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Chapter 5

Research Perspectives on the Revised Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index of the Image of Political Democracy in Latin America, 1945-75

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Scholarly opinions may have an impact beyond the circles of academic institutions and governmental policy-making centers when these opinions are widely disseminated via the public media. How this dissemination occurs takes on special importance, critically so, when expert opinions have been aggregated statistically. In the recent past, scholarly opinions about the status of democratic practices in Latin America, formulated by North Americans, have drawn public attention in the southern part of the hemisphere. A case in point involves the Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index which surveys scholarly images of political democracy in Latin America at 5-year intervals.¹

Commenting on the most recent survey, that of 1975 (see data in Table 5-1), a writer for the then independent and highly influential Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* wrote that "the three most democratic nations in Iberoamerica are Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Mexico, in this order, according to 84 political scholars in the United States."² The writer, Armando Vargas, quoted my report on the 1975 survey in such a way as to create a favorable image for his native

country (Costa Rica) and for his host country (Mexico).³ Thus he ignored my caveat which pointed out that the survey does not involve interval data but only ordinal data (as in this year's "beauty contest" wherein candidates are compared with each other and not with last year's beauties) and therefore we cannot say ex cathedra that Mexico has improved its position from 5 years earlier when it was in fifth place. Nor did the journalist quote my conclusion, based upon my research and interviews with Mexican political figures since 1970, that the status of democratic practices in that country had probably declined.⁴ (With such traditionally democratic nations as Chile and Uruguay having fallen victim to military coups during the quinquennium 1970-75, Mexico only appeared to have improved its position.) And finally, the journalist for *Excelsior* did not report that my study also contains a revised scale that did not place Mexico among the top three countries in terms of "political democracy" (see Table 5-2), the revision having been developed with the advice of Wilkie to reduce serious methodological problems for the entire series of surveys.⁵

The *Excelsior* article takes on special significance

[Editors' Note: For Professor Johnson's study entitled "Measuring the Scholarly Image of Latin American Democracy, 1945-1970," originally planned for publication here, see Wilkie and Turovsky, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, 17 (1976), pp. 347-365. Professor Johnson wishes to thank Merle Kling and James Wilkie for their encouragement and support of this ongoing project.]

¹ A résumé of the time-series results from 1945 through 1970 appeared in the international magazine *Visión*, March 13, 1971. See also Russell H. Fitzgibbon, "Measuring Political Change in Latin America," *Journal of Politics*, 29 (1967), p. 139.

² Armando Vargas, *Excelsior*, April 7, 1976.

³ See my report entitled "Scholarly Images of Latin American Political Democracy in 1975," *Latin American Research Review*, 11:2(1976), pp. 129-140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵ Full raw data (original and revised) are published for the first time in my "Measuring the Scholarly Image of Latin American Democracy 1945-70," in James W. Wilkie and Paul Turovsky, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, Vol. 17 (Los Angeles, UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1976), pp. 347-365.

Table 5-1
ORIGINAL FITZGIBBON-JOHNSON INDEX: U.S. VIEW OF
DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA,^a 1945-75
(15 criteria)^b

Country	Rank 1945	Rank 1950	Rank 1955	Rank 1960	Rank 1965	Rank 1970	Rank 1975
ARGENTINA	5	8	8	4	6	7	5
BOLIVIA	18	17	15	16	17	18	17
BRAZIL	11	5	5	7	8	10	9
CHILE	3	2	3	3	3	2	11
COLOMBIA	4	6	6	6	7	6	4
COSTA RICA	2	3	2	2	1**	1	1
CUBA	6	4	7	15	18	13	7
DOMINICAN REP.	19	19	19	18	14	14	13
ECUADOR	14	9	10	10	12	9	14
EL SALVADOR	13	14	11	12	11	8	10
GUATEMALA	12	10	14	13	13	13	15
HAITI	16	18	17	19	20	20	20
HONDURAS	17	15	12	14	15	16	16
MEXICO	7	7	4	5	4	5	3
NICARAGUA	15	16	18	17	16	17	18
PANAMA	8	11	9	11	10	11**	12
PARAGUAY	20	20	20	20	19	19	19
PERU	10	13	16	9	9	11**	8
URUGUAY	1	1	1	1	1**	3	6
VENEZUELA	9	12	13	8	5	4	2

a. Excludes Latin American respondents added to the survey beginning in 1970.

