (Santiago Times, June 11, 1999). Despite unprecedented levels of economic growth and an even more impressive reduction in poverty throughout most of the 1990s, income inequality was virtually
the same in 1999 as it was in 1990, at the end of the 17 year military dictatorship.16

A variety of factors contribute to the perpetuation of high levels of income inequality in Chile. Many of the poor are now working poor, and employment insecurity has become a structural problem throughout the economy that the labor reforms enacted by the first Concertación government were unable to change (Díaz 1991).17 Organized labor remains relatively small, organizationally weak, and with various strains in the relationship between the leaders of the peak organization, the Centro Unitario de Trabajadores (CUT), and union rank-and-file.18 As Lagos himself explained to the leaders of the developed countries attending the June 2000 “Third Way” conference convened by German Prime Minister Gerhard Schroeder in Berlin, “I told them, you have strong unions that negotiate for your workers. But in our (underdeveloped) countries, characterized by weak unions, who can negotiate on behalf of the worker?” (Santiago Times, June 6, 2000).

More generally, throughout the region a principal factor behind high levels of economic inequality is the poor quality of public education systems which limits social mobility for the majority (Inter-American Development Bank, 1998). This stands in sharp contrast to the period 1950-79, when improving educational levels contributed to significant social mobility for many Latin Americans, particularly young ones (CEPAL 1989).19 Chile is no exception. For example, students who are able to attend private schools have a 60 percent chance of being accepted into a university, compared to just 16 percent for graduates from public schools (Santiago Times, August 6, 1999). Concern over educational performance led to the enactment of major educational reforms over the past three years, but so far their impact has been minimal. Recent results from the Educational Quality Measuring System showed no improvement compared to test results from 1996, before the reforms. Moreover, the weakest scores tended to come from


17More significant labor reforms have become a priority of the Lagos Administration after the Frei Administration failed to pass its own reform package due to the intransigence of the business community and Right in congress, although it is not clear that these reforms will significantly effect income distribution.

18 This was a common theme in interviews I conducted with labor leaders representing the principal political tendencies in Santiago in December 1995, and there is little evidence that this has changed since then. In fact, the inability of labor leaders to achieve any noticeable advancement on behalf of workers may have exacerbated this problem.

19 Education is a good example of how the problems associated with neopluralism are not reducible to neoliberal economic policies. Because of the communications revolution and more general processes of globalization, basic literacy no longer suffices to guarantee social mobility for younger generations the way it did in the past. In fact, even though privatization has exacerbated inequality, privatization policies were often a response to these general socio-economic changes in the late 20th century by introducing accountability and competition into the delivery of education.
the Santiago Metropolitan area (Santiago Times, July 10 and July 13, 2000). Similarly, of the 21 countries included in the Second International Adult Literacy Survey conducted under the auspices of Princeton University, Chile came in last. Just over 50 percent of Chileans scored the lowest possible score on reading comprehension (basically none) and 56.4 percent were “incapable of carrying out a simple mathematical calculation using numbers easily located in the text” (L Tercera, July 2000).20

The frustrations these problems engender are further compounded by enduring authoritarian legacies and what often appears to be a noticeable lack of change after the return to democracy, including Pinochet’s continued political presence, first as Command in Chief of the Army, later as Senator for Life, and now as a fugitive from justice who was declared mentally incompetent to stand trial in both Britain and Chile. In addition, there is also the important veto role played by conservative designated senators and right wing political parties which are over-represented in the legislature due to Chile’s binomial electoral system (Siavelis, 2000). One result has been the public’s growing disenchantment with the performance of the democratic regime. Such disenchantment emerged quickly, rising from 20 percent of the population to 45 percent of the population in just the first 18 months of the new democratic regime. By 1996, only 27 percent of Chileans were satisfied with the performance of the regime (Lagos, 1997). More recently, a 1999 UNDP survey found that only 45.2 percent of Chileans said democracy was preferable to any other form of government, while 30.5 percent did not care if the government was democratic or not. This compares with a 1989 survey by the Latin American Social Sciences Faculty (FLACSO) in which 64 percent of Chileans favored democracy over all other kinds of regime (Santiago Times, March 13, 2000). While the 2002 Latinobarómetro public opinion survey found that 50 percent of Chileans now felt that democracy was the preferable system of government, 79 percent felt democracy was not necessary for solving the country’s socio-economic problems and only 27 percent were satisfied with how democracy actually functioned in Chile.

