



Presidential survival in South America: Rethinking the role of democracy

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Christopher A Martínez

Temuco Catholic University, Chile

Abstract

Since 1979, one in every six South American presidents has failed to complete his constitutional term. These 'presidential failures' occur when elected presidents are forced out of office but without compromising the democratic order. This article seeks to discover the factors that underlie presidential failures through a survival analysis of 65 South American presidencies between 1979 and 2012. We argue that 'democratic stock', assessed by taking a historical perspective on democracy, significantly affects presidential survival, a finding which has not been observed in previous studies. It is found that partisan support and democratic stock reduce the hazard of presidential failure. Surprisingly, inflation, executive–legislative power imbalances, party system fragmentation and presidential scandals have no significant effects. These findings offer new evidence for the 'institutions vs. street' debate by showing that, when institutional variables are accounted for, the effect of social mobilisations significantly weakens.

Keywords

Presidential failure, South America, survival analysis, government crisis, democratic tradition

Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s political instability was the rule rather than the exception in South America. Democracy was in retreat and military juntas held sway throughout the region. In the last three decades, however, the military have returned to their barracks and civilians have regained control over their political institutions. Yet, while most South American countries have moved steadily toward democratic consolidation, a new form of instability has emerged: 'presidential failures' (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009). That is, elected presidents are being forced to leave office early but without compromising the underlying democratic order.

This article uses survival analysis to assess the hazards of presidential failure in South America. Following prior research, it focuses on the effects of institutional and political factors, economic

Corresponding author:

Christopher A Martínez, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Temuco Catholic University, 56 Manuel Montt, Temuco, Araucanía 4813302, Chile.

Email: christopher.martinez@uct.cl

issues and social mobilisations on presidential survival and, in addition, revisits the effects of democracy. Using Cox's Proportional Hazard (PH) model, a method that has not been used thus far to study government survival in presidential systems, we analyse 65 South American presidencies between 1979 and 2012. We find that democratic stock and partisan support consistently affect the hazard of presidents being unseated. Surprisingly, inflation, executive–legislative power imbalance, party system fragmentation and presidential scandals have no significant effects. Our findings shed light on the 'institutions vs. street' debate (Marsteintredet, 2009), which discusses whether presidential failures are chiefly driven by institutions or social mobilisations.

Presidential failures in South America

Presidential failures are a puzzling phenomenon because they represent a break with a key feature of presidential systems – fixed terms independent of the legislature – and a dramatic deviation from a central goal of political leaders: holding onto power. Since 1979, 11 out of 65 South American presidents have failed before completing their terms of office. In Argentina, presidents Raúl Alfonsín (1983–1989) and Fernando de la Rúa (1999–2001) resigned amid severe economic crises, widespread street protests and weak partisan support. In Bolivia, Hernán Siles Zuazo (1982–1985) was forced to step down due to strong congressional opposition, hyperinflation crises, massive demonstrations and a military coup threat; while Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (2002–2003) was ousted in the midst of the social unrest that spread throughout the country after his government coalition collapsed.

Seven failed presidencies resulted from an intense legislative backlash. In Brazil, Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–1992) was impeached after congress opened an investigation into multiple corruption scandals involving him and his inner circle. The Ecuadorian congress was a central actor in ousting three presidents: the legislature voted out Abdalá Bucaram (1996–1997) for 'mental incapacity'; accepted a 'never-proffered resignation' after a military–indigenous uprising overthrew Jamil Mahuad (1998–2000) and dismissed Lucio Gutiérrez (2003–2005) after declaring his 'abandonment of his post'. In Paraguay, presidents Raúl Cubas (1998–1999) and Fernando Lugo (2008–2012) were both unseated via impeachment. Cubas was charged with illegally shortening General Lino Oviedo's sentence from 10 years to three months, whereas Lugo was held responsible for the deaths of several protestors and police officers. Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989–1993), who was under strong pressure from the military and faced two ill-fated coups, was eventually impeached after several cases of corruption became public.

Facilitators of failure

Institutional and political factors

Times when executives and legislatures are deadlocked can be especially 'complex and threatening' in presidential systems where there is no democratic principle or rule that can resolve such conflicts (Linz, 1994: 7). And since presidential systems do not generally offer 'friendly' exit strategies for presidents in a crisis (Valenzuela, 2004: 12), failed presidents have usually left office amid severe political crises. This scenario is starkly different from parliamentary democracies where a political crisis is only one of a number of possible reasons for abandoning office early (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009; Warwick, 1994).

