

REVIEW ESSAY

Alternative Participation: The Current Literature on Political Protest in Latin America

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Arce, Moisés, and Takeshi Wada, eds. *Popular Politics and Protest Event Analysis in Latin America*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2024. Acknowledgments, bibliography, contributors, index, 352 pp.; hardcover \$75.00, pdf \$75.00.

Arceneaux, Craig L. *Political Struggle in Latin America: Seeking Change In A New Era Of Globalization*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022. Front matter, 203 pp.; paperback €109.99, hardcover €109.99, ebook €85.59.

Boulding, Carew, and Claudio A. Holzner. *Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Copyright page, dedication, illustrations, acknowledgments, appendix 1, appendix 2, notes, references, index, 264 pp.; hardback GBP£70.00.

Bruhn, Kathleen. *Politics and the Pink Tide: A Comparative Analysis of Protest in Latin America*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2024. Figures and tables, acknowledgments, abbreviations, notes, references, index, 258 pp.; hardcover \$65.00, ebook \$51.99.

Cohen, Mollie J. *None of the Above: Protest Voting in Latin American Democracies*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2024. Figures, tables, acknowledgments, appendixes, notes, references, index, 269 pp.; hardcover \$85.00, paperback \$34.95.

Otero, Gerardo, and Efe Can Gürcan. *Collective Empowerment in Latin America: Indigenous Peasant Movements and Political Transformation*. London: Routledge, 2024. Acknowledgments, index, 277 pp.; hardback £135.00, ebook £35.99.

In contemporary Latin America, one in three people spends their life in conditions of material poverty, lacking access to basic services, often limited to informal employment, and living in precarious housing situations. Yet, these same people may have a vibrant political life where they participate in local organizations, march for their economic and political rights with civic movements, cast protest ballots in national and local elections, meet face-to-face with elected officials, and even stand in direct confrontation with police or military forces. These forms of engagement constitute an alternative to the institutionalized politics of representative democracy, which they appropriately complement. When successful, these actions and efforts can result in the collective empowerment of a whole social class.

This scenario may surprise people unfamiliar with the region but reflects the daily experience of many residents of its communities. Fortunately, the scholarship on Latin American politics and societies has been receptive to this complex reality, and the six monographs examined in this review embrace much of the conceptual and empirical heterogeneity generated by the ongoing political struggle in contemporary Latin America. In doing so, they look at political protests in the last couple of decades from divergent angles, in turn highlighting different aspects. Even the works that initially appear close in their perspectives, such as the Bruhn (2024) and Boulding and Holzner (2021) volumes, view their empirical evidence from only partially reconcilable starting points. This review essay addresses this diversity first, by discussing each of the books in isolation in chronological order of publication, and then dissects the complementarities in the material from substantive, theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Before going into detail, a general consideration is in order. The current scholarship on public protest in Latin America is still evolving, having left behind the monolithic approach seen until the 1990s. This older literature dealt mainly with new informal political practices during the consolidation of young democratic regimes and had normative concerns about the destabilizing characteristics of street demonstrations. It is now uncontroversial to claim that those days are over. Protest has become so commonplace in some Latin American countries, that the expression “protest state” has been appropriately coined to define the routinization of political turmoil as a response to socio-economic inequality (Moseley 2018). Starting from this foundation, the literature included in this review focuses on how contemporary protests in Latin America are shaped by the evolution of party systems, elected governments, and economic policy, with an appropriate focus on the poor, the excluded, or generally the groups that lack an institutionalized channel to participate in the political life of their country.

Inside Contemporary Latin American Protests: The Six Books in Sequence

Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner’s *Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies* (2021) undertook the ambitious task of investigating the political participation of the poorer citizens of Latin America, who are very active compared to their equals in other regions of the world. In doing so, they looked at political protest as one of several ways that people can mobilize to express their personal preferences and grievances, and at how political institutions can help bridge the existing gaps among societal groups. The bulk of their empirical work is done through the careful analysis of LAPOP Americas Barometer data, which has over time established itself as a key source for researchers and practitioners alike. This is also the oldest and arguably the best-known of the works included in this comprehensive review.