Not surprisingly, voter apathy has been rising in Chile. In the 1992 municipal elections, the first in over 20 years, there was a 12 percent abstention rate and another 10 percent of voters submitted blank or void ballots. A trend seems to be emerging, and in the 1997 congressional elections, 20 percent of eligible voters (mainly youth) did not register and another 18 percent of voters cast blank or void ballots (compared to just 6 percent in 1993) (Posner 1999: 70, 74).21

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20It should be noted that Chile was the only Spanish-speaking country included in the survey, and that the rest were generally much more economically developed. It is also important to add that the educational reforms were enacted beginning in the late 1990s and it may take some time to show significant results.

21This trend was mitigated to a certain extent in the 1999-2000 elections. Although the rates of abstention and non-registration continued to rise in, there was a significant drop in the number of blank and void ballots. See Epstein, Edward. 2000. Political Apathy and Alienation in a Stalemate Society: The Limits of the New Chilean Democracy. Paper read at Paper delivered at the XXII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, March, at Miami. However, it is difficult to determine if this is a long term trend or, as is more likely, a reflection of the closeness of the elections which made individual votes more meaningful.
Voter apathy is particularly pronounced among the young, who see their future opportunities as limited and have no memories of the tumultuous 1970s and early 1980s. This is clear from voter registration statistics: while the number of Chileans 18 years old or older increased from 8 million in 1988 to 9.6 million in 1997, the number of registered voters increased by only 600,000 during the same period, a gap of a million people (Riquelme 1999).

The leadership of the Concertación has been unable to develop an effective long term strategy for dealing with these challenges. In effect, they wasted valuable opportunities for institutional change in the early years of the regime, when their overwhelming victories in the 1988 plebiscite and 1989 elections gave the Concertación government an unprecedented level of legitimacy and authority that would have helped to neutralize opposition from the military and the right to needed reforms (Garretón 1995). Moreover, Garretón notes that much of this is related to the closed nature of Chile’s political elite, to the extent that “… any potential criticisms from the intellectuals close to the Concertación was silenced by the official political class…” (Garretón 1999: 259). Pinochet’s arrest in London in October 1998 only served to highlight many of these problems as the Concertación government of Eduardo Frei failed to devise a coherent strategy that reflected the overwhelming desire of a majority of Chileans for justice:

…this episode has produced the widest distance and deepest gap between the political class, responding self-referentially and introvertedly to the situation, and a public opinion that watched perplexed as the former got entangled in the issues of national sovereignty, spun a double discourse and was incapable of representing the demand for justice of the great majority of Chileans… (Garretón 1999: 267).

Overcoming the problems of Chile’s democracy inevitably will revolve around the political parties which have exacerbated (if not actually created) them, and their relations with civil society. As authors of the 1998 Chile Human Development Report concluded, “it is fundamentally a political challenge: to develop the capacity of politics to name, accept and take charge of the fears and dreams, of the doubts and motivations of the people” (PNUD-Chile, 1998: p. 11). Unfortunately, the political realignments and changing ways of “doing politics” (hacer politica) associated with neopluralism will make it more difficult to meet this challenge, both in Chile and elsewhere in the region.

Neopluralism’s ‘Personal Touch’

Populism and the Rise of a New Form of Political Engagement

Neopluralism affects how politicians relate to voters in ways that are both old and new. Neopluralism has a strong affinity for populist forms of mobilization that offer the promise of quick solutions for pressing problems. What is new is the way in which such politicians seek to get their message across to voters and their ability to overwhelm alternative political perspectives that offer long term solutions to the structural causes of extremes of poverty and inequality. Other factors contribute to this (for example, political marketing techniques drawn from the U.S. and propagated in Latin America by U.S. political consultants), but neopluralism provides a particularly propitious context for a particular kind of political engagement to become dominant. This is perhaps most clear in the 1999-2000 presidential elections in Chile. Again,
Chile offers important insights given that the factors influencing the emergence of neopluralism are generally much stronger elsewhere.22