Legislative activism is a major force in driving presidents from office.¹ Latin American presidents faced with minority governments are more likely to suffer early departures than those who enjoy a majority in government (Kim and Bahry, 2008; Llanos and Marsteintredet,

2010; Marsteintredet et al., 2013; Mustapic, 2010; Negretto, 2006). Additionally, political deadlock can jeopardise presidential survival even more than simply the share of legislative seats held by the presidential party (Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010: 221–222). Partisan support may work as a ‘legislative shield’ that protects the president from social mobilisations and undermines the credibility of accusations by congress against presidents facing impeachment (Pérez-Liñán, 2007, 2014). The active role of congress in these presidential crises has led some authors to argue that there might be a parliamentarisation of Latin American presidentialism (Carey, 2002; Mustapic, 2005). Furthermore, power imbalances favouring the executive would make ‘powerful’ presidents less inclined to cooperate with legislatures, increasing the likelihood of executive–legislative conflicts (Cox and Morgenstern, 2002) and thus also the hazard of presidential failure (Kim and Bahry, 2008).

Building and maintaining a legislative shield is not an easy task (Deheza, 1998). Most Latin American political party systems are characterised by fragmentation and lack of party discipline (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997) which have weakened and threatened the stability of many Latin American presidents (Valenzuela, 2004).² Under such conditions, higher levels of party system fragmentation significantly increase the risk of the president being ousted (Álvarez and Marsteintredet, 2010; Kim and Bahry, 2008). Similarly, research on parliamentary government duration has found that the more parties in a government, the shorter the government’s tenure (Sommer-Topcu and Williams, 2008; Taylor and Herman, 1971; Warwick, 1994). The assumption is that a wider ruling coalition makes bargaining within the government more difficult and leads to greater instability.

Political scandals involving the president may also shorten her term. But presidential involvement must be personal or direct, the evidence of wrongdoing has to be solid (Hochstetler, 2006: 406) and subjected to wide media coverage (Pérez-Liñán, 2007) in order to trigger the kind of public outrage or legislative backlash that spurs an investigation which eventually deposes her. Overall, while some research argues that the prospects of removing a chief executive due to scandal are weak (Kim and Bahry, 2008: 816), other studies limited to South America find that presidential scandals have played a significant and important role in both presidential challenges and failures (Hochstetler, 2006; Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009). Nevertheless, Marsteintredet (2009: 203–204) finds that corruption scandals significantly affect the likelihood of Latin American presidents being challenged but not unseated.

Economic issues: crisis and presidential mismanagement

Other scholars have stressed the role of a deteriorating economy and economic crisis on presidential interruptions. Curiously, inflation does not seem to significantly affect presidential failures (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009; Kim and Bahry, 2008; Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010; Marsteintredet, 2009). In contrast, economic recessions for which presidents are held accountable have proven to significantly heighten the risk of both presidential failures and challenges (Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010; Marsteintredet, 2009). Moreover, Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) show that a close relationship exists between socioeconomic development and presidential challenges, insofar as presidents who rule over wealthy countries are less likely to face serious deposition attempts.

One common feature in most cases of presidential failures and challenges is perceived economic mismanagement by the executive (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009; Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010). The adoption of market-oriented economic policies was also found to have statistically significant though not powerful effects on presidential survival (Hochstetler, 2006; Pérez-Liñán, 2007). Thus when the legislature, or especially the public, deems that presidents have initiated

misguided economic policies or are responsible for economic woes, then presidential failure is more likely.

Social mobilisations

A final factor driving presidential instability is social mobilisation. Corrales (2002: 37) posits that people mobilise in developing democracies when the economy performs poorly, in order to protest against the government and politicians that (they believe) are corrupt. Social mobilisations affect presidential stability especially when linked to legislative activism: they buttress one another and together create insurmountable obstacles for presidential survival (Hochstetler, 2006; Marsteintredet, 2014; Pérez-Liñán, 2007). Sometimes indeed, according to Hochstetler (2006: 410), social mobilisations can be strong enough to unseat presidents on their own. However, not all types of social mobilisation have the same potential for throwing presidents out of office. Mass demonstrations directly aimed at the incumbent have a higher likelihood of success than general strikes (Kim and Bahry, 2008: 816; Marsteintredet, 2009: 135). Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) point out that the number of deaths resulting from government repression against protestors has a significant effect in explaining the failure or success of challenges to presidents.

Rethinking the role of democracy

Scholars have mixed views with respect to the effects of democracy on presidential failures. Some authors have suggested that democracy should make presidential failure less likely (Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010: 220–221; Marsteintredet, 2009). Other studies have argued that democracy should be positively associated with the occurrence of interrupted presidencies. Pérez-Liñán (2005) claimed that as democracy deepens and the president's authoritarian constitutional powers are dismantled, more political leverage is given to congress which can now threaten the president with impeachment. Similarly, Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) show that democracy is positively related to attempts to unseat presidents; however, their work does not address whether those challenges actually lead to presidential failures. We are thus left with the puzzle of determining whether democracy has a positive or negative effect, if any, on presidential failures. To answer this question we address democracy from institutional and path-dependent perspectives.