Overall, the book shows the combined importance of several variables to the participation of lower-class citizens, which helps them overcome the structural barriers inherent to their social positioning. The explanation encompasses factors ranging from community organizations and political parties to the quality of democratic institutions and political competition, opening the door to the study of sectoral organizations. In a general sense, it constitutes a good base, a general platform for scholars of Latin American politics to start exploring specific national realities or the small-scale determinants of protest participation. The choice to discuss voting, protests, and other forms of participation allows them to be evaluated in parallel and also jointly as part of an individual’s overall tendency to take an active part in politics.

Especially salient is the finding that poor Latin American citizens frequently contact their politicians, which can be seen in the negative as signaling the pervasiveness of patronage networks, and in a positive light as a signal that not all is lost for the credibility of politics. Clientelism is discussed pragmatically, recognizing its mobilizing capabilities and how it can create a real point of access to politics for people who would otherwise have none. The linkages offered by mass parties continue to matter a great deal for all forms of political participation, making party system deterioration still dangerous. Finally, the results show that protest participation is strongly

stratified by class in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Bolivia, which accidentally offers a powerful explanation of why left-wing parties were elected to government precisely in these countries, after the collapse of the earlier party system.

In contrast, Craig L. Arceneaux's *Political Struggle in Latin America* (2022) moves from the perspective of unconventional, contentious politics, as evidenced by the term struggle in the title. Its introduction incorporates a comprehensive literature review of political protest coupled with a selected history of the continent, making the subject accessible even for those outside of our field and for our undergraduate students, something professors should make a note of. Then the following chapters are thematic, looking at the struggle of the indigenous, of the urban poor, of those excluded by patriarchal societies, and finally of an increasingly precarious middle class. While lacking a strong methodological edge, this academic compendium presents much-needed historical evidence, theoretical discussions, and several useful data tables.

The examination of the middle class is salient since across the continent its components have been quick to rise up whenever their status was endangered. This happened regardless of whether this instability was caused by international market fluctuations, inflation, the COVID-19 pandemic, or was a direct consequence of their executives' policies. Moreover, the middle class is easily mobilizable in response to violations of the rule of law, from both a political and economic standpoint, and in connection to corruption at all government levels. In parallel, the choice to shed light on the urban poor, their excluded status continuing despite rootedness in local communities, is an appropriate counterbalance in our era of renewed social individualism. One can easily forget that during 2019 these groups rose transnationally to ask for improved life conditions before the national lockdowns and curfews of the COVID-19 pandemic shut them down in the following year.

In addition, this is also the only text to devote some space to feminist protests and LGBTQ+ rights in Latin America, two themes still often absent from mainstream scholarship. In this regard, Arceneaux shows that while activists have had some victories over the past two decades by lobbying national governments and reaping some policy gains, society has been much slower at accepting the ongoing transformation. The current backlash is also closely related to the expansion of Evangelical Christianity as a social and political force. Constantly relevant for all these groups is the necessity of continued struggle to be heard and bring about much-needed societal change, a theme that also echoes the focus of a later book.

Mollie J. Cohen's *None of the Above: Protest Voting in Latin American Democracies* (February 2024) might initially look like a completely different beast from the rest of the volumes examined here. After all, it deals with the occurrence of invalid voting in Latin American elections and not with public protests in the street. Yet, as anyone familiar with the subject matter will realize, this is the book that promises to establish once and for all invalid voting as a form of protest that acts as a complement to other forms of political struggle. Cohen's work focuses both on the whole region and on specific country evidence from Peru to trace the process through which invalid vote campaigns are built as a protest tool and what their consequences are downstream. Methodologically, she uses both existing datasets of political behavior and electoral figures, plus one of her elaboration to categorize invalid voting campaigns.

The book's findings are clear and well-organized, showing the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, its relevance, and its positive repercussions across civil society. Those who still consider invalid voting to be a random behavior, a signal of apathy, or simply a voting mistake, should weigh the finding that between 1980 and 2020 only the Dominican Republic and Honduras have not had an organized campaign calling for blank or spoiled ballots. Half of these campaigns have been successful in causing a surge of invalid voting in the country of target, and jointly they have contributed to the overall growth of this behavior across Latin America.

