

BOOK REVIEW

Llanos, Mariana, and Leiv Marsteintredet, eds., *Latin America in Times of Turbulence. Presidentialism under Stress*. New York: Routledge, 2023. 225 pp.; tables, bibliography, hardcover, index.

doi:10.1017/lap.2024.39

Reflection on the features and effects of presidentialism is a consolidated area of specialization among those who study Latin America. Since Linz initiated the iconic parliamentarism vs. presidentialism debate in 1984, there have been numerous studies on its effectiveness in the region. Recent events, such as the “muerte-cruzada” applied by President Lasso in Ecuador (after an impeachment challenge against him) that led to early elections); or Milei’s difficulties as president of Argentina in pushing through his policy agenda, are a reminder that leaders of presidentialist governments are not always strong. At the same time, such events have revived the debate on what it means to govern in presidentialist regimes.

Latin America in Times of Turbulence. Presidentialism under Stress is one example of a resurgence in this valuable literature. This book promotes research on the current challenges of presidentialism based on the study of what is actually happening in Latin America. Its editors, Mariana Llanos and Leiv Marsteintredet, are academics who have demonstrated their expertise on the subject in previous works. On the basis of their recognized status, as editors they have been able to bring together a group of authors from different institutions.

The aim of the book is to analyse the functioning of political institutions with the executive at the centre. Thus, over 11 chapters, the volume offers a framework for an orderly interpretation of recent processes in which presidents and executives have been directly or indirectly affected. It covers a wide range of aspects, such as relations between the executive and the judiciary, hyper-presidentialism, and the performance of the legislative branches.

The reference to “turbulent times” in this book’s title limits the study to the present moment. What is meant by “turbulent times”? Llanos and Marsteintredet use this evocative term to refer to three simultaneous phenomena: discontent and protests; distrust in institutions and the crisis of representation; and the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, the book assesses the most recent performance of Latin American democracies. In this respect, the different chapters show that a crisis, such as the pandemic, can become a catalyst. In this case, the crisis has increased, at least temporarily, the power of presidents to the detriment of other institutions in the political system.

The book contains valuable and recognizable contributions that make it essential reading for specialists and scholars of this region. Among the theoretical contributions, it is worth highlighting two that will foreseeably open up lines of research in the immediate future. The first contribution relates to the effect of impeachment and its misuse in the region’s democracies. Llanos and Marsteintredet provide an interpretation of what happened in the presidencies of Peru and Brazil as a starting point for a more general reading of the impeachment of presidents. Both cases are, respectively, an example of the obstructionist use of impeachment (Peru) and the inability to use impeachment, despite the preconditions for it to take place (Brazil).

The second theoretical contribution, with expected follow-up in the specialized literature, is the distinction between hyper-presidentialism and concentration of power. Martínez and Dockendorff stress the advantages of the latter concept, which not only refers to the constitutionally recognized powers of the president but involves a consideration of how other powers act as a constraint on the president’s authority.


Among the work's empirical strengths, the reader will find in this book, for example, data on presidential decrees approved by year in the chapter by Igácio, Rech, and Valencia; as well as on the organization of legislative work during the pandemic in the contribution by Alcántara, Barragán, and García.

Polga-Hecimovich's contribution is particularly novel in this work of rich empirical strength. His piece measures military responses to anti-government demonstrations and analyses military support across countries using data from the VDEM project. In doing so, Polga-Hecimovich brings a fresh take to a classic topic, that of civil-military relations. Further, he reframes the study of the military's role in democracies, which was particularly relevant in the earlier period of democratic transitions.

The difficulty with this type of coordinated book is well known to all those who, either as editors or authors, have been involved in such an undertaking. Teamwork entails trade-offs. Most of the chapters draw on a large number of cases from Latin America, but two chapters focus on a single case study: one of those chapters is devoted to Chilean hyper-presidentialism and the other to Mexican sub-national politics. The rationale for the choice of these case studies and not others is an issue perhaps somewhat neglected in the volume. Moreover, the thematic division of the chapters into two broad areas could have been more clearly distinguished. On the one hand, the first seven chapters fit neatly into the analysis of presidentialism under stress. On the other, there are three additional chapters on electoral bodies, sub-national politics, and civil-military relations, respectively. The latter are more thematically complex, although they provide relevant data and valuable insights. The editors summarize these contributions with a useful chapter on conclusions on the functioning of institutions, which integrates all the chapters of both "subject groups."

The quality of all the chapters, as well as the topicality of the debates raised, make the book a valuable contribution to studies on the political dynamics of Latin America and, especially, on the issues involved in understanding the functioning of presidentialism in Latin America.

In a context of shared concern over issues such as growing polarization, the deterioration of rights and freedoms, and democratic backsliding in general, the book develops a complementary perspective on the functioning of political systems. In the words of Llanos and Marsteintredet from *Latin America in Times of Turbulence* "we learn that it is wrong to assume that weak institutions will fall when faced by socio-political turbulence." Latin American presidents *have* been able to respond to a turbulent context. This can be viewed optimistically. However, it is also true that, in most countries, the need for urgent responses has meant that the executive has accumulated powers to the detriment of other institutions. The editors invite us to consider whether this pattern is a turning point or just a cyclical trend.

Leticia M. Ruiz Rodríguez 

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Email: leticiamaria.ruiz@cps.ucm.es