b. The fifteen criteria are:

1. Educational level
2. Standard of living
3. Internal unity
4. Political maturity
5. Lack of foreign domination
6. Freedom of press, speech, assembly, radio, etc.
7. Free and honest elections
8. Freedom of party organization
9. Independent judiciary
10. Government accountability

11. Social legislation
12. Civilian supremacy
13. Ecclesiastical separation and freedom
14. Professional governmental administration
15. Local government

SOURCE: Kenneth F. Johnson, "Measuring the Scholarly Image of Latin American Democracy, 1945-1970," in James W. Wilkie and Paul Turovsky, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America 17* (1976), Table 3200; and Johnson, "Scholarly Images of Latin American Political Democracy in 1975," *Latin American Research Review* 11:2 (1976) p. 137.

because of several factual considerations relevant to North Americans who study Latin American political democracy. During the presidential regime of Luis Echeverría Alvarez (1970-76), freedom of speech, which is a key item in the Fitzgibbon-Johnson index, was seriously abridged and academics and journalists were expelled from Mexico or "urged" to leave. Ironically, *Excelsior* itself was taken over under presidential initiative, an act the *New York Times* called totalitarian and likened to the regimes of Lenin and Hitler.⁶ Also, efforts by former *Excelsior* staffers to create a new open forum were initially frustrated.⁷ In the end, the re-

porter who had disseminated my "good news" about Mexico's democratic status found himself telling the *Washington Post* how he was forced to resign as chief of *Excelsior's* Washington office.⁸

This example taken from Mexico has generic relevance because a basic assumption of the Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index is that some measure of political democracy exists throughout Latin America and that we can compare the relative presence or absence of democracy among the Latin American states without specific reference to, say, the Anglo-American model. Yet, we as North Americans specializing in various aspects of the political life of Latin America may not be able

⁶Quoted by Armando Vargas, "The Coup at *Excelsior*," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October, 1976, p. 45.

⁷According to a story in the Argentine newspaper *La Opinión* (November 26, 1976), the former editor of *Excelsior*, Julio Scherer García, who was ousted by president Echeverría's takeover, sought to reestablish a free press on a weekly basis with a journal called *Proceso*. The government's newsprint monopoly denied newsprint to Scherer but when he supplied himself on the open market the first

edition of *Proceso* was completely sold out. It was believed, according to the story, that the Mexican government was one of the principal "buyers" of the new journal to keep it off the street and thereby prevent continued public criticism likely to damage to Echeverría's desired image as a leader of the Third World.

⁸Vargas, "The Coup at *Excelsior*."

130a

Table 5-2
**REVISED FITZGIBBON-JOHNSON INDEX: U.S. VIEW OF
 DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA,^a 1945-75:
 FIVE KEY CRITERIA^b**

Country	Rank 1945	Rank 1950	Rank 1955	Rank 1960	Rank 1965	Rank ^c 1970	Rank 1975
ARGENTINA	9	15**	15	4	7	14	5
BOLIVIA	16	13	12	15	16	15	15
BRAZIL	12**	5	4	6	10	17	16
CHILE	3**	2	3	3	2**	2	18
COLOMBIA	3**	6	9	5	5	5	3
COSTA RICA	2	4	2	2	1	1	1
CUBA	5	3	10	16	19	19	14
DOMINICAN REP.	20	20	20	20	14**	10	6
ECUADOR	12**	7	6	9	12	7	10
EL SALVADOR	14	14	8	13	11	8	8
GUATEMALA	11	11	13	12	13	9	9
HAITI	19	17	14	18	20	20	20
HONDURAS	17	8	11	14	14**	12	12
MEXICO	7	9	5	7	6	6	4
NICARAGUA	15	18	19	17	17	16	17
PANAMA	6	10	7	11	9	11	11
PARAGUAY	18	19	18	19	18	18	19
PERU	8	15**	17	10	8	13	13
URUGUAY	1	1	1	1	2**	3	7
VENEZUELA	10	12	10	8	4	4	2

a. Excludes Latin American respondents added to the survey beginning in 1970.

b. The five criteria are:

1. Free speech
2. Free elections
3. Free party organization
4. Independent judiciary
5. Civilian supremacy

c. Calculated by Wilkie from data in Johnson's Table 3204, cited in source below.

