

Rethinking the Legacy of the Liberal State in Latin America: The cases of Argentina (1853–1916) and Mexico (1857–1910)*

GABRIEL L. NEGRETTO
AND JOSÉ ANTONIO AGUILAR-RIVERA

Abstract. The predominant interpretation of nineteenth century Latin America is to see the failure of constitutional democracy in the region in terms of the inability of liberal elites to break with an authoritarian past. Against these views, we argue that the divorce between liberalism and democracy in Latin America was the unintended outcome of the institutions created by the liberal elite in response to the problems of territorial fragmentation and factional conflict that emerged after the fall of the Spanish empire. Using the cases of Argentina and Mexico, we support this proposition by focusing on the creation of a centralised form of government and a system of electoral control by the ruling elites as the main factors that through time prevented the evolution of the liberal regime into a competitive democracy.

There is no good faith in America, nor among the nations of America. Treaties are scraps of paper; constitutions, printed matter; elections, battles; freedom, anarchy; and life, a torment.

Simón Bolívar

Introduction

During the nineteenth century, liberal elites in Latin America succeeded in introducing the notions of constitutionalism and modern representative government in the context of traditional political systems. Elected presidents with legally defined powers replaced the rule of absolutist monarchs and the idea of citizenship emerged for the first time as the basic principle of legitimate government. Most liberal regimes in the region, however, were unable to achieve the gradual incorporation of opposition parties and the expansion of political representation that characterised successful constitutional democracies in this century. After a more or less

Gabriel L. Negretto and José Antonio Aguilar-Rivera are Lecturers in the División de Estudios Políticos, CIDE, Mexico

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extended experiment with popular government, different forms of authoritarianism generally replaced liberalism as a model of government. What factors account for this result?

A conventional view of nineteenth century Latin America sees the failure of the liberal project in the inability of liberal elites to break with authoritarian mental patterns and practices inherited from the colonial period. Against this interpretation, we argue that the divorce between liberalism and democracy in Latin America was the unintended outcome of the formal and informal institutions created by the liberal elite in the process of consolidating national unity and lowering the levels of conflict in the competition for power. Using the cases of Argentina and Mexico, we suggest that the achievement of political order in a context of territorial fragmentation and factional conflict led to the creation of a centralised form government and a system of electoral control by the ruling elites that, through time, prevented the evolution of the liberal regime into a stable constitutional democracy. This failure sealed the course of a process of democratisation that until this day has found it difficult to reconcile the legacy of the liberal tradition with the principles of democratic pluralism and popular participation. This article addresses only the cases of Argentina and Mexico. We suspect, however, that the political dynamics we describe here may be used to compare the evolution of liberal regimes in other countries of the region as well. More evidence is required to complete this task.

This article is divided into four sections. Section I presents a critical overview of the different interpretations of Latin American liberalism. Section II analyses the ideological and institutional foundations of the liberal-constitutional project in Argentina and Mexico. Section III compares the implementation of the liberal project in both countries. Section IV explores the different and similar conditions that led to the fall of the liberal regime and the legacy which it created for the future process of democratisation.

I. The nature of liberalism in nineteenth century Latin America

The predominant interpretations of the nature of liberalism in nineteenth century Latin America may be seen as different versions of a single thesis: the inability of liberal institutions and values to break with the colonial past. According to one of these versions, liberalism was an 'exotic' import, an ideology of limitation of powers and individual rights unable to take root in a cultural and social milieu dominated by the principles of the centralist-corporate state inherited from Spain. A second, slightly different version, claims that there was no duality between liberal doctrines and institutions adopted from the great revolutions of the late

eighteenth century and a political reality anchored in the mental patterns and practices of the *ancien régime*. From this perspective, Latin American liberalism was just a particular form of political authoritarianism in the non-democratic tradition of the colonial empire.

The work of Claudio Véliz is closely identified with the view that the liberal project in Latin America had no indigenous roots. The adoption of liberalism, in his opinion, was the result of an obsessive attitude of imitation of everything foreign that characterised Latin American elites in the aftermath of independence. The institutions of modern representative government and free-market capitalism were part of what he calls the liberal ‘pause,’ a period during which the legacy of the centralist and mercantilist state inherited from Spain seemed suspended. But only in appearance, because this tradition, says Véliz, would remain in force until its re-emergence in the first decades of this century.¹

Different authors have echoed these ideas. Richard Morse, for instance, argues that behind the rhetoric of liberal constitutionalism the pervasive reality in Latin America was that of the patrimonial state inherited from Spain. Liberalism, in his view, was a disruptive ideology that simply aggravated the loss of authority and legitimacy left by the fall of the Spanish Empire. The proof of this assertion, according to Morse, is that only conservative Chile, which in the 1830s recreated a patrimonial state under republican form, escaped the political conflicts and struggles that characterised most Latin American nations after independence.²

Morse’s argument is followed by Edmundo O’Gorman, who argues that Mexico possessed a monarchic constitution that outlived the colonial period.³ According to O’Gorman, the liberal ideology embraced by important sectors of the Mexican elite, in spite of its emphasis on legality and universal rights, was incapable of changing traditional ideas and practices, such as the lack of compliance with formal rules or the prevalence of clientelistic networks of authority. An illiberal past, in other words, frustrated the modernising attempts of Spanish American liberal elites.⁴

¹ C. Véliz, *The Centralist Tradition of Latin America* (New Jersey:, 1980), pp. 163–88. See also C. Véliz, *The New World of the Gothic Fox: Culture and Economy in English and Spanish America*. (Berkeley, 1994).

² R. M. Morse, ‘The Heritage of Latin America’, in Louis Hartz (ed.), *The Founding of New Societies* (New York, 1964) pp. 163–64.

³ E. O’Gorman, *La supervivencia política novohispana* (Mexico, 1967).

⁴ In an attempt to challenge this interpretation, different historians debated for years whether there was an authentic liberal tradition in Mexico. Daniel Cosío Villegas, for instance, in his well-known history of Mexico claimed that political practice after the *Reforma* and *República Restaurada* (the era of liberal dominance) had ‘betrayed’ the political constitution of the country. See his *Historia moderna de México*, 7 vols. (Mexico, 1955). Jesús Reyes Heróles, on the contrary, proposed that liberalism had been

The inability of liberalism to change the political and social reality is also one of the core assumptions of Cecil Jane's interpretation of nineteenth century Latin America. He contends that the failure of liberalism in the region should be traced to the legacy of the Spanish culture. According to Jane, Spaniards were idealistic extremists who sought both order and individual liberty in such perfect forms that politics went from the extreme of despotism to the extreme of anarchy, rather than finding a stable compromise between those two contending principles. Conservatives in power, he argues, carried the 'pursuit of order' to such an extreme as to provoke a violent reaction on behalf of liberty. Likewise, when liberals enacted 'standard western liberal protections of the individual', Spanish Americans did not use these liberties with the responsibility expected by the 'Englishmen who had developed these liberties, but rather carried them to the extreme of anarchy'.⁵

A different but related version of the thesis that continuity rather than break explains the political dynamics of Latin American countries after independence is represented by the recent work of Brian Loveman. According to this author, the liberal-constitutional movement in nineteenth century Latin America was from the very beginning a peculiar form of authoritarianism that simply provided legal foundations to arbitrary rule. The pervasive constitutional regimes of exception that gave presidents the power to suspend constitutional rights and the recognition of the military as protector of the political system created what he calls the 'constitution of tyranny'. As he puts it:

In practice, liberalism and authoritarianism merged; dictators and constitutional presidents executed opponents, sent adversaries into exile, censored the press, jailed and abused authors and publishers, and confiscated property—in short, ruled their nations with virtually absolute authority. They usually did this, however, in accord with the constitutions that purportedly guaranteed civil liberties, civil rights and popular sovereignty.⁶

successful in establishing an alliance between the middle classes and the lower strata of the population. See his *El liberalismo mexicano*, 3 vols (Mexico, 1959). See also: Virginia Guedea, 'Las primeras elecciones populares en la ciudad de México, 1812–1813', in *Estudios Mexicanos*, vol. VI, no. 1 (Winter 1991), pp. 1–29, and A. Annino, (coord.). *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica* (Buenos Aires, 1995). Whereas Cosío Villegas focused on the second half of the nineteenth century, Reyes Heróles' optimism was grounded in an analysis of the first decades after independence. He believed that there was a 'liberal continuity' since independence only broke by the Porfirian regime. In his view, the Mexican revolution updated the liberal spirit. His reading of liberalism reconciled the past and the present.

⁵ L. C. Jane, *Liberty and Despotism in Spanish America* (London, 1929).

⁶ B. Loveman, *The Constitution of Tyranny. Regimes of Exception in Spanish America* (Pittsburgh, 1993), p. 6.

Loveman's analysis has the merit of indicating that the institutions created by Latin American liberals were *not* irrelevant to understand the political development of the region. As we will argue in the case of Argentina and Mexico, it seems true that constitutional regimes of exception had through time a negative impact on the process of democratisation in the sense that they were used to marginalise and prevent the emergence of political opposition. We believe, however, that Loveman's interpretation, as well as the standard interpretation of Latin American liberalism, is mistaken in its foundations and conclusions.

Véliz's view of Latin American liberalism as a mere imitation of foreign institutions is based on an oversimplification. It is certainly true that in the aftermath of independence political elites in Latin America looked for models of republican government created abroad, particularly in the United States. The attraction exercised by the United States model was due to the fact that it, who like the creoles had broken with a colonial empire, provided the only visible case of a stable and prosperous republic. No models of this type were available in France, where the brief and quite unhappy experience with a parliamentary republic was followed by the plebiscitary dictatorship of Napoleon, the restoration of traditional Monarchy and the constitutional Monarchy of Louis Philippe. What was created in Spanish America was not a disguised form of royal authority but rather a new mode of authority, based substantially on republican principles.

Since the early years of independent political life, however, influential Creole leaders reacted against the attempt to 'transplant' foreign institutions. Such was the case of Bolívar, for instance, who praised the US constitution but deemed it unsuitable to Colombia. Moreover, after a few decades of experience with imported institutions, Bolívar's sceptical attitude toward foreign models was the starting point of a second generation of liberal elites who struggled for a design of institutions able to suit local conditions.