Institutions: rules and equilibria

Institutions are usually defined as the formal and informal rules of the game by which players are bound (North, 1990). By influencing their strategic calculations and by providing the 'frames of meaning' (i.e. what is right, appropriate or acceptable), institutions affect the behaviour, values and interactions of political actors (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Furthermore, when understood as equilibria, institutions increase the cost of deviating from established patterns of behaviour since no actor can gain an advantage from changing their strategy unilaterally if other players stick to their equilibrium strategy (Greif and Kingston, 2011: 27). We posit that two equilibria are reached when it comes to a country's previous experience with democracy. The first equilibrium takes place when most political players are willing to abide by the rules, which would be a likely scenario in countries with a strong democratic background. The second equilibrium occurs when most political actors would rather game the system instead of playing by the rules. This would be the case for states with relatively weak democratic experiences. In both equilibria, players would have few incentives to modify their behaviour unilaterally since the costs of deviating are significantly high (Greif and Kingston, 2011).

Democracy and regime legacies

We posit that taking a historical perspective on democracy allows its effects on presidential failures to be gauged more effectively. We thus adopt a path-dependent approach to understanding how a country's past political experiences continue to affect present and future outcomes (Mahoney and Villegas, 2007: 79). As argued by Gerring et al. (2005: 325), democracy may have institutional effects that develop over long periods of time and are 'cumulative'. As countries spend more time under democratic rule, political capital is built up via learning and institutionalisation (Gerring et al., 2005: 328). Politicians and ordinary citizens eventually 'learn' to govern the country and to prefer long-term over short-term goals (Gerring et al., 2005: 331). In so doing, countries with more democratic experience will see fewer actors inclined toward populist policies that seek radical, 'quick' solutions to social problems (Gerring et al., 2005: 331). Democratic institutionalisation means that political patterns become more routine and democratic processes and rules are internalised as legitimate; these developments reduce chaos in the political system, rendering it more stable and predictable (Diamond, 1999: 75; Gerring et al., 2005: 332; Shepsle and Bonchek, 1997: 301).

We also build upon the regime legacy literature, which emphasises that current political phenomena are influenced by a country's historical record with democratic and authoritarian politics.³ The working of a country's institutional legacy could thus be indirectly perceived through the behaviour of congress, presidents, the courts, the electorate, political parties, the military, unions, business associations, etc., which Pérez-Liñán and Mainwaring (2013: 389) call 'institutional carriers'. It is upon these carriers' democratic values, strategies and goals, as well as their interactions with each other and with political institutions, that presidential survival depends.

Our hypothesis, labelled 'democratic continuity', suggests that there would be a negative association between a country's democratic stock, as Gerring et al. (2005) call it, and presidential failures. That is, presidential survival would be lower in countries with a small democratic stock because political actors, pursuing short-term objectives, might find it more difficult to handle political bargaining and be more tempted to game the system in order to achieve their political ends (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009: 41).⁴ Hence it is likely that institutional carriers such as opposition parties will be willing to bend the rules of the system in order to get rid of an incumbent president should he become 'undesirable'. In states with a larger democratic stock, by contrast, political actors would be more prone to negotiate, make accommodations and play by the rules, all of which serve to develop, preserve and reinforce democratic patterns of behaviour. The larger the democratic stock in a country, the more institutionalised are the political institutions and the behaviour of political actors, and therefore the more likely it is that a president will complete her term. We theorise that these types of political patterns would be further reinforced by the institutional equilibria described above.

Previous studies have not observed this causal relationship because they have usually measured democracy using Polity IV's revised polity score (Polity2), which captures year-to-year variations (Marshall et al., 2014). Figure 1 shows the fluctuations of both Polity2 scores and Gerring et al.'s (2005) democratic stock. When countries adopt democratic rule, their democratic scores rise dramatically. It seems that there is a completely new political system in place. Nevertheless, these countries may have significantly different democratic stocks. For example, even though Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay all experienced authoritarian rule during the 1970s and are currently democracies, only Chile and Uruguay have relatively large democratic stocks (Figure 1). In addition, using democratic stock rather than level of democracy (Polity2) as the variable, enables us to partially control for endogeneity, since presidents surviving or failing in the past may influence current levels of democracy.⁵ We therefore use Gerring et al.'s (2005) democratic stock as a more appropriate measure to test the impact of democracy on presidential failures.