The 1999-2000 elections marked the first time that the presidency was decided through a run-off election after no candidate won a majority of the vote in the December 1999 electoral contest. The run-off provision was included in the 1980 Constitution as one of several institutional mechanisms established by the military regime in an effort to “engineer” a new political party system that would be dominated by two electoral blocs, if not parties. The closeness of both elections suggests that the military might have actually succeeded. In the December contest, Lagos narrowly beat the Right wing candidate, Joaquin Lavín, 48 percent to 47.5 percent. The outcome of the run-off was almost as close, with Lagos receiving 51.3 percent of the vote to Lavín’s 48.7 percent. This polarization of the vote itself was also historic. Never before in Chile’s modern history had a right wing candidate received such a high percentage of the popular vote, coming very close to an absolute majority.

In some senses, the narrowness of Lagos’ victory is not surprising. Chile had entered into its worst recession since the economic collapse of 1982, largely as a result of the Brazilian economic crisis. Unemployment again reached double-digits. To make matters worse, a prolonged drought had curtailed hydro-electric production and Chileans were forced to endure blackouts and electricity rationing. Moreover, the slow response by the Frei Government to both problems fed growing perceptions that the government was not only lacking in initiative, but also increasingly distant from the average person given its excessively technocratic, pro-business policy-style. For many, it seemed that after 10 years in power, the Concertación was running out of new ideas and that a change was needed. Lavín recognized this, successfully campaigning on the slogan “Long Live Change!” (“¡Viva el Cambio!”).

What is surprising is the swiftness of Lagos’ electoral slide. Lagos had dominated national opinion polls as late as just six months before the first round election. His apparent invincibility was underscored when he resoundingly defeated the Christian Democratic Party’s (PDC) presidential nominee Andres Zaldívar in a national primary election held in the May 1999. Despite the PDC’s clear organizational advantages over the Center-Left Socialist Party (PS) and the Party for Democracy (PPD) which supported Lagos, Lagos won 71 percent of the vote. Yet within a matter of months, the race changed dramatically and became the closest electoral contest since the 1988 plebiscite which began the transition process.

Several factors contributed to this dramatic change in Lagos’ electoral fortunes (Oxhorn 2000), but the principal factor can be seen in the contrast in their campaign styles and the kind of relationship that they sought to establish with the electorate. This contrast was in large part generational, although the differences separating the two candidates in this regard were far greater than their 15 year age difference. Fundamentally, the 61-year-old Lagos represented the kind of politics associated with Chile’s rich democratic past, whereas the 46-year-old Lavín was a new kind of politician much more in tune with Chile’s neopluralist democracy.

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22 Chile is also relatively unique in that it historically has had only limited experiences with populism compared to many other countries in the region. See Drake, Paul. 1978. Socialism and Populism in Chile, 1832-52. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
In the earlier period which came to a dramatic end in 1973, politics revolved around a strong centralized state and was orchestrated by equally strong, equally centralized political parties. These parties were closely identified with rigid ideological projects and dominated Chilean civil society, intensifying the dimension of social class in political identities. This system gave rise to Chile’s infamous “three thirds” voting pattern in which the principal electoral tendencies were divided into roughly equal Right, Center and Left blocs. No single tendency could hope to win a majority, yet their ideological differences made effective coalitions and compromise increasingly difficult to achieve.

The radical reforms of the state and the economy instituted by the military regime, combined with its intense repression of all political activity, irrevocably undermined the foundations for this kind of politics. Global trends, particularly the end of the Cold War and the dominance of U.S. influence on processes of globalization associated with the technological revolution and increased economic ties among nations over the past 20 years, accentuated these trends. This was particularly true for Chile, given the historically close ties between the Chilean Left and the Soviet bloc and the unprecedented degree to which neoliberal economic reforms were carried out in terms of economic liberalization and the privatization of state institutions. The declining importance of political parties and political ideologies, as the Chilean case clearly demonstrates, is one clear consequence of the new style of engaging in politics. Thus, even though the Chilean electorate still is divided into the same roughly equal three electoral tendencies, the consequences of this division are very different. Instead of political stalemate and confrontation, the dominant political outcome has been, if not cooperation, inertia. Moreover, the largest group of voters by far identifies with no particular tendency, giving Chilean politics an unprecedented fluidity.