SOURCE: Johnson, "Measuring the Scholarly Image of Latin American Democracy, 1945-1970," Tables 3201 and 3204; and Johnson "Scholarly Images of Latin American Political Democracy in 1975," p. 137. Cf. discussion of the Index by James W. Wilkie, *Statistics and National Policy*, Statistical Abstract of Latin America Supplement 3 (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1974), pp. 480-481.

to divorce our judgments from ethnocentric influences, hard as we may try. Also, one must admit the possibility that the concept of democracy is not applicable to the political life of Latin America. Nevertheless, all of the Latin American countries have governments that subscribe to "democracy" as a desirable principle, even though it may be necessary for regimes to suspend the principle's application in operational terms for indefinite periods. Thus, the taking over of *Excelsior* may seem undemocratic to some and not so to others.

In short, Latin America boasts a range of democratic forms: people's democratic dictatorship (Cuba), military-populistic democracy (Panama, Peru), official single-party systems (Mexico), and official two-party systems (Brazil). Even the old-style dictators like Paraguay's Stroessner and Nicaragua's Somoza regularly legitimize themselves via "elections" in which the people have little choice. The Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index, then, may be measuring the degree of "undemocracy" in Latin America. Certainly the onslaught of the Echeverría regime against various organs of the Mexican news media and control of newsprint via a

government monopoly (a common Latin American practice) suggests that "undemocracy" may be a more meaningful concept in terms of freedom of speech and press; so that to say such-and-such countries are the most democratic in Iberoamerica becomes a somewhat empty affirmation.

Ironically one of the goals of the now defunct Alliance for Progress (which cost the United States over US \$20 billion) was to promote nonviolent democratic political change throughout Latin America. When the Alliance ended around 1972, most of the area was under some form of dictatorship whereas the reverse was true when the Alliance was initiated in 1961. Since creation of political democracy in Latin America was a foreign policy goal of the United States it could be argued that it is appropriate for U.S. scholars to inquire into the status of Latin American democratic practices, albeit in terms of the paradoxical "undemocracy." Perhaps, it is more appropriate to relate the matter of United States interventionism in Latin America through foreign assistance to the "ups" and "downs" of what we perceive Latin American political democracy to be. This task I have undertaken in a recent study with my colleague Miles

Williams. We find both quantitative and qualitative evidence to support the contention that U.S. aid to Latin America has had a deleterious effect on democratic political development during recent decades.⁹ It is, thus, fruitful to compare the scholarly image of political democracy, using statistical tests of significance, with a measurable output of United States foreign "aid" policy.

Also, we are developing a method of reinterpreting the Fitzgibbon-Johnson surveys, for example, to show by how many points a country decreased in its democratic image even as its relative standing in Latin America gained during a given quinquennial period. This method involves the construction of a Democratic Rating Coefficient (DRC) and a Power Rating Coefficient (PRC), the latter based on an experimental supplementary instrument that was appended to the standard Fitzgibbon-Johnson questionnaire for the first time in 1975. I hope that by the time of the 1980 survey we will have perfected a methodology with which to estimate political "distances" between country ranks. Also, I hope to continue measuring the interface between political power, democracy, and interventionism in Latin America, it being important to test political democracy by relating it to both internal and external influences.

With regard to interpretation, users of the Index should consider the composition of the panels of experts who generate the judgments that are aggregated statistically. Prior to 1970 only resident scholars in the United States were surveyed. The overwhelming preponderance of these experts were ethnically "non-Latin." Beginning in 1970, however, I formed a panel of resident Latin American scholars who were ethnically "non-North American." The 1970 survey had nearly equal numbers of resident U.S. and resident Latin American scholars. The latter were drawn from Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina not only because of financial limitations but also because of my own rapport with persons who could be counted upon to answer the questionnaire competently and promptly.¹⁰

In the 1970 survey a major effort was successfully made to encourage all the respondents throughout the hemisphere to answer on the same day to avoid the situation of some experts voting before and others after a coup, thus making it difficult to aggregate the data in any meaningful way. By 1975, however, financial constraints were quite severe and no effort was made to secure a Latin American panel of experts from many countries. Because I was in Argentina, I was able to administer a Spanish-language version of the questionnaire during July 1975. The test respondents were journalists and academics from the provinces of Buenos Aires and Tucumán, with most choices dictated by personal rapport. To complicate matters in 1975, however,