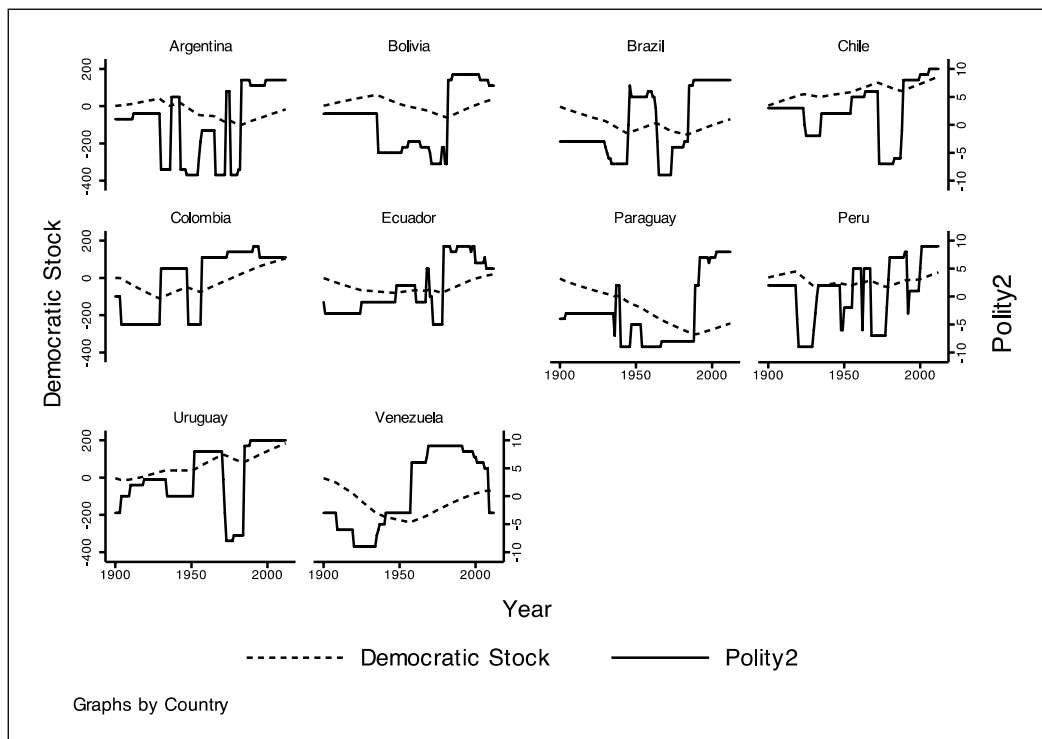


Figure 1. Democratic Stock and Polity2 Democracy Scores for South American Countries, 1900–2012. Note: Elaborated by the author based on an update of Gerring et al.'s (2005) democratic stock formula and the Polity IV dataset.

Data and measures

Survival analysis has been widely used in studies on government duration (Laver, 2003; Roozendaal, 1997; Savage, 2013; Somer-Topcu and Williams, 2008; Tzelgov, 2011; Warwick, 1992, 1994) and cabinet stability (Browne et al., 1986) in parliamentary systems. Notwithstanding, no single study on Latin American presidencies has used it before. This technique is useful to determine how long it takes for an event to occur, considering that the same event has not occurred before (Mills, 2011). Survival analysis enables us to determine the ‘hazard rates’ of an event taking place at a particular time during risk periods (Yamaguchi, 1991: 3). The hazard rate depicts the ‘propensity’ of one unit to move from state *A* to state *B* at a time *t* due to changes in explanatory factors in time *t* (Blossfeld et al., 2007: 33). Cox’s PH model is the most popular semi-parametric model as it offers straightforward interpretation of coefficients, does not require a priori specification of the shape of the hazard, and fits data accurately (Golub, 2008; Mills, 2011). In this article, therefore, we use Cox’s PH model to estimate how long it takes for a presidential failure to occur as a function of a set of covariates.

The major limitation of using Cox’s PH model is the small number of ‘events’ in this analysis. A small ratio of events per variable (EPV) may produce significantly inaccurate and biased coefficients and affect their statistical significance. Since there are only 11 presidential failures included here, the analysis will proceed with caution when modelling Cox’s regressions and interpreting its coefficients. Following Vittinghoff and McCulloch’s (2007) recommendation, we will include two (and in some cases three) independent variables per multivariate regression.⁶

Sample

The universe of cases for this research comprises all democratic presidencies in South American countries between 1979 and 2012 in which the president was directly elected in competitive elections.⁷ A presidency is included in the sample if the country has a Polity2 score of +5 each year during a presidential term.⁸ Finally, since presidents must have been popularly elected; caretaker governments (e.g. vice-presidents taking office or appointed by the legislature) are excluded as their primary goal is to lead the country to the next presidential election. This cross-national time-series dataset encompasses a total of 65 presidencies, with administration-years as the unit of analysis.