While the federalist ideal was initially attractive to liberal intellectuals and local leaders, it could not solve the problems that the consolidation of national authority presented in the context of the territorial fragmentation and institutional vacuum left by the fall of a centralist and absolutist monarchy. After an early experience with loose federal structures, most countries started to adopt either unitary forms of government or centralised forms of federalism in which the central government was invested with different instruments to control political autonomy in the provinces. Something similar happened with the system of distribution and division of powers in the central government. While early liberals preferred a presidential system with checks and balances,

sometimes even providing greater powers to the legislature, the pervasive factional struggle to control state positions and policies gradually created the need to strengthen executive authority, often by means of emergency powers. In other words, whether it was the doctrine of federalism or the division of powers, constitution-making in Latin America since the 1840s was the result of a learning process in which foreign institutions were constantly re-adapted to fit specific local conditions.⁷

One should also revise the assertion that liberal ideology was ultimately unable to affect the mental and behavioural patterns inherited from colonial times. In spite of the decades of factional struggle and cyclical outbursts of dictatorship that followed independence in many Latin American countries, the search for a constitution and the reform of the old order was the main motivation behind the different groups in dispute. Later on, as most countries entered a phase of increasing political stability by the mid nineteenth century, the observance of constitutional norms and liberal values were also essential to understand crucial conflicts among the political elite. As Charles Hale indicates, major political controversies during the regime of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico turned around the interpretation and application of the constitution of 1857.⁸ Whereas a fraction of the old liberal elite saw in the centralisation of power under Díaz a betrayal of the principles of the constitution of 1857, ‘new’ or ‘conservative’ liberals defended the institutional changes of the regime as necessary to satisfy the demands of political order and economic progress.⁹ Similar disputes about the principles and implementation of the liberal constitution of 1853 permeated political struggles in Argentina by the early 1890s. Why would an irrelevant piece of paper be at the centre of political conflict?

Difficult as it was, the application of notions like republican government or constitutionalism in an environment shaped by the influence of a centralist and patrimonialist state gradually acquired a symbolic dimension that changed traditional models of political legitimacy. In most countries, the liberal-constitutional movement not only replaced the authority of hereditary monarchs by elected presidents but also provided a solid background for the development of notions of citizenship that

⁷ See F. Safford, ‘Politics, Ideology and Society in Post-Independence Spanish America’, in Leslie Bethell (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. III (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 347–421.

⁸ Charles Hale, ‘The Reconstruction of Nineteenth Century Politics in Spanish America: A Case for the History of Ideas’, in *Latin American Research Review*, no 8 (Summer 1973), p. 65. See also: *El liberalismo mexicano en la era de Mora: 1821–1853* (Mexico, 1985).

⁹ On the ideological transformations of Mexican liberalism under Díaz, see C. Hale, *The Transformations of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-century Mexico* (Princeton, 1989).

were absent during the colonial period. Because liberal elites usually manipulated elections by means of fraud or corruption, conventional interpretations of nineteenth century Latin America maintain that the actual practice of liberal regimes made impossible any meaningful experience with popular participation before the beginning of democratisation. However, while the evidence for distorted electoral practices abounds, the idea that elections had no impact in terms of citizen participation must be critically assessed.

Recent historical studies on comparative elections in the early nineteenth century show that one of the peculiarities of Spanish America was the precocious adoption of modern forms of representation and universal suffrage when restrictions to vote were predominant in Europe.¹⁰ Although only a fraction of the adult male population participated in elections that were often subjected to government manipulation, studies such as those of Richard Warren on popular participation in early elections in Mexico and Hilda Sabato on elections in Argentina from 1850 to 1880 show that the selection of representatives by universal suffrage often had an impact on popular participation that challenges the usual depiction of elections as an exclusive elite affair.¹¹ Moreover, even in countries where formal restrictions for voting applied, elections still had a significant effect on the process of democratisation. As Samuel Valenzuela shows, in spite of its restrictions for voting, the Chilean constitution of 1833 provided the framework of one of the most successful experiences of institutionalisation of political competition and progressive inclusion of the electorate in Latin America.¹² This interpretation goes against the core of Morse's argument about the pre-modern character of Chilean institutions.

As Brian Loveman argues, Latin American liberals left an institutional legacy, such as broad emergency powers, with a strong potential for abuse in hands of authoritarian leaders. He neglects, however, the environment

¹⁰ See, Francois-Xavier Guerra, 'The Spanish American Tradition of Representation and Its European Roots', in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 26 (1994), pp. 1–35. Also E. Posada-Carbó, *Elections Before Democracy: The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America* (New York, 1996) p. 6. See also: A. Annino, (ed.), *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, Siglo XIX. De la formación del espacio político nacional* (Buenos Aires, 1995).

¹¹ See R. Warren, 'Elections and Popular Political Participation in Mexico, 1809–1836', in Vincent Peloso and Barbara A. Tenenbaum, (eds.), *Liberals, Politics and Power*. (Athens, 1996), and H. Sabato, 'Citizenship, Political Participation, and the Formation of the Public Sphere in Buenos Aires, 1850–1880', in *Past and Present*, no. 136 (1992), pp. 139–61.

¹² See S. J. Valenzuela, 'Building Aspects of Democracy Before Democracy: Electoral Practices in Nineteenth Century Chile', in Eduardo Posada-Carbó (ed.), *Elections Before Democracy*, pp. 223–57.

in which those provisions were created. More than a reflection of an authoritarian mentality, the constitutionalisation of emergency powers was an attempt to prevent the arbitrary use of these powers in political contexts plagued by factional conflict and internal strife. Whereas dictators like Rosas were able to execute political opponents with no other limits than their own will, Argentine presidents after the constitution of 1853 could resort to emergency measures only under the conditions and limits established by the law. The legalisation of emergency powers also averted the delegitimation of the constitution when the government was forced to use those powers outside the constitutional framework. This, for instance, was the primary reason why the Mexican constitution of 1857, by any measure one of the most liberal constitutions of the time, included provisions for emergency that were absent in previous documents.

One should emphasise that Latin Americans did not invent emergency powers. Although the relationship between these provisions and liberal constitutionalism is a troubled one, many classic liberal authors recognised that extraordinary powers are necessary during emergencies. Locke, the father of classic liberalism, admitted that there were many things ‘which the Law can by no means provide for, and those must necessarily left to the discretion of him, that has the Executive Power in his hands to be ordered by him, as the public good and advantage may require...’.¹³ Similarly Montesquieu, in a passage of the *Spirit of the Laws*, indicated that there are cases in which a ‘veil should be drawn for a while over liberty, as it was customary to cover the statues of the gods’.¹⁴ These theoretical premises are perfectly consistent with the historical reality of any liberal state. As Neumann has observed, the liberal state ‘was precisely as strong as it needed to be in the circumstances. It acquired substantial colonial empires, waged wars, held down internal disorders, and stabilised itself over long periods of time’.¹⁵

In terms of ideology, Latin American liberals were deeply affected by the task of creating an effective state authority and usually placed the

¹³ J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, 1993), Second Treatise, chap. XIV. For a critique of Loveman’s assertions, see also: José Antonio Aguilar-Rivera, ‘El manto liberal. Emergencias y constituciones’, in *Política y Gobierno*, vol. III, no. 2 (1996), pp. 327–358 and ‘The Liberal Cloak: Emergency Powers in Nineteenth-century Mexico’, PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1996. For a theoretical analysis of the doctrine of emergency powers among Latin American liberals, see G. Negretto and J. A. Aguilar-Rivera, ‘Liberalism and Emergency Powers in Latin America: Reflections on Carl Schmitt and the Theory of Constitutional Dictatorship’, *Condozo Law Review* (forthcoming, 2000).

¹⁴ *Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge 1989), book XII, chap. 19.

¹⁵ Franz Neumann, ‘Approaches to the Study of Political Power’, in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State* (London, 1964), p. 8.

values or order and stability above the idea of political liberty. They created a conservative brand of ‘nation-building’ liberalism whose main concern was the creation rather than the limitation of political power.¹⁶ This, however, does not turn Latin American liberalism into an insidious form of authoritarianism. As was the case with the founders of the USA, Latin American liberals were opposed to despotic and arbitrary rule and sought an effective protection of civil rights. They simply wanted a strong legal authority for exceptional times, trusting that the progress of civilisation would reduce the need to restrict the sphere of political liberty. Ultimately, their concern to strengthen state authority was no different from the ideology of post-revolutionary French liberals, like Constant or Guizot, who also wanted an equilibrium between popular sovereignty and political liberty, on the one hand, and effective order and authority, on the other.

The liberal ideology of Latin American elites was no less averse to democracy and popular participation than was the liberalism of the fathers of the modern liberal republic. In a way similar to Madison or Siéyès, Latin American liberals used the term ‘republic’ or ‘representative government’ in the sense of rule by an elected aristocracy. As Bernard Manin points out, this form of government not only rejected the idea of rule by the people but it also presupposed that, with or without voting qualifications, the elected representatives would always form a separate political class distinguished by virtue of its superior culture and social position.¹⁷ In this sense, the fact that most liberal regimes in nineteenth century Latin America evolved as oligarchic regimes with sharp divisions between rulers and ruled in terms of wealth, social position and even race, does not lead to the conclusion that those regimes were only liberal in name. Perhaps with less pronounced distinctions, a similar separation between rulers and ruled could be seen in European liberal regimes at the time, like the British, which later evolved into stable constitutional democracies.

Now, if Latin American liberal regimes produced a real change in the inherited notions of political legitimacy and we cannot trace any radical ideological difference with other liberal regimes that later evolved into stable constitutional democracies, we have a puzzle. In historical perspective, this puzzle can be formulated as follows: why did most liberal regimes in Latin America fail to introduce gradual competition among elites and participation of the population in elections without disruption

¹⁶ J. G. Merquior, *Liberalism Old and New* (Boston, 1991), pp. 75–80.