It is important to emphasize that I am not suggesting that a return to the rigid ideological positions that characterized Chilean politics in the past is what is called for. Indeed, one of the principal political lessons that the parties of the Concertación learned is the need to seek compromise and avoid attempting to equate party ideologies with the national good (Garretón 1989). Rather than building this political learning, however, the role traditionally played by political parties and ideology in aggregating interests and attempting to develop long term projects for national development has largely been replaced by the candidate’s ability to personally “connect” with the people. The prestige of being chosen to lead powerful, well-organized parties in presidential elections no longer suffices to ensure voter allegiance. Lavín recognized this early on. He launched his national campaign with an unorthodox “Walk through Chile” that brought him into direct contact with Chileans from all walks of life all across the country’s territorial expanse. Throughout the campaign, Lavín adopted an “anti-party and anti-politics stance that is popular with the Chilean right [and] played to a similar mood in a populace disillusioned with the limitations of Chilean democracy and the self-absorbed maneuvers of its increasingly distant political leaders” (Winn 2000: 7).

As a result of this direct “connection” with the people, Lavín claimed to know their true problems better than Lagos, and focused his electoral promises on issues of most concern to them. To buttress his claim to truly know what was one the average Chilean’s mind, he announced with considerable fanfare in early June 1999 the results of a poll conducted on his behalf which showed that voters were concerned most about jobs and crime, followed closely by education and child care, with constitutional reform at the bottom of their concerns. The results
of Lavín’s poll were hardly unexpected and were consistent with polling results from the respected Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) in late April-early May of the same year. What was surprising was the degree to which Lavín explicitly tailored his platform to the polls—even if he never adequately explained how he would fund these initiatives given his commitment to fiscal restraint. By implication, Lavín was distinguishing himself from 10 years of unresponsive Concertación government. This is what Lavín successfully associated with his campaign slogan, “Long Live Change!” His overriding message was that he would listen to the people, whereas the previous government and Lagos had not.

The reaction of the Lagos campaign helped Lavín succeed in getting this message across. Whereas Lavín sought to deal directly with the consequences of neopluralist democracy, Lagos sought to deal with the underlying structural sources of those problems at the political level, at the same time that he stressed that he would not abandon the Concertación’s commitment to the same basic set of economic policies shared by Lavín. Lagos was certainly not insensitive to the concrete issues of most concern to the average voter, but his priorities appeared to be different. For example, even though polling data consistently showed that Chileans were largely uninterested in constitutional changes to advance Chilean democratization, this remained a priority for Lagos. Contrasting the Concertación’s primary elections, which took place at roughly the same time that Lavín’s poll was being conducted, Lagos noted that “these are two different ways of listening to what people are saying… The public is able to separate the wheat from the chaff. But why is it we are told (by Lavín) that we should only fight crime, and should not concern ourselves with the issue of designated senators. Let’s get serious!” (Santiago Times, June 8, 1999).

Similarly, Lagos’ approach to the economy appeared to be the polar opposite of Lavín’s promise of “change.” Instead, Lagos’ campaign slogan “Growth with Equality” failed to capture the imagination of the average Chilean and seemed more like just another iteration of the Concertación’s original promise of neoliberalism with a “human face.” Yet the appeal of Lagos’ promise was, ironically, limited by the legacy of the first Concertación government. Given the years of neglect under the military regime and his clear electoral mandate, the Aylwin government was able to increase social expenditures by 21 percent in real terms between 1990 and 1992, and witness a dramatic decline in the poverty rate from 46.6 percent in 1987 to 28.5 percent at the end of 1994. Such dramatic, concrete signs of improvement could not be duplicated—especially during a period of recession.