The binary dependent variable 'presidential failure' is coded 1 for the year when a president resigns, is impeached or dismissed, and 0 when the president remains in office. In addition, a case is considered 'censored' if the president: (a) completed her term in office, (b) neither failed nor completed her term before the observation period ended (31 December 2012), or (c) left office for health reasons or died. Following Warwick (1994: 11), the rationale of including right-censored cases, those in which the event of interest does not take place during the study period (Mills, 2011: 5), is that it is assumed that the president's government would have lasted longer if one of these three situations had not occurred.

Survival analysis

Due to the EPV limitation we use bivariate and multivariate analyses. First, the dependent variable is regressed on each independent variable separately (for detailed coding and sources of explanatory variables see the Appendix to this article, available online at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>). This enables us to identify which covariates are statistically significant and thus to be used in the multivariate models. Table 1 shows the results of the bivariate Cox's PH models. As theorised, higher levels of democracy (Polity2) are associated with less risk of presidential ousting; however, confirming previous findings, this coefficient is not statistically significant. On the other hand, our new measure of democracy, democratic stock, is significant and is negatively associated with the occurrence of presidential failures supporting the democratic continuity hypothesis. The risk of failure also decreases when the president's party or coalition in congress holds more seats (partisan support); contrary to expectations, however, the variable 'government fractionalisation' would make presidential failure less likely. Executive constraints, which supposedly encourage the president to cooperate with other political institutions (e.g. congress) and thus make it more likely that he will remain in office, were not statistically significant. Finally, given the well-known risky combination of presidentialism and multipartism for Latin American democracies (Mainwaring, 1993), it is noteworthy that party system fragmentation has no significant effect on presidential survival.

The three variables measuring a country's economic performance behave as expected. Both economic growth and GDP per capita have a significant negative relationship with presidential failures, whereas inflation is not statistically significant. When it comes to presidential scandals, incumbents seem to be unaffected by their political wrongdoing. Perhaps surprisingly, social mobilisations exhibit only limited impact on presidential failures. Neither anti-government demonstrations nor general strikes alone seem to be powerful enough to drive presidents from office, but riots – violent showdowns between protestors and the police – do have the potential to topple chief executives. This finding is consistent with the report of Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) that dead protestors significantly increase the likelihood of presidential removal.

Table 2 shows the different multivariate analyses performed. Model 1 includes only institutional covariates: partisan support, democratic stock and government fractionalisation. Since a close

Table 1. Bivariate Cox's Proportional Hazard Regressions.

	HR ^a	Coeff.	Log pseudolikelihood	Subjects	Failures	Obs
Democratic stock	0.99	-0.01** (0.00)	-39.43	65	11	246
Democracy (Polity2)	0.84	-0.18 (0.20)	-41.89	65	11	246
Partisan support	0.96	-0.05*** (0.01)	-38.80	65	11	243
Government fractionalisation	0.10	-2.28* (0.99)	-40.20	65	11	246
Party system fragmentation	1.07	0.07 (0.11)	-41.69	63	11	237
Constraints on the executive	1.31	0.27 (0.31)	-41.93	65	11	246
Economic Growth	0.90	-0.11* (0.05)	-40.29	63	11	240
GDP per capita	0.84	-0.17** (0.06)	-40.64	63	11	238
Inflation (logged)	2.02	0.70 (0.57)	-40.88	63	11	240
Presidential scandals	2.60	0.96 (0.79)	-33.92	49	10	177
Anti-government demonstrations	1.18	0.16 (0.15)	-41.29	63	11	238
General strikes	1.18	0.16 (0.23)	-41.52	63	11	238
Riots	1.47	0.39* (0.16)	-40.73	63	11	238

HR: hazard regression.

^aHR = $e^{(\text{Coeff.})}$. Robust SE clustered by country in parentheses.

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

relation has usually existed between a country's economic development and democracy, GDP per capita and economic growth are added in models 2 and 3 respectively. Model 4 furthers this analysis and pays attention only to the impact of democratic stock and GDP per capita. In models 5 to 7, the variable 'riots' is pitted against partisan support and democratic stock so as to shed light on whether institutions, the 'street', or both affect presidential survival.