This monograph also sublimates a research agenda on invalid voting bringing together the scholarship on elections and social movements, with recent examples in Aron and Superti (2022) and Lioy (2024), which connected protest and invalid voting. Beyond these existing works, Cohen convincingly shows that just like protest movements, invalid voting campaigns are successful

when they are organized by credible institutionalized actors around a shared grievance. Moreover, they are most efficacious in countries where people have already proven able to use invalid voting as a protest tool in the past. Fundamentally, just like public turmoil in the streets, protest voting is not—and should not be seen as—bad for democracy. Rather, it indicates that people are paying attention and can react quickly when they disapprove of current institutions. Moreover, invalid voting campaigns increase the chance that governments will react to blank and null ballots, connecting them to specific grievances instead of simply ignoring them as insignificant.

Moisés Arce and Takeshi Wada's *Popular Protests and Protest Event Analysis in Latin America* (April 2024) has appeared only recently, but it has the potential to rapidly become a reference point for the discipline. It applies the methodology of *protest event analysis*—see Hutter (2014)—to successfully cover a daunting amount of ground. After a technical and theoretical introduction, the book is divided into two macro-sections, where the first focuses on longitudinally tracing the national evolution of protests for a series of countries, and the second casts a narrower gaze at the process of specific protest cycles. Wonderfully cohesive for an edited volume, it gathers evidence from a multitude of sources and analyzes it under a unitary methodological umbrella.

For each of the cases, descriptive insight is presented concerning which actors, grievances, actions, targets, and places were involved, keeping the reader close to the same points of interest in each country. It is always possible to jump back and forth and compare two situations at a glance. Across the cases and periods explored, the centrality of the state as the target of popular grievances remains constant and so does protests' relevance as part of the democratic life of Latin American countries. Yet, the book does not shy away from looking at complex situations such as the contemporary Mexican reality where political protest happens under an increased risk of violence and can be misinterpreted as cartel activity. Even if exceptions do exist, most protests have both a political and a socio-economic core, which can hardly be separated. In fact, it is precisely the meeting point of the two components that allows the expansion of movements.

Going more into detail, Chapter 7, looking in parallel at Costa Rican and Nicaraguan protests during early neoliberal reform cycles in the early 1990s, is especially successful in its analysis. This is both because of the comparative neglect of these countries within the contemporary protest scholarship and of the integration in one tight treatment of geographical insights, statistical regularities, and historical evidence. Similarly, in Colombia, political protest is a neglected topic, given the prominence that violence has in the scholarship. Here, the trajectory of protests is examined in the long run, showing a peak with the 1999 discussion of the National Development Plan and with the beginning of guerrilla demobilizations in the late 2000s. Finally, in Peru, often considered with Guatemala the best example of a non-party system, where people have no trust in politicians, a repertoire of protests emerged in the early twenty-first century through a significant shift from labor strikes to popular marches.

Kathleen Bruhn's *Politics and the Pink Tide: A Comparative Analysis of Protest in Latin America* (April 2024) is a brilliant critical examination of how the rise to power of a series of leftist governments across Latin America has affected public protests and political mobilization. This book constitutes a great example of how to organize different themes within the same project, informed by the coding of newspaper data for the late 2000s in five countries: Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Chile. Across its chapters, this study discusses the influence of political organization, the interaction of protest tactics and police behavior, the individual determinants of informal political behavior, and finally the unfolding of salient cases of protest.

Navigating the gulf between radical left and moderate left governments in Latin America, Bruhn provides a well-written, complete account. In synthesis, its overarching model convincingly shows that—contrary to conventional wisdom—anti-neoliberalism did not constitute a major protest driver and that political parties have maintained a fundamental role in mobilizing people, and can actually deploy protests to recover some lost credibility across the electorate. This leaves little room for other factors to emerge as prominent at the individual level because hurdles to political activity are often too high to overcome without a little help. In other words “protesters may be dissatisfied, but not all dissatisfied people protest” (p. 142). The inclusion of the dynamics

taking place between demonstrators and law and order institutions powerfully illustrates the staying power of past choices and behaviors, with recurring patterns of action and reaction.