¹⁷ B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 94; José Antonio Aguilar-Rivera, ‘La nación en ausencia: primeras formas de representación en México’, in *Política y Gobierno*, vol V, no. 2 (1998), pp. 423–457.

of constitutional mechanisms? At different times during the nineteenth century several countries achieved important levels of political competition and popular participation. And yet, by the early decades of this century, most liberal regimes in the region were unable to institutionalise the peaceful alternation in power among parties with different political and social interests. Using the cases of Mexico and Argentina, we attempt to show in the following sections that this result was a by-product of the centralised form of government and official control of elections created to consolidate a national state and lower the stakes of political competition for power among the elite.

II. Ideological and institutional foundations of the liberal project

As in other parts of Latin America, the fall of the Spanish Empire in Argentina and Mexico inaugurated a period of political turmoil. A centralist monarchy disappeared but no local institutions had sufficient legitimacy or stability to substitute its role. In this context, opposing groups struggled with each other attempting to organise the national state according to their different material interests and opposing views of the world. At the centre of conflict was the creation of a new constitutional order that all hoped would introduce a new era of political stability and material progress.

The struggle for the constitution in Argentina is the story of four decades of conflict between Buenos Aires, opposed to a federal form of government, and the rest of the provinces, which found in that system the only viable means of organising the national state. Opposed economic and political interests, rather than ideological disputes, were at the centre of this conflict. While Buenos Aires wanted to preserve the revenues of its port and dominate the rest of the provinces, local leaders desired the nationalisation of the port and the preservation of political autonomy. Only in 1853, after the military defeat of Buenos Aires by the governor of Entre Ríos, did a coalition of provincial governors manage to organise a convention that produced a federal constitution supported by the majority of the provinces. Although conflicts of interest remained and Buenos Aires resisted its integration until 1860, the ideological foundation of the constitution of 1853, a conservative version of liberalism, was never disputed among the elite. Juan Bautista Alberdi, the jurist who prepared the draft constitution adopted in 1853, articulated the main elements of this version of liberalism.

According to Alberdi, the main mistake of early liberal elites in Latin America was their excessive reliance on the principle of popular sovereignty and their desire to curb the colonial legacy of absolutism by the creation of weak executive authorities and strong legislatures. These

systems, in his view, could not provide an adequate measure of authority in the midst of the process of territorial and institutional disintegration that followed independence from Spain. Governments fell in the face of internal conflict, constitutions changed according to the ruling faction and dictatorships emerged as the only apparent solution to the problem of political order. In the light of this experience, Alberdi found in the stability of the Chilean constitution of 1833 the secret formula that could help Argentina to escape the permanent cycle of anarchy and despotism that was the norm in the rest of Latin America.¹⁸

There were three main components in this formula: a centralised form of federation, a vigorous executive endowed with strong emergency powers, and restrictions on popular participation by means of voting qualifications. These institutions integrated the concept of what Alberdi called a 'possible' republic, that is, a republic that though formally consistent with the idea of popular election of representatives, would place a strong emphasis on the principle of order over the exercise of political liberties. It was a restricted, though genuine version of liberalism whose main objective was not so much the limitation as the regularisation of state authority by means of a fundamental law.

Alberdi proposed that the provinces should be able to elect their own authorities, create their own constitutions and participate in the formation of the national government through a senate with two senators per province elected by state legislatures. At the same time, however, he sought to counteract the endemic political instability and centrifugal tendencies in the provinces by making the national government superior to local governments. The most formidable power of the central government in this respect was that of intervening the provinces, even without requisition of local authorities, in cases of internal conflict or external attack. Also crucial was the power of congress to revise provincial constitutions before their approval. At the convention, the delegates accepted and even strengthened this form of disguised centralism, including the right of the national congress to impeach provincial governors and the intervention of the Supreme Court in conflicts between different branches of provincial governments.¹⁹

The convention also adopted the system of division of powers proposed by Alberdi. This system was based on a mixed structure that

¹⁸ See J. Meyer (ed.), *Bases y puntos de partida para la Organización Nacional*, (Buenos Aires 1969), pp. 227–30.

¹⁹ See E. Ravignani (ed.), *Asambleas constituyentes argentinas*, vol. IV (Buenos Aires, 1937), pp. 520–2. For a detailed analysis of the constitution-making process of 1853, see G. Negretto, 'Constitution-making and Institutional Design: Distributing Power between Government and Opposition in three Argentine Constitutions (1853–60, 1949, 1994)', PhD. diss., Columbia University, 2000.

combined elements of presidential dominance with traditional principles of check and balances, such as bicameralism, executive veto and impeachment.²⁰ The president did not require legislative approval to appoint cabinet ministers, had the power of legislative initiative and was able to declare the state of siege during the recess of congress, which remained in session for only five months. The president could veto the whole or parts of a bill, subject to a two-thirds majority override in congress. He was elected by an electoral college for a period of six years and could not run for immediate re-election.²¹ Congress was composed by a senate, with two senators per state elected for nine years by state legislatures, and a house of representatives, composed of deputies directly elected by the people for periods of four years. Apart from the process of impeachment, the congress could exercise some form of control over the executive by calling in person cabinet ministers to inform about particular areas of policy.

In one crucial respect, however, the constitution-makers of 1853 departed from the model of ‘possible’ republic proposed by Alberdi: the restrictions on the right to vote and to stand for office. While Alberdi did not establish any property or literacy qualifications on the right to vote in his project of constitution; he relied on the adoption of those restrictions by provincial constitutions and electoral laws.²² The constitution of 1853, however, established that a national law would regulate the election of deputies and electors for president. This law was passed in 1857 creating a system of universal male suffrage. The intention of imposing this principle over contrary provincial regulations became clear when the national congress rejected a few provincial constitutions that attempted the introduction of voting qualifications.²³ The framers also relaxed some of the requirements to stand for office. While maintaining property restrictions for senators and presidents, the constitution of 1853 removed those requirements to be elected deputy, thus making the lower house an authentic centre of popular representation.

The new constitution was accepted by all the provinces except Buenos Aires, which formed a separate state until its final integration in the federation in 1860. One of the conditions for the incorporation of Buenos

²⁰ Without completely rejecting the idea of check and balances among the different branches of government, Alberdi was sceptical of the attempt to introduce a spontaneous equilibrium of powers by means of mutual controls between executives and legislatures. According to Alberdi citing Juan Egaña, ‘the equilibrium of powers is an illusion’. See Meyer, *Bases y puntos*, p. 354.

²¹ One period of six years should pass before the president could be re-elected.

²² See D. Perez Guilhou, *El pensamiento conservador de Alberdi y la Constitución de 1853* (Buenos Aires, 1984) p. 86.

²³ See D. Cantón, *Elecciones y partidos políticos en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1973), p. 20.

Aires was a constitutional reform that would protect the interests of this province by eliminating some of the centralist features of the original model. Sarmiento was a firm supporter of Alberdi's model but in that particular occasion acted as a doctrinaire federalist and proposed the general lines of reform. The reform eliminated the revision of provincial constitutions by the national congress, its right to impeach provincial governors, and the power of the federal judiciary to intervene in conflicts between different branches of provincial governments. With some modifications, however, the most important instrument of control of the central government was maintained. The central government could intervene in the provinces to guarantee the republican form of government and, upon request of local authorities, in cases of internal rebellion. Given the duration of congressional sessions for only five months a year, this rule meant that, in practice, the president would exercise this authority most of the time.

The acceptance of these reforms by a national convention made possible the application of the constitution at a national level and the gradual pacification of the country. Crucial issues, like the federalisation of the city of Buenos Aires as capital of the nation or the maintenance of provincial armies, remained unsolved until 1880. However, the constitution of 1853–60 became the basic framework of reference of a new era of increased political stability, protection of civil rights and economic progress from 1862 onwards. Though valuable, these achievements were all the more impressive if measured against a past characterised by factional conflict, violence and despotism. Provincial rivalries for power were slowly eliminated, internal conflict reduced, and presidents succeeded one another observing the principle of no re-election. In addition, a relatively independent judiciary, particularly at the federal level, began to assert its presence as the guardian of individual rights and moderator of political conflict.

As in Argentina, the Mexican constitution of 1857 was the product of a generation of liberals committed to the creation of a modern republic that would halt the flood of rebellions and dictatorships that characterised the history of this country since Independence.²⁴ In Mexico, however, the ideological foundation of the new constitution was highly disputed among the elite. In distinction to Argentina, where regional economic interests were predominant in shaping the dynamics of constitutional

²⁴ As Ponciano Arriaga, the president of the constituent congress, asserted, 'For years the Mexican people suffered the dreary consequences of civil war, the extorsions of despotism, the evils of anarchy. After the disasters of personalism and the bad faith of petty rulers all hoped that some day ... a constitution would rule'. See F. Zarco, *Crónica del Congreso Constituyente: 1856–57* (Mexico, 1979), pp. 30–2.

conflict, Mexican politics was affected by a sharp ideological division between conservative and liberal groups with opposing views across different institutional issues. Not only did conservatives support centralism while liberals favoured federalism – the former were also advocates of maintaining the system of colonial corporate privileges that liberals sought to destroy. In this sense, the triumph of the liberal coalition that defeated the conservative dictatorship of Santa Anna and created the constitution of 1857 in part foreshadowed the period of civil war that would follow the implementation of the new constitution.

The composition of the constituent congress formed in 1856 was not broad-based: conservatives were systematically excluded from the delegation. Ponciano Arriaga, a radical, was elected president of the congress, while the committee in charge of drafting the new constitution was composed of radical and moderate liberals. The congress as a whole, however, was more radical than the drafting committee. Thus, the project presented to the congress was amended in significant ways to accommodate the radical convictions of most deputies. These views can be easily traced in the position taken by the constituent congress in three key areas: federalism, balance of power among the branches of government and the electoral system.

The 1857 constitution restored federalism in Mexico. Different from the centralised version of federalism adopted by the Argentine constitution, the Mexican charter established a loose federation in which states were allowed to conduct their own business as they saw fit. Federalism was seen in Mexico not so much as a concession to the demands of provincial leaders as an integral part of a democratic project to distribute and limit the exercise of power. The constitution lacked institutional devices to counteract centrifugal tendencies and moderate political conflicts in the provinces. While the institution of federal intervention was included in very general terms, in no case could the national government intervene in the provinces without the request of local authorities. The union could provide aid to the states if, and only if, it was requested by the state legislature, or the governor, in case the legislature was not convened. The fact that the states had no representation as such in a unicameral legislature was probably one of the reasons to deny further powers of intervention to the central government.