Model 1 shows that a country's democratic stock and the president's partisan support remain statistically significant, whereas the variable 'government fractionalisation' does not. That is to say, even though having more parties in the government could make negotiations more difficult, it does not lead to shorter presidential terms.⁹ In models 2 and 3, we observe that neither economic growth nor GDP per capita have significant effects on the hazard of presidential failure when democratic stock and partisan support are accounted for. These findings come as a surprise since previous studies have found that economic decline was a powerful factor for driving presidents out of office. Model 4 shows more clearly that the impact of GDP per capita loses its statistical significance when only controlling for a country's democratic stock. What these results show is that poor economic performance notwithstanding, democratic institutions are more central to explaining why presidents may leave office early.

Table 2. Multivariate Cox's Proportional Hazard Regressions.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7	
	HR	Coeff.	HR	Coeff.	HR	Coeff.	HR	Coeff.	HR	Coeff.	HR	Coeff.	HR	Coeff.
Democratic stock	0.99	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.99	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.99	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.99	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.99	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.99	-0.01*** (0.00)		
Partisan support	0.95	-0.05*** (0.01)	0.95	-0.52*** (0.01)	0.95	-0.06*** (0.01)			0.95	-0.05*** (0.01)			0.96	-0.04*** (0.01)
Gov. fractionalisation	0.24	-1.44 (1.35)												
Economic growth			0.91	-0.98 (0.06)										
GDP per capita					0.83	-0.19 (0.11)	0.88	-0.13 (0.07)						
Riots									1.38	0.32 (0.18)	1.50	0.40* (0.17)	1.33	0.29 (0.15)
Prob>Chi2	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.007		0.000		0.003		0.000	
Log p-likelihood	-35.45		-34.89		-34.97		-38.61		-35.26		-38.19		-37.87	
Subjects	65		63		63		63		63		63		65	
Failures	11		11		11		11		11		11		11	
Obs.	243		237		235		238		235		238		235	

HR: hazard regression.

Note: HR = $e^{(\text{Coeff})}$, Robust SE clustered by country in parentheses.

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

The results of models 5 to 7 are especially interesting as they offer key insights to the ‘institutions vs. street’ debate (Marsteintredet, 2009). The power of the most violent type of social mobilisation, riots, practically disappears when partisan support and democratic stock are accounted for. Furthermore, when it comes to determining which has a greater impact on presidential survival – the street or congress (model 7) – again, the effects of riots are not statistically significant, whereas the coefficient and significance level of the partisan support variable remain practically unchanged. Therefore, when explaining presidential survival, the share of legislative seats held by the president’s party or ruling coalition is more important than any type of social mobilisation, even bloody confrontations.

Our findings have shown that both democratic stock and partisan support are key variables in explaining presidential survival.¹⁰ Their coefficients and significance levels did not change dramatically even when other variables were also included. The hazard ratio of partisan support, 0.95 ($e^{-0.05}$), means that when the president’s party (or ruling coalition) increases its share of legislative seats by 1%, the risk of presidential failure diminishes on average by 5% (calculated as $[0.95 - 1] * 100 = -5$). This finding seems quite strong. On the other hand, the hazard ratio for democratic stock, 0.99 ($e^{-0.01}$), means that for a one-unit increase in a country’s democratic stock, the hazard of presidential failure would go down by approximately 1%. The effects of democratic stock, albeit consistent, may be deemed somewhat weak. However, in considering its range of 475.35 points (from -292.20 to +183.15), a country’s democratic stock may still have substantial effects on the occurrence of presidential failures.

Weighing the risks of presidential failures

Unlike previous works (Álvarez and Marsteintredet, 2010; Kim and Bahry, 2008), our results suggest that presidentialism and multipartism would not be a deadly combination for South American chief executives. Economic development and recessions, which were thought to affect the perception of a president’s performance, do not seem to be strong predictors of failed presidencies.

Presidents may pay political costs for being involved in scandals, but the survival analysis shows that being forced to step down is not one of them. Even though some presidents were unseated due to corruption scandals (e.g. Pérez in Venezuela and Collor in Brazil), many others managed to survive in office (e.g. Menem in Argentina, Cardoso in Brazil, Samper in Colombia, Gonzalez Macchi in Paraguay and Herrera Campins in Venezuela). Additionally, it could be argued that presidential scandals may indirectly affect presidential survival by undermining a president’s legislative shield. For instance, the bribery scandal that hit President De la Rúa in Argentina (2000), and the alleged links between Ecuador’s President Gutiérrez (2003) and a drug trafficker, seriously undermined their partisan support. The scandal prevented Gutiérrez from building a new political alliance with the conservative Social Christian Party, while the bribery scandal led to the resignation of De la Rúa’s vice-president, Carlos Álvarez, and to several important defections. Although the scandals did not trigger the presidential failures of De la Rúa and Gutiérrez, they nevertheless severely debilitated their partisan support, thus increasing the risk of failure.