The stylistic choice of putting a chapter with watershed episodes of protest at the end of the book brings the theoretical point at home, expands the temporal span into the 2010s, and shows the complexity behind real-life explosions of turmoil. In these landmark events, the mobilizing role of political parties is even more prominent—yet parties try to remain as hidden as possible from the spotlight—and large protests usually far exceed the initial organizers' goals and capabilities. There is also a good amount of path dependence in the protest patterns of Latin American countries, as exemplified for instance by cycles of student activism and repression in Chile or indigenous movement grievances in Bolivia. This final section also provides a powerful caveat against shortcuts, against unitary accounts of Latin America that want to attribute motives and strategies that might hold up in some specific context, but certainly not everywhere.

Finally, Gerardo Otero and Efe Can Gürçan's *Collective Empowerment In Latin America: Indigenous Peasant Movements and Political Transformation* (June 2024) looks at Latin American protest movements through the theoretical lens of collective empowerment. Departing from the other approaches considered in this review, it shifts both the glance and the overarching framework to analyze critically the existing conceptual and empirical material on the subject. In doing so, it provides a more critical edge, adopting a perspective centered on the resistance of the dominated groups, and on their attempt to transform the behavior of the state, with implications that travel further than Latin America. Here, the authors align themselves with the protest actors they discuss, without hiding behind formalisms and with a clear normative goal in mind.

On these premises, the book includes theoretical and empirical sections, although the borders between the two are porous. The theoretical part correctly insists upon the contemporary conundrums around class formation and class consciousness and deploys international examples to show how protest and social movements can spur change at the governmental level. One chapter also addresses why separating class and indigenous identity is not just dangerous but simply absurd given the embeddedness of the two. Furthermore, the authors are painfully aware of the impossibility of getting material grievances addressed without undergoing a collective process of political-cultural formation that also underlines class consciousness. This is where the role of social movements is often inescapable: without the emergence of massive mobilization known to the general public, the transformation will not occur.

Finally, in the case studies, one can find detailed discussions of (1) independent Mexican *Zapatist* organizations vis-à-vis Ecuador's CONAIE and its coopted long-term trajectory, (2) the unexpected surge of Argentinian indigenism in relation to food sovereignty, (3) Bolivian social movements before and after the country's first indigenous-led administration, (4) the relentless struggle of the landless peasants' movement (MST) in Brazil and its continued independence, and finally (5) a broad assessment of the rise of the new Latin American left and its most important achievements. Across all cases, one can see how gains were perhaps obtained against all odds but also tended to be precarious and necessitated a continued political struggle to be sustained. For Bolivia, the difference between the original *Katarismo* and its narrow identity focus and MAS' revendication of broader societal differences is especially well articulated.

Stronger Together: Different Approaches and Complementarities

After looking at these works in isolation, the review discusses a few salient points jointly. In particular, much can be learned from integrating the temporal perspectives adopted by the different authors. While seeing long- and short-term cycles as temporally separate and partially related phenomena is tempting, it must be resisted. If anything, these books should be read together as part of the same scholarly narration, as tales from the same tradition, even if some countries might offer a more representative picture. A quick example should clarify the concrete

meaning of these statements. For instance, combining different passages on Bolivia allows us to look at contemporary turmoil as part of a tradition dating back to the democratization struggle in the 1980s (Arce and Wada 2024), evaluate the perspective of the TIPNIS movement against road building through indigenous land (Bruhn 2024), and weigh the trade-offs of the transformation of MAS from a social movement into a multiclass government party (Otero and Gürcan 2024).

In contrast, a natural convergence between authors is visible around the evolution of the new left and in the analytical separation between its moderate and hard versions. Otero and Gürcan (2024) persuasively argue that some social-democratic gains happened under all these administrations, even if the experience was not as transformative as hoped. In this sense, Venezuela represents more of an outlier—and a cautionary tale—than a regional blueprint, as seen again around the 2024 elections, which took place after the publication of these six volumes. The separation between the two lefts does not have much traction in Bruhn's (2024) treatment either, with some surprises in regards to police repression—highest in Chile and against students—and the negotiated exit out of a crisis by the early Chávez in Venezuela. Overall, Boulding and Holzner (2021) saw it best: an extremist left differs from its moderate counterpart only because it elicits mobilization from the more affluent sectors of society in defense of their privileges.