More clearly than Argentine constitution-makers, Mexican framers rejected the American doctrine of checks and balances, the idea of a self-enforcing equilibrium between the different branches of government. They did so, however, to assert not the superiority of the executive but a model close to a parliamentary constitution. The last dictatorship of Santa Anna left a deep impression on the liberals who finally ousted him

in 1855. Since a strong executive was to be avoided at all costs, it was neither the Chilean constitution of 1833 nor the Argentine constitution of 1853 which served as their model. They found inspiration, instead, in the parliamentary constitution of the second French Republic, and so rejected the well-established trend in Latin America at the time of strengthening the powers of the executive. Mexican framers eliminated the senate of the previous constitution and created a unicameral legislature whose powers indeed resembled a parliamentary form of government.²⁵ The mention of an unspecified 'Council of Ministers' in the charter furthered this interpretation.

The Mexican congress had the authority to determine the initiation and extension of its sessions and was potentially able to intervene in the appointment and dismissal of any official in the administration. The president had a veto, but could be overridden by a simple legislative majority. While emergency provisions were included in the constitution, such powers had to be granted to the president by congress. Only its independent election by an electoral college and the possibility of re-election after periods of four years guaranteed the executive a relatively autonomous position. Given the weak powers of the president and his dependence on the legislature in most areas, Mexican liberals found no objection to the indefinite re-election of the executive, if such was the will of the people. As we will see, this rule proved to be crucial in shaping the dynamics of political competition for power in Mexico.

In terms of electoral rights, the Mexican constitution was more explicitly democratic than its Argentine counterpart. Mexican liberals wanted a return to the early experience of popular participation obliterated by the voting restrictions imposed by the previous conservative government.²⁶ The constitution included a long bill of rights and a declaration that sovereignty resided in 'the people'. The definition of citizen rights was expansive. The assembly rejected the proposal of the drafting committee for restricting voting rights to literate citizens as 'unfair and undemocratic'. A property qualification was not even considered by the committee. Peasants were not to be blamed for their ignorance, according to deputy Peña y Ramírez, but governments were culpable for not having provided them with adequate public instruction.²⁷

²⁵ F. A. Knapp, 'Parliamentary Government and the Mexican Constitution of 1857: A Forgotten Phase of Mexican Political History', in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. XXXIII, no. 1, 1953.

²⁶ On popular participation in elections before 1835, see R. Warren, 'Elections and Popular Political Participation in Mexico, 1809–1836', and A. Annino, 'Nuevas perspectivas para una vieja pregunta' in Antonio Annino (ed.), *El liberalismo en México* (Münster, 1993), pp. 5–15.

²⁷ F. Zarco, *Historia del Congreso Constituyente de 1857* (Mexico, 1987), p. 304.

In this view, a literacy restriction would constitute an undeserved form of punishment.²⁸ Once this restriction was eliminated, the article was approved by a unanimous vote. In a similar fashion, limitations (other than age and residence) on being elected deputy or president were also absent from the constitution. The only non-democratic feature of the electoral system devised by the framers was the provision for indirect elections for congress. However, this article passed by a tight vote after a long and heated debate. Many deputies, and the more prominent members of the congress, opposed this provision.

Although it followed the general tenets of liberal constitutionalism, the Mexican constitution of 1857 was, like the Argentine constitution of 1853, an original creation. The mix between a strong parliament and a presidential office followed the model of the French constitution of 1848, but the unicameral organisation of the legislature in the context of a federal state broke with the models adopted by the vast majority of the constitutions at the time. Innovations also included the *juicio de amparo*, a form of judicial review, and the inclusion of emergency powers, which previous constitutions in Mexico omitted. The provisions of the constitution were designed to cope with specific political conditions: just as emergency powers were needed to deal with chronic political instability, the unicameral congress was intended as a safeguard against the previous experience of executive despotism. These were not perceived as theoretical but as tailor-made solutions to real problems.

A central aspiration of the new constitution was the elimination of the traditional social order, which for Mexican liberals had its centre in the corporate rights and special jurisdictions (*fueros*) of the military, the Catholic Church, economic guilds and Indian communities. The most powerful of these corporations, particularly the military and the Church, soon became allies in the violent offensive initiated by the conservative opposition. Shortly after the enactment of the charter, the foes of the liberal regime issued the Plan Tacubaya in 1858. For three years, from January 1858 until January 1861, liberals and conservatives fought each other with unprecedented ferocity. When the president, Ignacio Comonfort, decided to join the rebels, the Chief Justice, Benito Juárez, became president and fled to the seaport of Veracruz, from where he fought the civil war until the conservatives were defeated in January 1861.

Yet, the opposition had not been eliminated and its members sought other means to destroy the liberal regime. The conservatives attempted to re-establish monarchical rule in Mexico. Conservative pleas found an echo in Emperor Napoleon III of France, who wanted a Latin empire.

²⁸ Zarco, *Crónica*, p. 304.

Maximilian, an Austrian prince, made himself available for the adventure and was recruited by Mexican Monarchists. Maximilian, however, had little more success than the dozens of caudillos before him. Even his own local supporters turned against him when, like the liberals, he tried to maintain secular control in the face of ecclesiastical pressures. Widespread civil disobedience lurked in the background of the Hapsburg court in Mexico City. In October 1866, when Prussia became a threat to France, Napoleon recalled his troops from Mexico. Without foreign military support, the empire collapsed.

The fall of the French Empire implied the complete defeat of the conservative faction and, in a way, the end of the conservative-liberal cleavage in Mexico. The discredit of conservatives (blamed for their alliance with a foreign power) inaugurated an era of liberal hegemony. Laws that had been issued during the Reform War, such as the nationalisation of Church property, separation of Church and state, secularisation of society, the forced sale of corporate property, were now backed by a legitimate government acting in the name of the constitution of 1857. As we will see, however, the experience of the civil war and foreign intervention deeply affected the perception of the liberal elite about the institutions that could finally stabilise the country. As if following the advice of Alberdi, the leaders of the Mexican republic would soon experience the need to abandon the model of parliamentary sovereignty and decentralised federalism for a centralised system of presidential hegemony.

III. Practice and consolidation of the liberal regime

From a political point of view, two interrelated factors may explain the success of the Argentine constitution of 1853. First, the formal institutions created by it proved to be adequate in solving the problem of national integration and consolidation of state authority. After the incorporation of Buenos Aires in 1860, Argentine presidents effectively used the power of federal intervention and state of siege to eliminate regional rivalries, reduce internal political conflict in the provinces and defeat the few caudillos that still challenged the national government. Second, the gradual stabilisation of the system was also dependent on the moderation of political competition by means of a system of agreements among the elite about the circulation of political power. In a system where the prize of winning the presidency was so high, the consolidation of this mechanism of sharing power by consensus was a key element in reducing the levels of conflict in the struggle to control the national government.

There was, however, a reverse side of this success. On the one hand, while the formal powers of the president and the central government

served progressively to enforce the constitution at a national level, they also increased the capacity of the government to shape the balance of political forces in the country. This tendency was particularly clear after 1880, when both in the provinces and at national level, no group could either compete or remain in power without the blessing of the central government. On the other hand, while the system of sharing power by consensus reduced the stakes of political competition, it also produced an increasingly visible contradiction between the principles and practice of republican government. Local elections, those of national deputies or the selection of electors for presidents, all remained under the control of provincial governors, who influenced the results according to previous agreements among local elites and between them and the national government.

To understand the meaning and evolution of these practices we need to look at the conditions under which the constitution of 1853 was born. The federal constitution was the outcome of an implicit pact of mutual protection between the central government and regional elites. According to this pact, the president would protect the authority of provincial governors in their local spheres of influence as long as governors collaborated in supporting the president in office. The sustainability of this political transaction was intrinsically dependent on the powers of the president and a system of presidential elections based on inter-elite bargaining.

A strong executive power with authority to intervene in the provinces and suspend constitutional guarantees in cases of exception was a guarantee against the emergence of internal and external challenges to the status quo in the provinces. Given the extreme political instability in the provinces, provincial leaders could rely on the central government every time they faced an internal rebellion or the threat of an external invasion from other provinces. At the same time, the president could also use his powers to impose discipline among those governors who did not align with the policy of the government.²⁹

It was also implied in the pact that the central authority would tolerate the control that provincial governors traditionally had over local elections. This practice not only made possible the formation and perpetuation of local oligarchies but also provided a reliable source of political support to the president. On the one hand, it could give the president stable majority support during his term in both the senate and the lower house. On the other, given the participation of the provinces in the election of

²⁹ See G. Negretto, 'The Making of a Latin American Republic: The Case of Argentina', Columbia University, 1997, unpubl. manuscript.

presidents, local control of elections could also sustain a national system of control of presidential succession.

Urquiza (1854–60) was the first president who controlled his own succession by appointing Santiago Derqui (1860–62) as the president who would complete the task of national unification. The growing conflicts between Urquiza and Derqui, however, led to the disintegration of the federalist coalition that sustained Urquiza's government. Neither Mitre (1862–68) nor Sarmiento (1868–74) were able to re-establish a stable alliance with provincial governors in order to control the mechanism of presidential succession. With the election of Avellaneda (1874–80), however, this alliance was again set in place and able to overcome the dissent of some members of the elite, like Mitre, who protested the manipulation of electoral results. By the election of Roca, in 1880, the alliance between central government and a majoritarian coalition of provinces already became the symbol of a hegemonic system of oligarchic domination known as PAN (National Autonomist Party).³⁰ The leaders of this system could easily be identified by both their monopoly over the state and their prominent social position as members of the land-owning elite.

