

## Book Review

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Omar Sanchez-Sibony (ed.). *State-Society Relations in Guatemala: Theory and Practice*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023. Tables, figures, 414 pp.; hardcover \$125, ebook \$50.

Most influential theories of Latin American politics have emerged from studying the region's major players—Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico—the primary contexts in which theories of democratization, social movements, and state-building have been developed and tested. In contrast, smaller Central American nations are often viewed as exceptions or scope conditions within these dominant frameworks and rarely drive theoretical innovation. Sanchez-Sibony's edited volume, *State-Society Relations in Guatemala*, marks a pioneering effort to integrate the study of Guatemala into core comparative politics debates. The volume explores essential topics such as democratization, political economy, social movements, civil-military relations, corruption, and subnational governance. In the 10 chapters, 12 prominent social scientists test and refine established theoretical frameworks to offer an illuminating analysis of the daunting challenges of democratization and state-building in Guatemala.

In his introductory chapter, Sanchez-Sibony situates the volume within a growing body of scholarship that views state capacity and performance as best understood in relation to society. Using the theoretical framework from Centeno, Kohli, Yashar, and Mistree's *States in the Developing World*, Sanchez-Sibony presents a largely negative portrait of Guatemala. The editor argues that the country's extremely weak party system, as well as the pervasive capture of the state by traditional oligarchic elites and new elites involved in illicit activities across Congress, parties, and subnational politics have hampered the deployment of an already weak central state. These dynamics are exacerbated by institutional incentives that counteract public-regarding policies and minimal societal pushback, adversely affecting democratic quality and economic and social outcomes.

In Chapter 1, Vargas Cullell and Durán use a comprehensive dataset on public institutions and budgets in Central America to explain state infrastructure underdevelopment in Guatemala. They find that traditional predictors like economic performance and democratization imperfectly explain Guatemala's "inchoate stateness," likely due to the country's inconsistent modernization and economic growth. The authors identify societal transformation, particularly

urbanization, as a significant predictor of state capacity, suggesting that rapid urban concentration heightens demands on the state for public services. The chapter advocates for a relational analysis of state development, focusing on shifting power dynamics between elites as a predictor of state capacity projection. The authors note that while initial democratization from above progressed due to a rift between oligarchic and military elites, further progress was hindered by their renewed alliance, especially in response to anti-corruption efforts.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the role of the Guatemalan military in contemporary politics. Lehoucq's chapter proposes a model which accurately predicts the occurrence of eight out of nine coups in Guatemalan politics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lehoucq shows that traditional variables such as inequality do not reliably predict coups in Guatemala; instead, the composition of elite coalitions is a more accurate predictor of political instability. Martinez and Nino extend this analysis by developing a sequential theory of the democratization of the military. They conclude that the armed forces in Guatemala have not democratized nor abandoned the control of the country, and that a process of normalization of the military in civilian perceptions is currently underway. Both chapters emphasize the importance of shifting power relations in elite coalitions to explain the military's role in Guatemalan politics.

Chapters 4 and 5 by Rachel Schwartz and Renzo Rosal highlight how the armed forces' persistent influence has impeded peacebuilding and democratization in post-Peace Accords Guatemala. Contrary to conventional views that focus on war settlements, international enforcement, and inclusive institutions, Schwartz' chapter argues that traditional elite cohesion has stymied both conflict resurgence and the fulfillment of peace agreements, explaining the long-lasting yet impoverished quality of peace since 1996. Rosal's chapter studies a widespread phenomenon in Guatemalan politics, subnational authoritarianism, which he attributes to the persistence of authoritarian figures from the armed conflict at the local level. This entrenched authoritarianism, bolstered by Guatemala's party system volatility, and the growing influence of illicit capital in politics, has further complicated democratic expansion. Both chapters contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on why post-war societies often struggle to realize the promises of peace and democracy, highlighting the significant role of entrenched authoritarian elites in undermining post-war peace and democracy.