What also emerges from these works is a tentative theory of mutual dependence between institutionalized and informal politics or between protest movement and partisan activity. At least for Latin America, we acknowledge that one can hardly thrive and reach its goals without the other. Without the push coming from popular marches and mass demonstrations, political parties tend to isolate themselves from civil society and focus on non-contentious matters that change little in people's lives. Without the organizational capabilities of political parties, mobilization is difficult and often limited to those who have personal resources and know they will be heard one way or another. All works in this review acknowledge, implicitly or explicitly, the existence of such a relationship in different contexts, which is important not just for the more stereotypical anti-neoliberal forces, but even for a regeneration of the ideological right inside democratic politics, as shown in the Ecuadorian or Brazilian contexts.

Finally, from an operational point of view, the six manuscripts function well together through a mix of more quantitative (Boulding and Holzner, partially Cohen), more qualitative (Bruhn, Arce, and Wada, and also Cohen) and also theoretical and descriptive (Arcenaux, Otero, and Gürcan) approaches. In combination, they offer compelling evidence from process tracing and historical events, they discuss of the validity of published materials and theories within current dynamics, and finally, they serve to establish regional patterns. This complementarity also allows readers to jump from the individual to the collective sphere of protest whenever they deem it necessary, and even explore the contradictions inherent to this type of conceptual operation, since individual and collective determinants might actually not be the same.

Advancing with Caution in Uncertain Times: Some Conclusions and Suggestions

Altogether, the six books examined in this review essay offer to the reader a wide range of theoretical puzzles centered around Latin American protests, and a wonderfully creative set of ways to address them. They demonstrate that fruitful social science can sprout out of varied empirical and philosophical grounds, as long as sufficient rigor and coherence guide the academic tillage. Their variety is auspicious for the future of the discipline and should inspire the current generation of scholars to keep scrutinizing protest behavior as new events emerge across the continent, supplementing and calling into question what we already know.

Of course, these positive aspects do not make all of these publications faultless in their choices and claims. As is often the case, many of the limitations of the studies examined have to do with external validity—when moving from single cases to a regional picture—and with the shortcomings inherent to specific methodologies. For instance, results that rely upon survey data for examining protest behavior among poor citizens can be called into question. This is

especially problematic when there is no correction for—or even discussion of—missing data, which are potentially correlated with the independent variable. The same goes for *protest event analysis* or generally for any work chiefly based on bulletins and newspapers, which must deal with the potential bias of media sources and with natural asymmetries in the intensity of event coverage across countries or periods. Moving forward, a higher degree of transparency in discussing these potential frailties and contradictions will be necessary.

Beyond these considerations, this literature overlooks some country case studies, which await researchers to be included into current conversations. Most problematic for this review is the exclusion of Honduras, which hosted one of the most important protest movements of the twenty-first century in the aftermath of a controversial suspension of democratic order, leading eventually to a complete reconfiguration of both its institutional and informal politics. The recent events that took place in Panama between 2022 and 2023 are also deserving of a comparative treatment that keeps into account the uniqueness of the isthmian country. Notice how the literature on Panama has already given us one of the most vibrant published accounts of political protest in Pérez (1993), which reconstructed the 1968–1989 period in detail and artfully used political jokes as key to addressing a political culture in transformation. Finally, comparative research must examine the Latin American experience in light of the recent cycles of mass mobilization in Europe and especially Africa (see for reference Sanches (2022)). A degree of cross-pollination has always existed, but in the internet era, people can be informed live of events around the globe and protest movements have worldwide resonance.

Last, a transversally problematic aspect of this literature is the neglect of cases of protest that were not as successful, or that mobilized people briefly without resulting in tangible political consequences. There are some obvious exceptions to this statement, such as the comparative assessment of unrest in Bolivia by Otero and Gürçan (2024) or the study of the determinants of efficacious invalid voting campaigns by Cohen (2024). Yet, the point remains valid, and scholars should not be afraid to look at the shorter outbursts of public anger or those that never caught on beyond a small geographical location, both to understand the specific causes of failure and see whether later successful movements learned—or could have grasped—something substantial from these instances. And surely we will see if the short-lived Cuban protests of 18–19 March, 2024 are bound to result in something much more impactful in the future.

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