The effects of social mobilisations were significantly weaker than expected. One possible explanation is that social mobilisations are not rare events in South American politics. Even though some presidents were deposed in the midst of strong social mobilisations, many others survived. In fact, presidents held onto power in five out of the seven years with the highest number of anti-government protests and general strikes combined: Menem (Argentina 1990 and 1997), Chávez (Venezuela 2001 and 2002), De la Rúa (Argentina 2001, failed), Sánchez de Lozada (Bolivia 2003, failed), Durán Ballén (Ecuador 1994). Another explanation is that it is the intensity of social

mobilisations that matters for presidential survival. Notwithstanding the fact that the variable 'riots' was statistically significant in the bivariate analysis, it fell below significance levels in models 5 to 7 when democratic stock and partisan support were also included.

Even though a country's economic development, recessions, social mobilisations and scandals may weaken a standing chief executive, the fate of presidents seems ultimately to depend upon partisan support and the country's democratic stock. When the president is able to gather a majority of legislators on her side, her chances of survival increase substantially. Congress provides her with a legislative shield (Pérez-Liñán, 2007, 2014) to weather challenges coming from either the streets or from the opposition. When the president's party (or ruling coalition) controls a substantial share of legislative seats, that loyal contingent typically will rally behind the chief executive even if the incumbent is bedevilled by political scandals or social protests. This was the case for presidents Samper in Colombia (1997) and Gutiérrez in Ecuador (2004), who avoided impeachment after being accused respectively of receiving funds from drug lords and embezzlement. Nevertheless, as the political cost of defection decreases, a substantial number of legislators may choose to withdraw their support and may even be tempted to unseat the president themselves.

The survival analysis presented here supported the democratic continuity hypothesis. In countries with a large democratic stock such as Chile and Uruguay, political actors seem to have *learned* to move away from short-term populist policies, which is thought to lead to more political stability (Gerring et al., 2005). Furthermore, extensive experience with democratic politics has created an institutional equilibrium in these countries that discourages political players from attempting to bend the rules, lowering the hazard of presidential failures. It is telling that no president in these two countries has faced a serious attempt at destabilisation since democracy was restored. On the other hand, in countries with a smaller democratic stock, political capital has not been fully developed. By pursuing short-term goals without much regard for the rules of the game, political actors' behaviour has actually undermined presidential survival.

For instance, this type of behaviour has been observed in the blatant betrayal of electoral promises (Pérez, Bucaram, Mahuad, Gutiérrez and De la Rúa), the formation of weak electoral alliances that either tore apart or turned out useless once in office (De la Rúa, Bucaram, Mahuad, Gutiérrez, Lugo and Sánchez de Lozada), the adoption of downright illegal decisions (Cubas and Gutiérrez), and in the role played by the military in undermining the president's authority (Siles Zuazo, Alfonsín, Mahuad and Pérez). Furthermore, the relatively few cases in which the president was deposed via impeachment have also revealed the low level of democratic institutionalisation linked to presidential failures. Out of the 11 cases, only four were unseated via impeachment, including the controversial 'express' ousting of Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo (2012); in the remaining cases presidents were unseated either by twisting institutional procedures (Bucaram, Mahuad and Gutiérrez) or amid generalised political alienation (Siles Zuazo, Alfonsín, De la Rúa and Sánchez de Lozada).

Additionally, our finding raises the question of how accountable presidents are in more stable democracies if they face very low risks of being ousted. Does this mean that 'bad' presidents are very unlikely to be removed in consolidated democracies? Or, would countries with weaker democratic legacies experience significantly more 'bad' presidents than countries with a longer history of democracy? The argument put forth in this article favours the latter explanation. Presidents who pursue questionable or downright illegal courses of action would be more likely to be criticised and attacked by congressional opposition, reducing their chances of completing their terms in office. Even though the impeachments of Collor (Brazil 1992), Pérez (Venezuela 1993) and Cubas (Paraguay 1999) were justified and advanced democracy in these countries, our argument is that this type of president – who try to game the system – is not as common in countries with a large

democratic stock as in countries with a weak democratic experience. In other words, 'bad' presidents and 'bad' politicians in general would be more likely to occur in countries with a small democratic stock.

Conclusion

This article offers new evidence favouring the view that the hazards of presidential early departure from office are primarily institutional. Quite surprisingly, the survival analysis shows that eventful variables such as economic growth, presidential scandals and riots have no significant effects on presidential survival when the new measures of democracy, democratic stock and partisan support are controlled for. In summation, when it comes to surviving in office, the fate of presidents seems to hinge upon congressional support and their countries' democratic legacies.