Chapter 6 by Rose Spalding applies Tarrow's social movements framework to anti-mining activism in Guatemala. While social movement theory has primarily focused on advanced industrial societies, Spalding argues that the Guatemalan case offers important insights. First, it showcases the need to extend Tarrow's framework to consider the impact of colonialism, state fragility, and violence on mobilization in a pluricultural setting. Second, the interaction between global advocacy networks and local movements is crucial to understanding anti-mining mobilization in Guatemala, highlighting the significance of international support. Third, the chapter suggests incorporating political economy insights into social movement theory to address gaps in Tarrow's analysis, particularly concerning elite power and state responsiveness, thereby enriching the framework with a deeper understanding of elite behavior and its role in mobilization.

In Chapters 7 and 8, Fuentes Knight and Segovia analyze Guatemala's capitalist system in relation to Ross Schneider's concept of "hierarchical capitalism." Fuentes Knight adopts this framework but complements it with the concept of a "vulnerable authoritarian coalition," which emerges when subordinated classes are weak, while formally excluded elites hold significant power. This dynamic, combined with Guatemala's hierarchical capitalism, helps explain the country's stable yet slow economic growth in Fuentes Knight's framework. In contrast, Segovia proposes to replace Schneider's concept with that of "rentier-transnational capitalism," which captures the fact that Central America's historical economic evolution has been shaped by state intervention. Segovia contends that Guatemala's historical lack of investment in education and labor regulation has perpetuated a low-wage, poorly organized labor sector, reflecting an agrarian capitalist legacy that continues to influence the current economic landscape.

In Chapter 9, Kevin Pallister examines Guatemala's pervasive corruption, challenging Rose-Ackerman's principal-agent framework, which views corruption as an issue of individual deviance and imperfect institutional safeguards. Pallister argues instead that, in a context where it is widespread and anticipated by all parties, corruption is fundamentally a collective action problem. This perspective suggests shifting discussions on corruption from the current focus on improving principal-agent monitoring systems to exploring how to achieve tipping points: first, enabling a system plagued by endemic corruption to implement meaningful reforms, and second, ensuring that these "islands of integrity" are not undermined by the surrounding corrupt environment. Pallister highlights underexplored factors, such as conflict legacies and international enforcement combined with a stronger civil society, as crucial for anti-corruption efforts.


In the final chapter, Sanchez-Sibony examines the survival of Guatemala's feeble democracy since 1996 and its erosion since 2016 using Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán's Actor-Centered Theory (ACT). Sanchez-Sibony argues that Guatemala's minimalist democracy survived due to a lack of strong normative preferences for authoritarianism among key actors. Yet, the entry of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala in 2016 exposed key actors' insincere commitment to democracy, who switched from a neutral to a hostile stance, leading to democratic erosion. Sanchez-Sibony concludes that, although the switch in elite attitudes is mostly consistent with ACT, structural elements, such as state weakness and counterinsurgent legacies limited democratic deepening, constraining the projection of the state's infrastructural power, the electoral supply, and encouraging state capture.

*State-Society Relations in Guatemala* is an exceptional book for Latin Americanists and students of comparative politics. By engaging with a wide range of core theories that have influenced the study of Latin American politics in recent decades, the book offers a solid foundation for exploring how Guatemala's unique experience can both challenge and enhance existing frameworks. A core contribution of the book is its systematic emphasis on the relationship between state and society to explain the deployment of state capacity. It highlights how traditional theories risk falling short without considering the historic and relational nature of state-building, including the

ways in which economic and political elites subvert democratization and economic modernization processes and how oligarchic and illicit actors have captured the Guatemalan state.

The volume's predominant focus on elite dynamics and state capture may, however, overshadow the experiences and perspectives of ordinary citizens, which are only briefly touched upon in Spalding's chapter. This omission is arguably due to Guatemala's historical context of violence and genocide, which severely weakened civil society, but limits the book's exploration of how non-elite actors influence and are affected by political processes. Although refreshing in its departure from a purely violence-centric analysis, the book could also have benefited from a more systematic exploration of the historical impact of violence and state capture on grassroots mobilization. This would offer a deeper understanding not only of elite preference formation but also of the strategic calculations of grassroots citizens.

The analysis of grassroots processes is even more relevant given the book's timing, published shortly after the election of progressive president Bernardo Arévalo de León, which adds a layer of urgency to the analysis of the role of grassroots citizens in the model. The potential realignment of political forces and institutional changes under Arévalo's presidency could also necessitate adjustments to some of the book's theoretical conclusions, especially regarding the effects of the CICIG on civic mobilization and elite preferences.

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