As has been noted, the existence of informal agreements between regional oligarchies and the central authority about the rules of political competition played a strategic role in the observance of constitutional rules for the transmission of power. While neither presidents nor governors could be re-elected, the mechanism of electoral control provided them with an influence over their successors that reduced the temptation of an extra-legal continuation in power or the promotion of constitutional reforms to establish the possibility of re-election. At the same time, once they left power, a large number of governors and several presidents found a place in institutions like the senate, from where they could continue exercising political influence or wait until they could be re-elected.³¹ It should, then, be emphasised that while the whole mechanism prevented a real alternation between parties with different economic and political interests, it did facilitate a limited but effective circulation in power among different fractions of the elite.

While mutually dependent, the relationship between presidents and provincial governors was not one of equal partners. In the first place, presidents had at their disposal important economic and political resources to co-opt regional elites. Given the weak economic position of many provinces, the central government often used the distribution of subsidies

³⁰ On the formation and consolidation of this system, see N. Botana, *El orden conservador: la política argentina entre 1880 y 1916*, (Buenos Aires, 1985), pp. 74–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–12.

as an instrument to penalise opposition or reward loyalty. A similar use was made of the distribution of offices in the national administration.³² Most crucially, Argentine presidents had powerful instruments of coercion for those cases in which persuasion would not work. From 1862 to 1880, the federal intervention and the state of siege were applied 27 and 15 times, respectively, in most cases by executive decree.³³ The general aim of these measures was the elimination of old-style provincial caudillos, who defied the authority of the national government or attempted the creation of regional hegemonies by invading or intervening in the local affairs of other provinces. This process, however, had culminated by 1880, after the federalisation of the city of Buenos Aires, with no single province remaining as a centre of autonomous power.

From 1880 to 1916, the use of coercive powers by the president acquired a different dimension. While the use of state of siege provisions was more sporadic, federal intervention was declared 40 times, now in most cases by law.³⁴ The greater involvement of congress in cases of intervention, however, suggests not so much a decrease in the power of the presidency as its greater command over stable legislative majorities during the period of the PAN domination. As Botana has observed, following the analysis of Sommariva, the use of federal intervention in this period played a more central role both in the control of potential oppositions within the coalition of provinces that supported the president and in the regulation of local conflicts.³⁵ In the latter cases, the intervention was not always intended to preserve the existing authorities and, in fact, in most instances where they were declared without request, the federal government tended to support the opposition.³⁶ This use of federal intervention, in which the central government reserved for itself the role of an arbiter, indicates a more effective use of the institution as an instrument of political manipulation.

Through time, the practice of electoral fraud and the distribution of offices by negotiations among the elite acquired the force of an unwritten convention that coordinated the actions of all the actors involved. Most cooperated out of self-interest although some did so by fear of the sanctions that would follow from a deviation from expected behaviour. No single agent seemed to be in control of a system that worked like an impersonal machine. It is perhaps for this reason that President Julio Roca

³² See O. Oszlak, *La conquista del orden político y la formación histórica del estado argentino*, (Buenos Aires, 1982), pp. 33–36.

³³ See N. Botana, 'El Federalismo Liberal en la Argentina: 1853–1930', in Marcello Carmagnani (coord.), *Federalismos Latinoamericanos: México, Brasil, Argentina* (Mexico, 1993) p. 235. Also G. Molinelli, in *Presidentes y Congresos en la Argentina. Mitos y Realidades* (Buenos Aires, 1991) pp. 130–37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See Botana, 'El Federalismo Liberal', p. 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 133.

(1880–86) thought it credible to state in a speech of 1886 that ‘the government is not responsible for the actions and behaviour of all the officials of the republic who intervene in the electoral mechanism...’.³⁷ In a way, he was right: passive acquiescence was all that was necessary to reproduce the current state of affairs.

In spite of the different institutional framework, the actual implementation of the liberal project in Mexico shows some interesting points of comparison with the Argentine experience. Towards the end of the French intervention it became increasingly clear to Mexican liberals that the strengthening of presidential power was a necessity. When Juárez entered Mexico City on 15 July 1867, after four years of exile in the north, he did so in the name of the 1857 constitution. For a decade, however, this constitution was a dead letter. Both the Reform War and the French intervention made it impossible to govern with a political structure in which the congress was supposed to be the central nerve of the national government. As the leader of the government in exile, Juárez was the only authority with the capacity to act under emergency conditions. In this sense, one of the major legacies of the years of civil war and foreign intervention was a ‘tradition of unrestricted presidential power and a desire for swift and unchecked decision-making. All the major reforms that the single chamber of deputies had been set up to perform had, in fact, been accomplished by an omnipotent president’.³⁸

According to Rabasa, between 1863 and 1867, Juárez substituted for congress in enacting laws and even the people itself, by extending his term in office for the time that was necessary.³⁹ While the amount of power concentrated in Juárez’s hands had been unsurpassed, he used such power vigorously and successfully to fulfil his high purposes. The 1857 constitution, Rabasa asserts, ‘has never been observed because, had it been, it would have made the stability of government impossible’.⁴⁰ Authority had become centred in the presidency, although officially it resided in congress.

The republic was finally restored in 1867 and power was returned to congress. The state of siege was lifted and all the laws restored. Yet, Juárez was not ready to relinquish all the powers he acquired in the preceding period. The problem of political order was far from settled.

³⁷ See E. Gallo and N. Botana, *De la República posible a la República verdadera (1880–1910)* (Buenos Aires, 1997), p. 200.

³⁸ R. N. Sinkin, *The Mexican Reform, 1855–1876. A Study in Liberal Nation-Building* (Austin, 1979), pp. 86–87.

³⁹ Rabasa, Emilio, *La Constitución y la dictadura. Estudio sobre la organización política de México* (Mexico, 1990 [c1912]), p. 99. A defence of the 1857 constitution was espoused by Daniel Cosío Villegas. See: *La Constitución de 1857 y sus críticos* (Mexico, 1957).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 67.

Political turmoil was widespread and local bosses, bandits, kidnappers and small bands of rebels challenged the authority of the national government. In this context, an institutional conflict emerged between the desire of the president to obtain greater powers and the formal structure of the constitution. As Sinkin asserts, the constitution had been written in reaction to the centralised and absolute dictatorship of Santa Anna and as such ‘made certain that the presidential office would never be able to exercise the kind of aggressive leadership Santa Anna had displayed. Yet this was exactly the kind of leadership Juárez came to regard as essential for the survival of the nation’.⁴¹

On 14 August 1867, the government issued the *convocatoria*, a document that established the dates for the elections of president, supreme court and congress. The document, however, also contained several proposals for constitutional change. Article 9 of the *convocatoria* called for a referendum on five constitutional amendments. In the first place, it proposed the creation of a senate to represent the provinces, decide on federal issues and counteract the power of the lower house. At the same time, the proposals contained a visible enhancement of presidential authority. The president would acquire effective veto power, cabinet ministers would be exempted from the duty of making personal appearances before congress to deliver their yearly reports and the power of congress to convene special sessions by itself would be eliminated.⁴² One last element of the amendment aimed to resolve the problem of alternation in power by fixing exactly the line of succession to the presidency.

In calling for this referendum and appealing directly to the people, the government side-stepped the existing amendment procedures. While only congress had the power to amend the constitution, the government claimed that the normal process of amending the constitution would be too slow. The strategic reason for this move was obvious. Given that the main purpose of the government was to create a second chamber and strengthen the powers of the executive, it anticipated the opposition that this reform would provoke in the legislature. The division of the single chamber, the government argued, would change the legislature from a radical convention to a deliberative body. The proposed reform, according to Sinkin, ‘was a logical and dramatic move in the direction of modern politics; given the strength of the Constitution of 1857 as a national symbol, however, it was doomed to failure’.⁴³ The *convocatoria* was

⁴¹ Sinkin, *Mexican Reform*, p. 82.

⁴² According to the existing system, the permanent diputación, a body representing congress when it was not in session, was in charge of convening the assembly for special sessions when it was necessary to treat some urgent issue.

⁴³ See Sinkin, *Mexican Reform*, p. 88.

assailed from all sides. Opposition to the reforms was such that the government was forced to yield and withdrew the proposal.

Since constitutional reform was impossible, the government attempted the use of emergency powers and federal intervention to expand its capacity of action. Similar to Argentine presidents in the initial period of the Republic, Juárez faced periodical challenges to the central authority and endemic political conflict in the provinces. Unlike them, however, Juárez had no independent authority to resolve these problems. He was successful in obtaining from congress regular concessions of extraordinary powers to punish federal crimes and control cases of rebellion against the constitutional government. In this way, he circumvented ordinary procedures in order to rule. Juárez had a more difficult time, however, obtaining broad powers of intervention in the provinces. One of the key problems was the existence of factional rivalries to control state governments.⁴⁴ While governors tended to establish bureaucratic machine factions loyal to them, opposition groups often found no option but to resort to violence. In these cases, however, the government was unable to intervene without request of local authorities and congressional approval. In 1870, Juárez sent a law to congress to regulate and expand the institution of federal intervention but this initiative was never approved.⁴⁵

The most serious conflict faced by the República Restaurada, however, was that affecting the rules of competition for presidential power. Unlike Argentina, presidents could be re-elected in Mexico and there was no accepted convention among the elite about how to regulate the problem of presidential succession. The end of each presidential period represented, a fierce struggle between the incumbent president and other potential candidates for the presidency. In the presidential elections of 1871 three leaders of different liberal factions competed for power: Juárez, the incumbent president, Lerdo de Tejada, the chief of justice and Porfirio Díaz, a popular and successful general. Although Juárez finally obtained re-election thanks to the support of Lerdo's faction, Díaz rebelled against the government under allegations of electoral fraud. The rebellion was quelled and Juárez continued in office until he died of heart failure in 1872.

In the absence of agreement about the rules of succession, elections in Mexico did not provide a reliable mechanism for the distribution of power. Similar to the experience of Argentina, elections were subject to constant manipulation by local political leaders. Yet unlike the Argentine

⁴⁴ On this issue, see P. Laurens Ballard, *Juárez and Díaz. Machine Politics in Mexico* (De Kalb, 1978) and W. Vinton Scholes, *Mexican Politics During the Juárez Regime 1855-1872* (Columbia, 1957).