Similar to results found in other regions, partisan support is thus central to understanding the risks of a president being prematurely unseated in South America. This finding highlights an apparent parliamentarisation of South American politics, in which congress is a key player in presidents' political demise. The role of congress in this political drama is indeed analogous to a two-edged sword: it may either protect the president or let her fail.

In addition, in countries with a larger democratic stock, patterns of behaviour by political actors (i.e. a regime's institutional carriers) are more institutionalised and therefore more stable and predictable. Their political behaviour is also limited by institutional equilibria. In other words, in countries with a large democratic stock, the cost of gaming the system would be high enough to discourage behaviours that may prevent presidents from completing their tenures. By contrast, in countries with a relatively small democratic stock, players would face higher costs if they decide to abide by the rules (i.e. be the sucker) when everyone else cheats, which will heighten the hazard of presidential failure.

More research is needed to detail the causal relationship between democratic stock and failed presidencies. Qualitative studies using process tracing, for example, may shed light on the causal mechanisms for the relation between a country's democratic stock and presidential survival, which currently remain obscure. Qualitative work is of even greater value since statistical analyses cannot include enough covariates to build robust theoretical models – in order to address the difference across different types of failures (impeachment, forced resignation and legislative dismissal) – without compromising the accuracy of their results due to the limited number of presidential failures (only 11).

At a more substantive level, these findings point to the need to revisit the role of democracy in presidential crises in developing countries. Although South American countries have become accustomed to democratic rule, democratic consolidation is still far from complete. Strengthening democratic institutions to make them more inclusive and responsive to people is of key importance to increasing stability and to reducing the incidence of 'failed' governments. As the literature on regime legacies has shown, further supported here by the variable 'democratic stock', more time living in democratic settings is also required to develop a deeper habituation to and understanding of democratic rules.

Finally, these results may also shed light on how a country's democratic tradition may affect government stability in other regions. In African countries, which have rather small stocks of democracy, presidential interruptions have been violent and threatening to the democratic order (Kim and Bahry, 2008). Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that Somer-Topcu and Williams (2008) find no relation between systems of government and early government termination in Europe, future research should explore the impact of the democratic stock variable on government survival in parliamentary and presidential systems. As argued in this article, parliamentary systems possess

more institutional escape valves, allowing for greater dissipation of intense political friction than in presidential systems. In light of the results presented here, it would be interesting to compare whether the ‘democratic continuity’ hypothesis, supported by the survival analysis, still holds true when analysing these two forms of government across geographic regions.

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Notes

1. See Baumgartner and Kada (2003) for a detailed study on impeachments.
2. Valenzuela (2004: 12–13) argues that in situations of divided governments, chief executives usually experience considerable difficulty in gathering congressional support even from their own parties.
3. Previous works have found that a country’s democratic legacy significantly affects inequality (Huber et al., 2006; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992), poverty (Pribble et al., 2009), redistributive social policies (Huber and Stephens, 2012), economic development (Gerring et al., 2005), and the strength of political institutions (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013).
4. This is what Hochstetler and Edwards (2009: 41) initially hypothesised, i.e. that higher levels of democracy would lead to fewer presidential challenges, but their findings showed the opposite.
5. The variable ‘democratic stock’ is calculated for the period 1900 to 2012, whereas the dependent variable (presidential failures) covers the period 1979 to 2012.
6. For a discussion on the EPV limitation, see also Concato et al. (1995) and Peduzzi et al. (1995).
7. The main reason for including only cases from South America is that the low ratio of presidential failures to non-failures in areas outside this region (e.g. North and Central America, Africa and Asia) might render the survival analysis results more problematic (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009: 51).
8. We based this requirement on Hochstetler and Edwards (2009: 42). One difference is that they only applied the democratic criterion for the year the presidential failure occurred.
9. In a model including only the variables ‘partisan support’ and ‘government fractionalisation’, the former was still statistically significant at the level 0.001, whereas the latter lost statistical significance (p -value = 0.149).
10. Although not reported here, we ran regression models including only two independent variables in order to increase the robustness of our quantitative analysis. We pitted each covariate against every one of the remaining (12) independent variables. We found further support for the greater impact of institutional variables vis-a-vis social mobilisations on failed presidencies. The variable ‘partisan support’ was statistically significant in all 12 regressions; ‘democratic stock’ reached statistical significance in 11 models; ‘government fractionalisation’ in 10; ‘GDP per capita’ and ‘riots’ in nine; ‘economic growth’ in six; ‘presidential scandals’, ‘democracy’ and ‘constraints on the executive’ in only one model each; and the remaining covariates never reached statistical significance.

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Author biography

Christopher A Martínez is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Political Science, Temuco Catholic University, and holds a PhD in Political Science. His current research interests include presidential survival, institutional performance and democratic consolidation in Latin America.