Admittedly, Lagos’ options were limited in the area of economic policy. This was part of Allende’s legacy—the need to prove that a “socialist” could be fiscally responsible. Indeed, this

23In fact, upon assuming office Lagos instituted policies to directly address many of the same issues Lavín tried to monopolize during the election. For example, the Lagos government moved quickly to virtually eliminate waiting lines at public clinics.

was perhaps the most successful part of his campaign leading up to the first round election, achieved through various meetings with Chilean business groups and the representatives of various international economic interests. The problem for Lagos was that it reinforced other aspects of his political style, as he himself recognized in changing his campaign slogan soon after the December elections to “A Much Better Chile” (“Chile Mucho Mejor”).

Lagos was also handicapped by his inability to match Lavín’s immense campaign financial resources. While the absence campaign disclosure laws makes it impossible to quantify the differences with any precision, it is clear that the lavish support given Lavín by the business community allowed him to significantly outspend the Lagos campaign. Moreover, Lavín used his estimated $50 million war chest to contract U.S. advisors—certainly the most proficient practitioners of this kind of electoral style. “Connecting” with the people in this sense is very expensive!

The contrast between the two styles was captured well by Peter Winn, when he wryly observed how “in contrast to Lagos’ top-down statesman, Lavín offered a bottom-up populist” (Winn 2000: 8). The best indicator of the permanence of this new style is that Lagos was increasingly forced to emulate it to compete. As Andrés Velasco points out, a defining moment in Chilean politics today came on January 7, when both presidential candidates used a popular term equivalent to the word “job” in English, “pega”: “That night…both presidential candidates did not promise more employment, more work or even an improved labor market, but more pega” (La Tercera, February 27, 2000). With this simple word—something that, not coincidently, would be of little importance to a North American audience which is long accustomed to its leaders promising more “jobs”—revealed in a graphic way the two candidates’ efforts, if not need, to reach out to the common person, to speak “in their language.” Fundamentally, it also reflects a shift from Lagos’ (and the Concertación’s traditional) focus on the structural or institutional causes of Chile’s social problems to Lavín’s insistence on addressing in a direct way the consequences of those same underlying problems. While such changes are fundamental to the long term prospects for Chilean democracy (Siavelis 2000), the problem is that a commitment to achieving them no longer seems sufficient to win elections, but instead may exacerbate public perceptions of a distant, self-absorbed political class that is “unconnected” with the people.26

25It is worth pointing out that the Concertación also has formidable public relations know-how, even if it was less effective in publicizing the political success of incumbent Concertación governments. In particular, the ability of the opposition to win the 1988 plebiscite was highly dependent on its extremely successful campaign publicity, which allowed it to overcome the obvious disadvantages it faced in trying to defeat an incumbent dictatorship, not the least of which was the fear on the part of many to defy the regime by voting “No.” Not surprisingly, if perhaps a bit late, the same people responsible for the 1988 campaign were given prominent roles in the Lagos campaign after the December round of voting.

26Significantly, as Garretón has argued, the lack of political vision, if not the temerity, of the Aylwin Administration in addressing fundamental issues of political reform during the first years of its mandate may itself have contributed to such popular disillusionment. See Garretón, Manuel Antonio. 1995. Hacia una nueva era política. Estudio sobre las democratizaciones.
This focus on the consequences of Chile’s structural and institutional problems also inevitably shifts attention away from issues of democratization and citizenship. Communist Party Secretarial General and 1999 presidential candidate Gladys Marín’s harsh criticism of Lavín strikes at the core contradiction or paradox of neoplastic democracy: “He was a functionary of the Pinochet dictatorship. He doesn’t know what democracy is all about” (Santiago Times, June 7, 1999). The authoritarian elements which are intrinsically part of neopluralism make Lavín’s close ties to the military regime irrelevant, even if Lagos’ own socialist “past” conditions his candidacy in substantial ways. More accurately (and independently of Lavín’s somewhat tainted past), this style of politics, at best, takes political democracy for granted. At worst, it leads to extremes of plebiscitarian styles that, in between elections, run roughshod over basic democratic principles of accountability and citizen participation (O'Donnell 1994; Oxhorn and Ducantenzeiler 1998a; Welfort 1998). It plays to the growing economic insecurities of people at the same time that it places a premium on private economic resources (including Lavín’s immense campaign war chest) for allocating political power, if not actually determining the practical effectiveness individual rights of citizenship and the style of engaging in politics. 

