

Research Proposal
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The Majority Runoff Presidential-Election Rule in Latin America

Do electoral rules affect the survival and quality of democracy, and concomitantly, democratic governance and public policy? Political scientists believe that, in general, the answer is yes.¹ Political scientists have rigorously examined the implications of parliamentary versus presidential provisions and first-past-the-post versus proportional representation systems. By contrast, another key electoral rule--election of the president by plurality or by majority runoff ("second round")--has received relatively scant scholarly attention. However, it is this rule that a majority of Latin American nations have adopted in recent years.² The hope is that majority runoff will enhance the prospects for the survival and quality of their democracies; has this hope been fulfilled?

To date, of the few scholarly assessments of majority runoff, most have been negative. Scholars have focused on the implications for the number of political parties in the country, and argued that majority runoff "contributes to the proliferation of presidential candidates and the fragmentation of the first-round presidential vote."³ Concomitantly, scholars contend that, especially as legislators are often elected on the basis of votes in the first round, the president is less likely to enjoy majority support in the legislature and more likely to suffer the interruption of his or her term.⁴ Also, given that majority runoff enables a relatively unknown candidate to enjoy the benefits of media attention, rise in the polls, and squeak into the second round, the possibility of the election of an unknown "outsider" is feared.⁵

If majority runoff correlates with party-system fragmentation, why has it increasingly been adopted? First, party fragmentation may be a cause, not a result, of the runoff rule; countries may adopt presidential runoffs because their party systems are already fragmented.⁶ Perhaps, as political learning takes place in these democracies, political parties will work harder to secure alliances prior to the first round.

Second, party fragmentation may not be as serious a problem as scholars have believed. Perhaps, political scientists have focused on the problem of party fragmentation without sufficient attention to the problem of party ossification.⁷ Concomitantly, while scholars worry that majority runoff facilitates the emergence of "outsider" candidates, perhaps majority runoff also facilitates the emergence of up-and-coming politicians whose ascendance has been blocked by aging party oligarchs.⁸ In other words, might majority runoff shift leadership-recruitment functions from Latin American political parties to the voters?

Whatever the implications of majority runoff for political parties, in all probability the key objective was to assure legitimacy for the president. Presumably, a president endorsed by a popular majority is more legitimate, and by definition not an extreme on the country's political spectrum.⁹ Also, in plurality systems, it is possible that

the elected president is disliked by a majority of voters. To date, however, empirical tests of this presumption have been scant.¹⁰

In this research, the implications of plurality versus majority runoff rules would be assessed through both quantitative, statistical analysis and through in-depth interviews and analysis in four Latin American country cases. To my knowledge, no interviews on this topic with Latin American leaders or political analysts have ever been carried out.

For my quantitative, statistical analysis, I would first use relevant databases, such as that of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, to classify presidential-election rules in young presidential democracies across the globe. Then, I would assess the relationships among plurality versus majority runoff rules and higher rates of survival and levels of democracy, as measured by Freedom House, Polity, and/or other institutions. I would also analyze relationships with the effective number of political parties. Further, I would explore trends over time, considering in particular trends in countries that adopted majority runoff after the first post-1978 "third democratic wave" election. For the Latin American region, where I am more familiar with both political trajectories and data of many kinds, I would probe more deeply, exploring for example relationships between electoral rules and popular approval of the president and trust in political parties. Relative to previous researchers, I have the advantages of a larger number of elections (a larger "N") and a larger number of countries that have shifted from plurality to majority runoff after the beginning of the "third democratic wave" (Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay). I have successfully carried out this kind of quantitative, statistical analysis previously.¹¹

Second, I would explore Latin Americans' own perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of plurality versus majority runoff rules in four country cases: Mexico and Venezuela, where presidential election is by plurality, and Chile and Peru, where it is by majority runoff. First, I would gain insights from interviews with scholarly experts in the four country cases. Then, working with prestigious colleagues in the countries, I would carry out a brief electronic survey of legislators in the four countries.¹² Why do they believe that majority runoff was or was not adopted? Do they believe that the current rule is the most appropriate for their country? Why or why not?

The two pairs of country cases were chosen for various reasons. First, they represent a range of apparent success versus failure. For scholars, Peru has been a "most likely" case for the negative effects of majority runoff; in 1990, "outsider" Alberto Fujimori finished a surprising, but distant, runner-up in the first round, was elected in the second, and proceeded to dismantle Peru's democracy. By contrast, Chile appears a "least likely" case for negative effects. In 1973, Chilean democracy was overthrown, perhaps in part because the country's leftist president had been inaugurated with only 36 percent of the vote; by contrast, since 1990 and the adoption of majority runoff, Chile's democratic trajectory has been very positive.