⁴⁵ See José Antonio Aguilar-Rivera, 'Oposición y Separación de Poderes: La Estructura Institucional del Conflicto 1867-1872', in *Metapolítica*, vol. II, no. 5, pp. 69-92.

case, Mexican presidents had no regular instruments to force or induce the compliance of these leaders. Given the absence of direct elections in Mexico, this compliance was crucial both to win a presidential election and to obtain a stable legislative support. For this reason, incumbent presidents sought by all means, legal and extra-legal, to influence the choices of local authorities.⁴⁶ Local authorities, in turn, did all they could to select candidates loyal to the interests of their states.

Mexican presidents, like their Argentine counterparts, attempted to obtain local leaders' compliance by using emergency powers and federal intervention, president obtained congressional authorisation to resolve political conflicts in the provinces, which was seldom neutral. Juárez, for instance, ignored requests for federal intervention made by factional enemies, even when congress ordered the national government to provide aid. At the same time, he supported his local allies by decreeing states of siege to allow electoral manipulation. These resources allowed the executive to obtain the selection of sympathetic electors, conduct electoral fraud, establish political alliances and exercise other forms of influence.⁴⁷ It was for this reason that opposition in congress rejected in 1870 the demand of Juárez to increase the legal powers of the executive to intervene in the states.⁴⁸

The control of a majority of electoral votes was paramount in a political system driven by deep cleavages. Two axes of conflict overlapped: national political rivalries (between leaders such as Juárez and Lerdo) and local factional struggles. If electoral tinkering could not be performed by means of emergency powers and federal intervention, an absolute majority of electoral votes was not likely. A majority of electoral votes was particularly crucial during presidential elections, as in 1871, when opposition to Juárez in congress led to the abrogation of emergency powers earlier that year. Thus, the federal executive was prevented from securing favourable political conditions in several key states before the election took place. The result was that none of the three candidates – Juárez, Lerdo and Díaz – obtained an absolute majority of electoral votes.

During the presidency of Lerdo, who succeeded Juárez in 1872, a new phase in the strengthening of governmental power was inaugurated. The turning point was the restoration of the senate in 1874, when this body was empowered to declare the 'disappearance' of state powers. However, the executive regarded this mechanism as too cumbersome. The senate,

⁴⁶ See I. Arroyo García, 'El péndulo: consenso y coacción a través de la intervención federal en México, Brasil y Argentina', El Colegio de México, unpubl. manuscript, 1997.

⁴⁷ See Perry, *Juárez and Díaz*.

⁴⁸ According to Arroyo, the central strategy of Juárez was to obtain legal powers of intervention to reduce the use of emergency powers for partisan purposes. Arroyo García, 'El péndulo'.

while not inimical to the president, was relatively independent from him. Thus, Lerdo's supporters in congress attempted to pass a law that had granted the executive a stronger hand over the senate. Congress, however, did not approve the initiative. Since electoral manipulation could not be carried out by means of federal interventions, Lerdo resorted once more, like Juárez, to the use of emergency powers. But they proved insufficient to solve the levels of conflict caused by the problem of presidential succession.

Lerdo called for new presidential elections in 1875. He won at the polls but, in the midst of allegations of electoral wrongdoing, Porfirio Díaz again rebelled in the town of Tuxtepec. This time, the revolt was successful, Lerdo was ousted and Díaz became president in 1876 to preside over the final stabilisation of the liberal regime. He came to power with the promise of making real the constitution of 1857, in his view violated by the corrupt electoral practices of ambitious presidents and provincial governors. The secret of his success, however, resonated closely with the Argentine formula: the concentration of power in the executive branch and a solid system of alliances between the central government and regional elites to control competition for power. After a decade of intense political conflict, Díaz managed to co-opt disperse fractions of the elite into what initially was a relatively inclusive oligarchic regime. Different from the case of Argentina, however, the stability of the new regime became so dependent on the continuity of Díaz in power that, through time, the peaceful adaptation of the regime to new political conditions was precluded.

IV. The decline and fall of the liberal republic

By the 1880s, the liberal regimes of Argentina and Mexico resembled each other in the role played by the president as the centre of a national network of oligarchic domination. After abolishing the rule of presidential re-election, Díaz managed, with the support of local leaders, to appoint a successor under his control. Once he returned to power in 1884, he was also successful in eliminating all centres of institutional and political opposition, and dominating the provinces by means of economic inducements and political sanctions. The outcome of this process, as in Argentina, was the gradual stabilisation of the political system and the acceleration of the process of economic growth and modernisation. In spite of these similarities, however, the final restoration of the principle of presidential re-election in Mexico and the ability of Díaz to perpetuate himself in power marked a different political dynamic regarding the opening of the political space and the development of a democratic opposition in both countries.

It was not until 1890, in the midst of a deep economic crisis, that a more or less organised opposition to the oligarchic regime emerged in Argentina. This is not surprising, given that the regime consolidated in the 1880s was increasingly reliant on the economic prosperity of the country to hide the weakness of a political legitimacy still based on the fulfilment of the liberal project. The Unión Cívica opposition movement was originally led by members of the elite marginalised from the current state of affairs. It criticised the government for the corruption of electoral practices and the concentration of power in the central government, but the tone of the vindication was fully consistent with the liberal tradition. As Leandro Alem, one of the main leaders of the Unión Cívica, put it: ‘... we are not the revolutionaries, properly speaking; we are the conservatives ...’.⁴⁹ The essential goal of the movement was not to replace the old liberal constitution but to make real the promise of a representative republic contained in it.

The initial response of the regime, particularly in the face of a national civic-military uprising promoted by the movement, was a coercive one. Between 1890 and 1893, as the rebellion spread throughout the country, the government repeatedly used the state of siege and federal intervention to restore order and protect the status quo. The movement was defeated but repression was quite limited. The main leaders of the movement remained free and even reached and maintained official positions in the senate, like Leandro Alem and Bernardo de Yrigoyen. After the resignation of President Juárez Celman (1886–90), the government clearly searched for a negotiated solution, trying to include the dissenting elite without an abrupt change in electoral practices. Part of the movement did in fact respond to this call producing, in 1891, a split between two factions: the Unión Cívica Nacional (UCN), partisan of an inclusive oligarchic regime, and the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), demanding of nothing less than a fully competitive democracy.

As a result of this division, three different groups started to compete in elections: the PAN, the alliance of provincial interests that represented the oligarchic regime, the UCN, a loyal opposition group, and the UCR, an opposition party with permanent organisation that intended the complete reform of the existing regime. As Paula Alonso indicates, from 1890 to 1898, before the UCR began to practice a permanent abstention in elections, the regime experienced a high and unusual degree of party competition.⁵⁰ This level of competition was largely restricted to the city of Buenos Aires and applied only to positions in congress. However, the experience of

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵⁰ See P. Alonso, ‘Politics and Elections in Buenos Aires, 1880–1898: The Performance of the Radical Party’, in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 25 (1993), pp. 465–87.

peaceful party competition grounded the belief of the ruling elite in the possibility of an internal and gradual reform of the regime.

In 1898, Julio Roca, the most powerful representative of the liberal-oligarchic regime and leader of the PAN, returned to the presidency in order to accomplish the reformist mission. In 1902, his minister of interior Joaquín V. González, presented an electoral law aimed at the gradual elimination of fraudulent practices and greater control of the voters over the selection of representatives. The proposal maintained the existing principles of universal suffrage but introduced two important changes. First, the vote would be secret instead of public to avoid the possibility of coercion over the voter. Second, seats for national deputies and electors for president would be distributed not by a single list of multiple candidates but by single-member districts. Though not seeking drastic change, the reform intended to deprive provincial governors from a centralised control over the candidate list, but it was a failure and electoral manipulation continued.⁵¹

In the meantime, opposition to the regime was growing. In 1896, the socialist party was founded with effective universal suffrage and competitive elections as leading principles of its political platform. It was the UCR, however, now under the leadership of Hipólito Yrigoyen, that was winning most popular support. Yrigoyen rejected any negotiation with the government, and after 1898 even participation in electoral processes, until a real reform was passed to give the opposition a credible chance to win. In his view, just as the liberal regime became a synonym of corruption and democratic illegitimacy, the radical party was evolving as the true interpreter of the nation and the popular will.⁵² This is perhaps the first seed we can trace of the antiliberal and plebiscitary interpretation of democracy that would later predominate in Argentina.

After the failure of the reform of 1902, it was clear that the regime was unable to change from within and that, at a minimum, a new leadership was necessary in order to make possible a transition to democracy. In 1905, the UCR organised a new national uprising against the regime, now with a more important and dangerous participation of the military than in 1890 and 1893. This revolt, along with the sudden death of Manuel Quintana (1904–1906) and the accession of reformist vice-president Figueroa Alcorta to the presidency (1906–10), paved the way to the transition. Given its open reformist orientation in a political scene still

⁵¹ According to Botana, the continuity of electoral malpractice was due to the fact that the reform failed to introduce the secrecy of the suffrage. See N. Botana, 'El Marco Histórico Institucional: Leyes Electorales, Alternancia y Competencia entre Partidos', in Natalio Botana, et al., *La Argentina electoral* (Buenos Aires, 1985), p. 17.

⁵² Gallo and Botana, *De la república posible*, p. 118.

dominated by the old guard of the PAN, the presidency of Alcorta was perhaps the first, and not very happy, experience with divided government in Argentina. At the same time that Alcorta initiated negotiations with Yrigoyen, the congress became the centre of opposition to the president that reached a peak in 1908, when in the face of congressional opposition to approve the budget, the president decided to use public force and temporarily close the congress.

The celebration of a hundred years of Argentine independence in 1910 was an opportunity taken by different intellectuals and publicists, to re-evaluate the legacy of the liberal project and the origins of the current state of affairs in the country.⁵³ According to Joaquín V. González, the main factor behind the absence of effective elections in Argentina was the failure of civic education to break with the authoritarian habits and political practices inherited from colonial times.⁵⁴ Other interpreters, like Matienzo, paid more attention to political institutions. In his view, the corruption of republican principles resided on the absolutist power that a façade of federalism left in hands of provincial governors. For Matienzo, Argentina should return to the original principles of the constitution of 1853, both to diminish the power of governors as well as to distribute more evenly the power to control the provinces among the different branches of government.⁵⁵

Another observer, Rodolfo Rivarola, accurately saw the origins of the current situation in the conditions under which the liberal regime was created. He argued that the existing regime was, in fact, a derivation of the original pact made in 1852 between Urquiza, the leader of the federalist coalition, and provincial governors. In his view, this pact contained the seeds of a hidden centralist organisation of power and a system of mutual protection between governors and presidents based on the official control of elections.⁵⁶ Attributing to the governors a mere passive role in the system, he argued for the abolition of the federation and the creation of a truly centralist system.