Chile’s strong political parties and rich democratic history tend to highlight in a particularly sharp way the principal characteristics of this new form of political engagement, but similar tendencies are already at the root of political instability throughout the region. In many ways, the spectacular rise of both Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Alberto Fujimori in Peru, to give but two examples, reflect the same fundamental dynamics in much weaker institutional

Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

It is important to note that, after he won the elections in 2000, Lagos went on to become one of Chile’s most popular and successful presidents. To his credit, he persisted (despite the polls!) in pursuing constitutional change, which he was finally pass in 2005. While the infamous binomial electoral system remained unchanged, many other “authoritarian enclaves,” including designated senators and the president’s inability to remove the commanders in chief of the armed services, were eliminated. Of course, while such constitutional changes may have been necessary, they are not sufficient for solving Chile’s socio-economic problems and much will now depend on how future elected governments use their new powers.

The importance of Lavín’s ties to the military have taken on renewed importance in the leadup to the 2006 presidential elections. This is in large part a consequence of a unique three-way race between Lavín, Sebastián Piñera (also on the Right) and Michelle Bachelet, the Socialist candidate for the Concertación. While Piñera is one of a very few party leaders on the Right who sided with the opposition and openly voted “No” in the 1988 plebiscite, Bachelet is the daughter of a General who died in prison after the 1973 coup, as well as a former political prisoner herself. It is also worth noting that the Bachelet’s unprecedented rise in popularity as the Concertación’s presidential candidate is in part due to her own personal style and warmth, although this is but one factor.
contexts. The consequences of long term structural problems associated with poverty, extremes of inequality and the apparent inability of democratic politics to address them contributed to the rise of populist leaders with little or no commitment to democracy (Chávez entered the political scene by leading a failed military coup and Fujimori’s popularity surged when he suspended Peru’s constitution and congress), but who appeared to offer concrete solutions to pressing problems.

Even more dramatic was the October 2003 resignation of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in Bolivia. Centuries of racism, decades of economic liberalization that failed to reduce poverty and inequality, a corrupt, deligitimated political class and intense nationalism served as a potent basis for a disperse group of populist leaders to mobilize widespread frustration against an unpopular and ineffective government. The violence that ensued only further discredited the Lozada government. Unfortunately, however, the ultimate losers from such a populist putsch are most likely to be the same poor, indigenous groups who made up its backbone, if only because of the incoherency of any possible alternative that it might have represented (Laserna 2003; Oxhorn 1998b). Perhaps the most poignant example is the now all-but-dead project to ship Bolivian natural gas to the West Coast of North America. The multi-billion dollar natural gas project became the focal point for the mobilization against the president, not for environmental reasons, but for a vague sense of nationalist integrity because the project would be owned by foreign firms and the gas would be shipped through a Chilean port that had been part of Bolivia until Bolivia lost the War of the Pacific in 1879. Sadly, it was the poor indigenous majority that came to the nation’s “defense,” even though they had been alienated by Bolivia’s national identity for centuries as a result of overt racism and desperately needed jobs so that they could escape their dependence on the illicit coca trade.

Stopping the Vicious Cycle
Latin America’s Democratic Challenge

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28 It is worth pointing out that these same factors help explain why populism, which has long been a problem in the region, historically has had only a limited impact in Chile.

29 It is important to note that Chávez has consistently campaigned against neoliberal reforms and this was clearly one of the sources of his electoral success, even though in practice he has not fundamentally changed the course of economic development in Venezuela and has taken advantage of his ability to win votes by appealing to many of the same basic concerns as Lavín. The example highlights how neopluralism is distinct from neoliberalism, despite their obvious selective affinities. See Weyland, Kurt. 2001. Will Chavez Lose His Luster? Foreign Affairs 80 (6):73-87.