Mexico and Venezuela also have distinct democratic trajectories. Historically a one-party regime, Mexico was considered to enjoy a high level of electoral democracy after the 2000 elections; however, questions have been raised about its plurality rule during the 2006 presidential campaign, in which Mexico City's leftist mayor, Andrés

Manuel López Obrador, is a frontrunner. Between 1958 and 1998, Venezuela was widely considered South America's democratic star; increasingly, however, Venezuelans perceived the country's two major political parties as hegemonic and exclusive. In 1993, former president Rafael Caldera, running as an independent, was elected with only 30 percent of the vote. More recently, questions have been raised about whether or not the plurality rule disadvantages Venezuela's political opposition, which to date has been unable to unite behind a single leader.

A second set of reasons is practical. During late 2005 and 2006, presidential elections will be held in all four, and I will be able to carry out interviews and observe political trajectories while the issue of electoral rules is salient. Also, I have scholarly networks facilitating my research in all four countries, which I will be able to activate during my sabbatical from George Washington University (GWU), which begins in January 2006. In January 2006, I will travel to Mexico for an Aspen Institute conference, and will be able to conduct research in Mexico City. During February-May 2006, I will be a Visiting Scholar affiliated with the Centro de Investigación Económica at the Universidad San Martín de Porres. GWU has recently initiated various collaborations with the University of Chile, in which I can participate. I traveled to Venezuela in summer 2005 under the auspices of GWU's Latin American Studies Program, and will vigorously pursue opportunities for research in the country for its 2006 elections.

Although my research focus is on plurality versus majority runoff rules, to the extent possible I will also consider innovative alternatives. Instant runoffs and point systems have received scholarly attention; the possibility of election to the legislature based not only on the first round of voting but also on the runoff has been discussed in Peru and possibly elsewhere in Latin America. My hope is that this research will help inform Latin Americans' electoral-rule choices, and, ultimately, enhance democratic governance in the region.

¹Most scholars consider electoral rules important, but also caution that electoral rules are one component of a complex network of political institutions and that countries' particular histories and contexts matter, too. See, for example, Pippa Norris, Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²Argentina (if no candidate wins more than 45% of the vote or 40% with a margin of at least 10%), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica (if no candidate wins more than 40%), the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua (if no candidate wins more than 45%), Peru, and Uruguay have adopted majority runoff; Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela have not. In Bolivia, the "runoff" is among the country's legislators, not its citizens.

³First made by Maurice Duverger, this argument is advanced recently by John M. Carey, "Presidentialism and Representative Institutions," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Michael Shifter (eds.), Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 14. The only published empirical test for Latin America is dated: Mark P. Jones, Electoral Laws and the Survival of Presidential Democracies (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 88-102.

⁴Carey, op. cit., p. 14; and Arturo Valenzuela, speaking at the conference "Chile's Road to Development, 1990-2005: Lessons Learned," under the auspices of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 25, 2005. See also his article "Latin American Presidencies Interrupted," Journal of Democracy, Vol. 15, No. 4 (October 2004), pp. 5-19.

⁵Carey, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

⁶ Michael Coppedge, "Presidential Runoffs Do Not Fragment Legislative Party Systems," Paper presented at the American Political Science Association conference, Washington, D.C., 2000.

⁷ This argument is advanced in Cynthia McClintock and James H. Lebovic, "Correlates of Levels of Democracy in Latin America in the 1990s," Latin American Politics and Society, forthcoming in early or mid 2006.

⁸ This problem was highlighted for Venezuela by Jennifer L. McCoy and David J. Myers (eds.), The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 7.

⁹ Carey, op. cit., p. 14, and Peter H. Smith, Democracy in Latin America, p. 159.

¹⁰ As mentioned above, the work by Jones on this issue, Electoral Laws and the Survival of Presidential Democracies, pp. 186-188 is dated. A recent study is Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, "La reversión del resultado en la doble vuelta electoral: Una evaluación institucional del Balotaje," Paper presented at the Third International Congress of Latin Americanists in Europe, Amsterdam, July 3-6, 2002. Pérez-Liñán concludes that run-offs are not necessary for legitimacy and that, when the runner-up emerges as president, a political crisis is likely. However, I have methodological questions about this unpublished study.

¹¹ See my article with James H. Lebovic cited above.

¹² I have recently been in e-mail contact with Stuart Orgill of Qualtrics, at qualtrics.com. Similar research with legislators has been done previously with some success; see Scott Mainwaring, "Politicians, Parties, and Electoral Systems: Brazil in Comparative Perspective," Comparative Politics, Vol. 24, No. 1 (October 1991), pp. 212-43. Mainwaring achieved a 19.1 percent response rate.