Such broad projects of constitutional reform, however, were not on the agenda of the political actors of the time. The central object of negotiation was the crafting of a new electoral law, which was finally passed in congress in 1912, during the presidency of Roque Sáenz Peña. The law established the secret and obligatory character of the vote, a centralised

⁵³ On the general characteristics of the movement of 'liberal reformism' that emerged in this period, see E. Zimmermann, *Los liberales reformistas: la cuestión social en argentina 1890-1916* (Buenos Aires, 1995).

⁵⁴ J. V. González, *El juicio del siglo* (Buenos Aires, 1979), p. 119.

⁵⁵ J. N. Matienzo, *El gobierno representativo federal en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1910), pp. 338-41.

⁵⁶ R. Rivarola, *Del régimen federativo al unitario* (Buenos Aires, 1908), pp. 50-4.

registry for all the voters, and a system to distribute seats in congress that provided two-thirds of the total seats to the majority party and one third to the second most voted party.⁵⁷ The fear of a violent revolution probably played a role in convincing the ruling elite about the necessity of reform. However, the final reason for making some concessions to the opposition resided in the belief of the elite that their political position was sufficiently strong to keep the presidency and a stable majority in congress for a relatively long time.

During the negotiations, the government also introduced several institutional rules that would secure the interests of the ruling elite during the transition. In the first place, the new law of elections restricted the right to vote to native citizens or naturalised residents. Since a large portion of the male population was made up of non-naturalised residents and most of them belonged to the working class, this was a crucial guarantee for the regime that its power basis would not be significantly challenged in the coming elections.⁵⁸ Second, the senate, the members of which served for nine years with the body renewed every three, remained untouched by the reform. Third, and most importantly, the government did not expect an immediate elimination of the traditional electoral machinery. As Minister Indalecio Gómez made clear in his exposition in congress, the government would *not* intervene in the provinces to guarantee the purity of suffrage. It is perhaps for this reason that he was so sure that two-thirds of representation in congress as well as the presidency would remain in hands of the traditional elite.⁵⁹

Contrary to these predictions, however, instead of a gradual transition in which the new elites would be integrated as a legal opposition, the *ancien régime* experienced a relatively rapid collapse of its hegemony. After the implementation of the new laws, the opposition won positions in the mid-term legislative elections of 1912 and 1914. The greatest defeat of the old elite, however, was experienced in 1916, when the leader of the radical party, Hipólito Yrigoyen, won the presidency. Among the main factors that explain this result was the greater autonomy of the voters, the organisational capacity of the UCR party to mobilise them and, most crucially, the failure of the regime to create a national conservative party organised and supported by the incumbent president.⁶⁰

By the 1920s, the traditional parties had lost their majorities in the house of representatives and were gradually losing power in the senate.

⁵⁷ Because of the mix between plurality and proportionality, the new system was called 'incomplete' list.

⁵⁸ See P. Smith, 'The Breakdown of Democracy in Argentina', in Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 10–11.

⁵⁹ See Gallo and Botana, *De la república posible*, p. 688.

⁶⁰ See Botana, *El orden*, pp. 334–5.

Worst of all, the executive, now invested with democratic legitimacy, turned the use of presidential power against the old parties that still dominated the provinces.⁶¹ During Yrigoyen's first term (1916–22) alone 19 interventions were declared, most by executive decree.⁶² Ironically, this use of presidential power did not depart from a very well established practice. What was novel, however, was the interpretation that Yrigoyen made of his powers. Being the first president elected by free elections, Yrigoyen saw in his election a popular 'mandate', a foundational plebiscite of the people to eradicate the remnants of a corrupt regime.⁶³ Through this interpretation, hostility to the liberal-oligarchic regime eventually turned into hostility to the liberal tradition itself.⁶⁴ The very idea of dividing power or subjecting political power to legal limits was implicitly challenged by the notion that the president was the incarnation of the unitary will of the people.

While the election of Alvear (1922–28) implied some return to the traditional politics of compromise, it was clear that the old elite would never again regain control of the presidency. With the return of Yrigoyen in 1928 all hopes to restore a more equilibrated transition were lost. Just as the democratic opposition in the past was marginalised under the rule of a powerful oligarchic president, now a similarly powerful democratic president displaced the old elite. Being unable to win presidential elections by legal means, the latter decided to resort to illegal measures. In September 1930, a military coup backed by members of the old regime overthrew Yrigoyen and restored the old liberal regime under conditions of electoral control.

By the 1890s, the regime of Díaz experienced greater contradictions than the liberal regime in Argentina. While Díaz came to power promising effective suffrage and no re-election, corrupted electoral practices consolidated during his government and, in 1887, a new constitutional amendment made possible his re-election in 1888. Díaz also created a system of presidential hegemony that was totally at odds with the formal structure of powers established by the constitution of 1857. While the constitution of 1857 gave all power to the congress, the new regime concentrated all power in the president. Yet, in spite of this glaring contradiction, the regime of Díaz faced no organised opposition until the turn of the century. The main reason for this result should be found in the

⁶¹ See Anne. L. Potter, 'The Failure of Democracy in Argentina, 1916–1930: An Institutional Perspective', in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. XIII, May 1981.

⁶² See Botana, 'El Federalismo', p. 500.

⁶³ For the views of Yrigoyen on the use of presidential power, see Ana María Mustapic, 'Conflictos Institucionales Durante el Primer Gobierno Radical: 1916–1922', in *Desarrollo Económico*, vol. XXIV, no. 93 (April–June 1984).

⁶⁴ See J. L. Romero, *Argentine Political Thought* (Stanford, 1963) p. 221.

particular characteristics of the personalised system of domination built by Díaz.

The main effort of Díaz after the seizure of power was directed to solve the problems that caused the crisis of the liberal republic during the period 1867–1876. Rather than initiating a policy of persecution and oppression of opposition groups, he invited them to participate in the regime as long as they provided support to the new order. He also exploited the conflicts created by the re-election rule by initially promoting a constitutional amendment that prohibited the immediate re-election of both presidents and provincial governors. This allowed him to replace local strongmen with his personal allies. At the local level, the re-election rule was not an efficient solution. Local factional struggles did not cease, but exploded.⁶⁵ The result of the ban on re-election was, according to Carmagnani, that ‘between 1878 and 1887 factional struggles in the federation and, above all, in the states were turned loose’.⁶⁶ The principle of no re-election, however, initially provided Díaz with substantive benefits. While the ban on re-election allowed him to replace unfriendly governors, it also made credible his supposed commitment to allow alternation in power.

At the beginning, and just like his predecessors, Díaz attempted to obtain greater formal powers of intervention in the provinces. Because the senate was not subservient to the executive, Díaz intended to annul its constitutional faculty to ‘disappear’ local powers and transfer to the president a more direct power of federal intervention. The proposal never went through congress and Díaz had to rely instead on an alliance with the senate in order to conduct federal interventions. Such interventions were carried out six times between 1878 and 1887.⁶⁷ After 1880, however, the use of federal intervention lost importance as an instrument to control local situations.

The new system of domination was based on personal compromises and alliances between Díaz and provincial governors. Díaz exchanged loyalty for relative local autonomy. He allowed governors to nominate substitute candidates for congress and the federal judiciary. Hence, local powers started to play an effective role in national politics. State executives freely nominated the candidates to local legislatures as well as to the state judiciary. Interference in local affairs by the national

⁶⁵ M. Carmagnani, ‘El federalismo liberal mexicano’, in Marcello Carmagnani, (ed.), *Federalismos latinoamericanos: México/Brasil/Argentina* (Mexico, 1993). See also: M. Carmagnani, ‘El liberalismo, los impuestos internos y el Estado federal mexicano. 1857–1911’, in *Historia Mexicana*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 3 (Jan.–March 1989), pp. 471–96 and ‘La libertad, el poder y el estado en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX’, in *Historias*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, (Oct.–Dec. 1986), pp. 54–63.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ M. González Oropeza, *La intervención federal en la desaparición de poderes*, (Mexico, 1983).

government became rare, since political equilibrium now rested on reciprocal relations of trust between Díaz and state powers. In exchange for their compliance, displaced local elites were permitted to enrich themselves and to conduct their businesses with great autonomy. In return, provincial caudillos accepted political defeat and did not revolt. It was in this new context, that Díaz, elected president again in 1884, promoted a new constitutional reform to re-establish the possibility of re-election for president and governors.

The principle of re-election critically altered the incentive structure of all political actors. On the one hand, it allowed powerful local families to retain the control of state governments for extended periods of time. Most provinces fell under the permanent rule of *gobiernos de familia* with wide networks of clientelistic relations on which the president could rely to secure political control over the territory. On the other hand, since no group could have access or retain power without the personal support of Díaz, he could also count on the support of regional oligarchies to obtain consecutive re-elections after the end of each presidential period. Through time, the relationship of mutual dependence between regional oligarchies and the president became even stronger than it was the case in Argentina. Since neither Díaz nor the *gobiernos de familia* were able to remain in power without the support of the other, they each had a common interest in preventing the emergence of any organised opposition in the country. This development reduced the ability of the political system to channel a growing opposition without disrupting the balance of power of the Porfirista regime. Lack of flexibility resulted in the forfeiture of the reform avenue to effect political change in Mexico. The long-established dynamic of co-optation that Díaz developed so successfully impeded the emergence of a broad opposition party. Only fragmented groups emerged, and they were unable to coalesce into a wide movement able to challenge the power of Díaz.