Argentina was undergoing a virtual civil war and the Power Rating Coefficient had to be omitted for reasons of political sensitivity. Moreover, I had to promise then, and again in 1976, not to divulge the names of most of the Argentine respondents for at least a year.¹¹

Viewing the revised Index results (not given here) for the Argentine scholars in 1975, I find that although the Argentines viewed the status of political democracy in the neighboring republics of Chile and Uruguay more pejoratively than did the North Americans, both the Argentines and the North Americans tended to downgrade the positions of Brazil and Cuba and to upgrade the positions of the other 18 countries. Otherwise, there were few major differences between the Argentines and the North Americans. (Because the Argentine sample was taken in July, and the North American in November, data sets have not been aggregated.)

Although I tried to secure a balanced sample of Latin Americans in both 1970 and 1975, the question of political sensitivity, the legacy of Project Camelot, and the more recent disclosures of United States espionage activity, all have made it extremely difficult to secure meaningful responses in Latin America. As I write these lines from Buenos Aires in November, 1976, I would not think of asking my panel of experts from last year to repeat their survey participation — four of them have been threatened by right-wing death squads, and two are in hiding after having received threats from the left. And in Latin America as a whole, I doubt that at the present time a truly random sample on any political topic could be administered anywhere without hazard except in Costa Rica and Venezuela.

Presuming, however, that in future years it will be possible to conduct political surveys in Latin America, it will be crucial to find panelists who really know about the political systems of other Latin American countries. Since relatively few social scientists in Latin America consider themselves to be specialists on Latin America as a whole, it may be necessary to rely heavily on Latin American journalists. But even Argentine journalists who have cooperated with my survey profess relative ignorance of large areas such as Central America (except for Panama).

For these reasons, and to follow Wilkie's suggestion that it is necessary to maintain the U.S. view of Latin American democracy which the Index originally measured, it is necessary to present findings of the Index without intermingling the Latin American view. Tables 5-1 and 5-2 here offer a consistent summary of the original and revised U.S. views.

In further refining the conceptual basis of the Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index, it is also necessary to make explicit the contention that we need to make a distinction between social and political democracy, the former encom-

⁹ Kenneth F. Johnson and Miles W. Williams, "Power, Democracy, and Interventionism in Latin America: Reflections and Measurements," paper presented to the Midwest Association for Latin American Studies, October 7-9, 1976, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

¹⁰ For 1970 Latin American ranking of countries from most to least democracy, see my "Measuring the Scholarly Image of Latin American Democracy," Tables 3200 and 3204.

¹¹ I had been invited to present my findings on the Argentine survey to the Sociedad Argentina de Sociología in November 1976, but could not do so because of terrorist threats, some of which declared the entire field of sociology to be "subversive" and condemned the collaboration of Argentine scholars with North Americans.

passing social welfare made possible by leaders for the masses without regard to the latter's requirement that leaders and policies be chosen by secret ballot elections. In this view, social democracy was heavily weighted in the original Index, which had the purpose, as originally conceptualized, of measuring political democracy. If we accept this distinction, then the issue of whether or not "democracy" can exist under military regimes can be answered quite simply. In the words of Juan Pereira Fiorilo, a Bolivian scholar with whom I visited recently in La Paz,¹² social democracy is still possible under generals who came to power via politically undemocratic methods.

¹² Interview in La Paz, Bolivia, September 1976. See also development of his argument in Juan Pereira Fiorilo, *Sociopolítica de los Países Subdesarrollados* (Cochabamba, Editorial Canelas, 1971).

In conclusion, if we see the Fitzgibbon-Johnson Index not so much as a measure of which country is "democratic" but how Latin American countries appear, in relation to each other, to U.S. observers as reflecting more or less democratic tendencies, then the Index will have sophisticated meaning, especially if the revised (political) Index is compared with the original (social) Index for the 5-year intervals since 1945 — an Index with a time depth now of 30 years. In further developing this Index, my motivating concerns are humanitarian and academic, hoping thereby to provide policymakers and scholars with concepts, methods, standards, and data with which to guide and assess their practical programs and academic teachings.

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