

BOOK REVIEW

Tomáš Došek, *The Persistence of Local Caudillos in Latin America: Informal Political Practices and Democracy in Unitary Countries*. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024. Figures, tables, bibliography, index, 317 pp.; hardcover \$55, ebook \$55.
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Over the last three decades, the unitary states of Latin America have implemented extensive decentralization reforms. The transfer of functions and responsibilities from the central state to subnational governments came with great expectations, and raised hopes of better functioning, more responsive democratic regimes. In particular, it promised to strengthen democratic representation by giving more prominence to local demands and augured a period of more inclusive electoral competition thanks to the involvement of new local political actors. Were these promises kept? Now that decades have passed since the first steps at decentralization, we are in a better position to provide a full assessment of its effects on the quality of democracy in the region.

In his timely and thought-provoking book, Tomáš Došek takes on this task and paints a sobering picture of democracy on the ground in Latin America. His overall findings suggest that the high hopes of decentralization were largely betrayed. Indeed, the book starts off by noting the pervasiveness of a particular phenomenon throughout Latin American cities—that of “local caudillos or family clans”, who govern “their municipalities for prolonged periods of time in a highly arbitrary and abusive manner” (4), often turning them into their personal fiefdoms. In these local fiefdoms, electoral competition is real but unfair: the incumbent mayors resort to a variety of unsporting informal practices to tilt the playing field in their favor, making it particularly difficult for the opposition to dethrone them (through elections or otherwise).

Došek is interested in studying the reproduction and demise of these local potentates: how do local caudillos survive in office? And when do they fall? He argues that local caudillos pursue three main goals to get reelected: cementing their electoral base, controlling local political opposition, and neutralizing other actors who might expose their malpractices, such as local social leaders, the judiciary, and the media. In order to achieve these goals, local caudillos resort to a combination of more and less severe informal practices—namely, strategies to exercise power, ranging from clientelism and patronage to harassment of local media and opposition—that the author classifies according to the level of abuse. Caudillos face a dilemma: more abusive practices allow them to exert more control over their turf but makes them more vulnerable to public scrutiny and criticism, while less abusive practices are more likely to go undetected but cannot ensure as tight a grip on the municipality. Thus, local caudillos have to find the right balance between more and less severe practices to maximize their chances of staying in power. Thanks to his exclusive focus on unitary states, Došek is able to control for the effects of national-level political variables that explain the fate of subnational regimes in federal countries, and concludes that the continuity or demise of local caudillos depends solely on their agency and on the success or failure of the political strategy they choose.

The author demonstrates the validity of his claims through the analysis of six municipalities in the capital-city metropolitan areas of three different Latin American unitary countries—Renca and La Cisterna in Chile, Chorrillos and Los Olivos in Peru, and San Lorenzo and Limpio and Paraguay. The cases are selected based on the severity of the practices mayors used and on the

relative degree of success in holding on to power (continuity vs. departure from power). The intersection of these variables produces a two-by-two table with the four Chilean and Peruvian cases. The two Paraguayan municipalities are used as shadow cases to test the limits of the theoretical argument, as the capacity that national-level actors have of intervening local politics makes the Paraguayan examples similar to the federal cases on which the subnational regimes literature has traditionally focused. The between- and within-country comparative analysis is based on an extremely rich array of data collected from media archives, participation in political meetings and municipal council sessions, and 124 in-depth interviews conducted during over seven months of fieldwork.

The result of this research endeavor is a remarkable and revealing portrait of the functioning of real existing democracy and of the exercise of de facto power at the local level. The ingenuity of the research design allows the author to insulate the reproduction in power of local caudillos from national-level dynamics: what we get are distilled portrayals of local politics, lifelike depictions of small microcosmos taken in isolation from the surrounding political environment. This capacity of the book to vividly depict the inner workings of local politics makes the book appealing to anyone with an interest in evidence-based accounts of the authentic functioning of democracy on the ground.


Three parts of the argument seem comparatively less convincing than the rest of the book. First, while the book does a great job of controlling for the effect of political structures on local political dynamics, it seems to discount the weight of socioeconomic factors. Theoretically, the relevance of some of the informal practices mayors resort to might be correlated with income: the lower the municipality's income level, the more likely are "redistributive" strategies (e.g., clientelism, pork barrel, turnout buying) to matter for maintaining support. Therefore, one could argue that income might negatively affect the breadth of the menu of informal practices available to local caudillos, thereby constraining (or enabling) their strategic choices and behavior. While the study focuses solely on mid and low income municipalities, a case selection that allowed more variation in the socioeconomic and demographic composition of municipalities could have helped to control for these factors. Future research should look at patterns of local political competition in higher income districts to test the limits of the theory and uncover how democracy is practiced in contexts where basic needs are largely fulfilled.

Second, the book places its theoretical bet on agency to explain the fate of local caudillos. The bet is well placed given the relative autonomy vis-à-vis national politics that municipalities enjoy in unitary countries. However, this focus on agency at times slips into excessive voluntarism. In particular, the concept of "'menu' of informal political practices" (23) from which local caudillos can pick to build their governing strategy seem to assume that engaging (or not) in those practices is a matter of individual choices. Yet, it could be argued that actors' strategies are rarely the product of their own free will but depend on the resources that they have (or don't) or can acquire (or can't) and—in the case of local caudillos—can bank on to stay in power. Practices such as clientelism and control of judicial power, for instance, cannot be resorted to at any given moment: they presuppose the existence of an extensive network of brokers and connections with the judiciary; in other words, political resources that are developed over time. Thus, the resources caudillos are endowed with or invest to acquire ultimately determine the practices available to them.

Third, the book does a better job of explaining local caudillos' survival than their demise. Reasonably enough, the author is concerned with showing that the fate of the caudillo is not the consequence of inter-level interactions, as the literature looking at federal states finds. Yet, the explanation of caudillos' failure in the two "negative" cases is largely based on idiosyncratic factors which are difficult to generalize, and we are left with no definitive answer as to what endogenous patterns seem to explain caudillos' downfall.

Došek's *The Persistence of Local Caudillos in Latin America* is a great example of meticulously researched and clearly written scholarly work. Its explanation of how politics work at the local

level could easily apply far beyond Latin America. For this reason, the readership of this book lies beyond scholars of subnational politics and Latin America to include everyone with an interest in democracy, the exercise of political power, personalism, and populism around the world.

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