As it was the case in Argentina, however, the Mexican president was able to reserve for himself the upper hand in the system of domination. While allowing the hegemony of certain families in state politics, it was of the utmost importance for Díaz's strategy to keep all factions 'duly represented and in constant opposition'.⁶⁸ The existence of latent rivalries among local elites allowed Díaz to play one against the other according to his own interests. Depending on the situation, he threw his political weight in one direction or the other to tip the political balance. Knowing this, displaced elites often requested Díaz's intervention on their behalf or used personal connections with the president to pressure concessions

⁶⁸ R. Falcón, 'La desaparición de jefes políticos en Coahuila. Una paradoja porfirista', *Historia Mexicana*, vol. XXXVII, no. 3 (1988), p. 434.

from local governments. Apart from the traditional distribution of offices in the national administration, Díaz was also able to obtain the compliance of regional elites by using his personal influence to guarantee or obstruct business opportunities to different groups. The growing expansion of investment and commercial activities in the 1880s and 1890's was in this sense an invaluable resource to secure the hegemony of the president.

Over time, particularly from his second term in office (1884–88), Díaz eliminated all independent institutions in the country. While the president controlled the governors, the governors, in turn, controlled all other provincial institutions. The relative strengthening of the governors allowed them to encroach on municipal governments. These had been elective until state constitutions were reformed in the early nineties. The *jefes políticos*, regional officials designated by governors to control municipalities, would now appoint township authorities. As state governors gained autonomy, *jefes políticos* ceased to be accountable to the central government and became creatures of the governors. By the same token, since the state congress and the judiciary were packed with governors' allies, the independence of those branches of government was seriously curtailed.

By the late 1880s Díaz neutralised the most central institution created by the constitution of 1857: the national congress. Given the strict control of elections, Díaz prevented any opposition from winning seats in congress. As a result, from being an arena of intense bargaining in key areas such as the approval of the budget or the authorisation of emergency powers, the congress became a mere rubber stamp of presidential decisions.⁶⁹ Economic power thus shifted from the states toward the national executive. Interest groups, for instance, started to negotiate directly with the finance minister rather than with deputies or senators. The result was that Mexico City's share in public expenditures grew and those of the states decreased.

From a political point of view, the Achilles heel of the regime was its growing exclusionary character and rigidity. In spite of the appearance of stability, by the 1890s, the regime of Díaz experienced a gradual but steady decline. Díaz had already exhausted his mechanisms of co-optation and was increasingly reliant on open oppression to prevent the emergence of opposition. The circulation of local elites was scarce, and Díaz' manoeuvres to preserve political equilibrium among factions were not always as successful as in the past. Between 1889 and 1893, revolts occurred in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila and Guerrero. Aggrieved elites were now likely to rebel if political access was denied to them. At

⁶⁹ See F. Katz, 'The Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato, 1867–1910', in Leslie Bethell, (ed.), *Mexico Since Independence* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 81.

the same time, the absorption of most resources by the central government and the multiplicity of pressures to satisfy contradictory economic demands, diminished through time the capacity of Díaz to maintain the redistributive pattern that initially made possible the sharing of the benefits of economic growth.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Díaz' regime faced multiple centres of opposition. The first serious opposition came from an old strand of liberalism that idealised the days of the *República Restaurada* and criticised the growing corruption and lack of political liberty under Díaz. This opposition was not unified in a political movement or party, like the Unión Cívica in Argentina, but was instead represented through several Liberal 'clubs' with connections in the progressive press. The core of the critique was the distance between liberal principles and the actual practices of the regime. The ills of the country, they argued, could be traced to a single source: the cancellation of the individual and political rights established by the 1857 constitution. In this view, peonage, peasants, Indian poverty and ethnic wars, all existed because these rights have been neglected.⁷⁰ After two years of tolerance toward liberal clubs, their leaders were arrested and organisations disbanded in 1902. Moreover, Díaz did not attempt, as did the reformist liberals in Argentina, to incorporate the opposition in the regime, much less compete with them in elections.

Their repressive action occurred in the midst of growing political radicalisation. While Mexico experienced in the 1880s an important process of economic modernisation and development, it did not resolve but actually increased social inequalities. While the liberal regime in Argentina supported a process of land concentration in few hands, Mexico had a much lower land-labour ratio than Argentina and a labour surplus. This situation worsened the economic conditions of thousands of peasants whose lands were expropriated by the regime. A growing working class, struggling for better labour conditions, supported their demand for social justice. In this context, social reform, not just effective suffrage and political liberalisation, became one of the crucial issues of most opposition movements. The Mexican Liberal Party (PLM), for instance, became in the 1900s one of the main political organisations in opposition to the Díaz regime. It was, however, only liberal in name and PLM embraced the principles of anarchism.

A liberal-democratic opposition emerged around the figure of Francisco Madero, who created an anti-re-electionist party aimed at preventing a new election of Díaz in 1910. As Díaz showed no intention of guaranteeing a competitive election, an armed movement was formed to force his resignation and support the rise of Madero to the presidency. Madero,

⁷⁰ F. Xavier Guerra, *México: del antiguo régimen a la revolución* (Mexico, 1991), vol. II, p. 30.

however, was unable to reconcile the contradictory demands of the coalition that brought him to power. While Madero wanted to emphasise the strengthening of civil liberties and political rights, his radical allies placed the need to distribute wealth and initiate a radical social reform as the top priority of the new democratic government. The army, still dominated by old *Porfiristas*, took advantage of this situation and overthrew him in a futile attempt to restore the old regime.

The project of reactionary forces failed but so did the liberal-democratic transition desired by Madero. The political stage was soon occupied by the leaders of a social revolution that in 1917 put an end to the liberal project. A new constitution was created with a broad charter of social rights and a scheme of division of powers that finally replaced the model of parliamentary government and loose federal structures by a strong presidential system and a centralised federation. While the liberal reform era was vindicated, the new regime clearly placed the social and economic objectives of the revolution above the ideals of limited government and democratic participation that once inspired the framers of the constitution of 1857.

Conclusions

Rather than a mere imitation of foreign trends or a particular form of authoritarianism, liberalism in Latin America was a conscious project seeking to introduce the notions of constitutionalism and modern representative government into the reality of traditional societies. By the end of the nineteenth century, the impact of this project was not negligible. On the one hand, ideas such as the separation of powers, rule of law and respect for individual rights became patterns of legitimacy that effectively replaced the colonial legacy of absolutist rule, patrimonialism, and corporatism. On the other hand, the ideal of republican government, the rule of representatives elected by the people, introduced the first notions of citizenship and popular participation in the context of a political tradition that emphatically denied self-rule or democratic autonomy. There were contradictions, of course, between the liberal project and political reality. But these contradictions, when they existed, should be found not so much at the level of ideology as in the specific political conditions under which Latin American liberals were constrained to act.

The fall of the centralist structures of the Spanish Empire created everywhere in Latin America a process of territorial fragmentation that paved the way for decades of conflict between different regional elites to define the unitary or federal structure of the national state. These conflicts, in turn, were often intensified by the presence of deep material and

ideological cleavages. By trial and error or by imitation of more successful cases in the region, liberal elites gradually found the solution to the problem of national integration and political order in constitutional models based on centralised forms of government and strong executive authorities. The different starting points of Argentina and Mexico illustrate this point. Mexican liberals created a model of parliamentary sovereignty with a weak executive and loose federal structures. However, persistent conflicts between central authority and local powers and among national leaders themselves led to the adoption of a model of centralised federation and strong presidentialism very much close to the one created by Argentine constitution-makers.

The most severe obstacle for the liberal project was found in the realisation of the promise of representative government. While representative government in the nineteenth century was not incompatible with oligarchic rule, it did require the use of popular elections for the distribution of office. As the cases of Argentina and Mexico show, however, liberal elites in these countries gradually distorted electoral results to honour informal agreements between the central authority and local leaders. It would be a crude simplification to claim that the essential aim of this system was to contain the challenge that popular participation could have created for the consolidation of oligarchic rule. Popular participation might have been limited, as in Europe at the time, by introducing strict voting qualifications. The fact that liberal elites in Argentina and Mexico rejected this solution, suggests a different interpretation: circulation in power by compromise rather than by electoral competition was a mechanism to prevent and solve the conflicts about the distribution of government positions that plagued the first decades of independent political life.

The liberal regimes of Argentina and Mexico achieved political stability in the 1880s through the formula of centralised government and sharing power by consensus. Both the centralisation of power and the system of electoral control by the ruling elites were functional to national integration and political order. Yet, these same institutions restricted the emergence of an independent electorate that could have provided incentives for the early creation and gradual incorporation of alternative parties at regional and national level.

The degree of inclusiveness and electoral competition of the liberal regime was certainly higher in Argentina under the domination of the PAN than in Mexico under Díaz. This made possible the emergence of a limited but effective form of party competition in the 1890s, and a negotiated transition to democracy in 1912. The process of democratisation in Argentina, however, was initiated without previous

experience in sharing the highest prize of the system – the presidency. In this sense, the early resolution of the problem of presidential succession by negotiated agreements among the elite was of no use when the presidential office was open to free competition. In the case of Mexico, the problem of presidential succession was not resolved until the late 1880s by the perpetuation in power of Díaz and his local allies. Due to the rigidity of this system, however, it was impossible for Díaz to reach a compromise with the opposition without affecting the basis of his power. Political opposition eventually emerged in Mexico but, different from the case of Argentina, they could not rely on a legal reform: revolution was the only viable alternative for gaining power.

In both countries, the experience of the liberal republic left a contradictory legacy for the process of democratisation initiated in this century. In Argentina, the democratic movement made real the promise of popular participation contained in the liberal project. It did so, however, by adopting a plebiscitary interpretation of democracy that implicitly denied the possibility of compromise or the sharing of power with the old elite. In Mexico, the revolution vindicated the struggles of the liberal period against conservatism and the colonial social order. However, in achieving the goals of social reform and economic redistribution, the revolutionary regime postponed the realisation of the representative republic desired by the framers of the constitution of 1857. Democratic movements in Argentina and Mexico received from the liberal republic the legacy of a powerful presidency and a strongly centralised system. The reform of these institutions should be the priority of a process of democratisation that has yet to re-invent a liberal tradition more compatible with the values of pluralism, limited government, and political autonomy.