30 While it is hard to defend the last Lozada government, it is ironic that during his first presidency (1994-97), his government did more than any other to incorporate indigenous people into Bolivia’s national identity through concrete reforms that included, among other things, constitutional recognition of Bolivia’s multiethnic character, the introduction of bi-lingual education and state recognition of indigenous community organizations as part of its state decentralization policies.
Perhaps the greatest paradox in Latin America today is that so many negative factors are converging at a time of unprecedented political rights. Problems of economic inequality and poverty are not new to the region, even if their levels are much higher. Yet these same structural problems have, in earlier periods, led to horrendous levels of political violence, including civil wars, failed revolutions and bureaucratic authoritarian regimes. That fact that this is not happening today is positive. Even if civil and social rights of citizenship remain precarious (which is also not a new problem), one should not underestimate the importance of the unprecedented level of political rights enjoyed by most Latin Americans today. It opens up spaces for trying to resolve these historical and contemporary problems that never existed before.

And, despite the negative tendencies emphasized here, other positive trends are readily identified. Among others, there is also an unprecedented level of organizational activity among indigenous groups and other minorities in a number of countries. While the women’s movement is not as active as it was during mobilizations demanding democracy, the movement has not disappeared and important gains have been made, even if much remains to be achieved. And even neoplasticism has not been able to prevent the recent electoral victories of Lula in Brazil and Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, although it is still too soon to know if they be able to fully live up to their democratic promise.

All of this underscores the importance of even limited political openings and political rights. Latin America’s democratic challenge is to push those spaces out further and increase both what those rights entail and who is able to fully benefit from their exercise. Unfortunately, if this does not happen, the resultant void will not only discredit the political rights that were often won at great cost, but it is likely to be filled by opportunists whose populist and/or extremist rhetoric promises more responsive government.

This, in turn, will require that civil society be strengthened in order to demand more rights and that existing rights are enforced.31 This is no easy task, especially given the historical and current weakness of civil society in Latin America (Oxhorn 2003). But, here again, there are positive signs that point the way to a better, more promising democratic future (Avritzer 2002). The key is to not lose sight of that future, with the hope that it may come about.

Strengthening civil society necessarily entails a central role of the state. First, because the state plays a central role in structuring politics, it is imperative that state institutions actively seek to interact with civil society. In this way, civil actors can strive to influence state policies through democratic institutions that transcend period elections, which in turn can create powerful incentives for such actors to emerge and grow. Decentralization of state institutions so that more access can be provided for civil society actors is one important way of achieving this, but even central state institutions, including ministries and the legislature, also have an important role to play in this regard.

Historically, when the state is closed to such influence due to the existence overtly authoritarian regimes or “democratic” regimes that are perceived as being corrupt, inept and/or nontransparent (e.g., Venezuela, Peru and Bolivia), civil society’s potential is ambiguous.

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31 Political parties also have an important role to play, although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss how this can be achieved. For more on the importance of political parties for strengthening democracy, see Mainwaring, Scott, and Timothy Skully, eds. 1995. Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Somewhat surprisingly, civil society (at least temporarily) seems to have played a much more constructive role in the recent authoritarian periods when it played a pivotal role in transitions to democracy than it has since. One reason for this is the nature of the resultant neopluralist democracy: the frustration, if not alienation, of large segments of the population have led to they almost blindly supporting populist and/or extremist alternatives that have, at best, only an ambiguous commitment to respecting basic democratic norms.

Another reason, however, is that transnational institutions, particularly the Catholic Church played an important role in protecting and nurturing civil society under authoritarian regimes that those same institutions have generally renounced after the return of democratic rule (Oxhorn 1995). While the relationship was not without tensions, its success was based on the willingness of institutions such as the Catholic Church to respect the autonomy of the civil society organizations they sponsored, at the same time that they provided those organizations with both material assistance and more intangible support in the form of helping people learn how to organize and understand the importance of organization.

While institutions such as the Catholic Church are no longer in a position to reassert this role, the state should step in to take their place. Moreover, this experience provides the state with an example for how it should model its relations with civil society organizations. This is no easy task, given a history of state efforts to co-opt and control civil society, and the requisite level of trust in the state is often lacking. Yet the history of the Catholic Church in Latin America is really no better in this regard. It only began to assume a new role in a number of countries (but by no means uniformly in the region or even within the same country) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In many cases, including Chile, it did so reluctantly to fill an important political void and work to stop the increasingly violent abuses of the state. Perhaps it is now up to the state to perform the same role before the political context again changes radically and the Church again has no choice but to reenter the political realm to try to curb future outbursts of state violence.

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