Democratic Accountability in Service Delivery

Factors that drive democratic stability: economic growth VS perceived good government

The economic crisis of 2008 affected all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The decreasing levels of economic growth, increasing unemployment, and poverty impacted everyone in the region. Over the past years, scholars have argued that economic crises can lead to democratic instability and that those democracies in the poorest countries are the most likely to deteriorate during such a period[1].

Surprisingly, the 2010 Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) found that the state of the economy had just a limited effect on democratic values in the region. More important in maintaining democratic values was the 'perception' of government performance. Support of democracy and of the political system was interpreted to be more affected by the perception of economic performance by the government than by the state of the economy. Thus, it can be assumed that negative effects of an economic crisis on the citizens' support of democracy can be mitigated by a positive perception of government reaction in response to that crisis.

The role of legitimacy

Specifically, the LAPOP study concluded that in any given country, the belief in the 'legitimacy' of its government is a pre-requisite for political stability. In other words, as was noted by Gibson et al. (2005), the legitimacy of the political system is an essential element for a stable democracy.[2] Legitimacy translates into support of the system and tolerance for political opposition.

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[1] (Adam Przeworski et al., *Demorcary and Development: Political Insitutions and Well-being in the World, 1950-*1990 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117 cf. LAPOP p. 16.

[2] Gibson, James L.; Gregory A. Caldeira & Lester Kenyatta Spence. "Why do People Accept Public Policies They Oppose? Testing Legitimacy Theory With a Survey-Based Experiment." *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2005):187-201.

In the 2010 LAPOP study, legitimacy was further described as the citizens' belief in a government's judicial system, respect and pride for its political institutions and the degree to which citizens feel safeguarded and protected by these institutions. Moreover, the LAPOP (2010) study found that among the multiple factors that affect 'legitimacy', and thus support for a stable democracy, a major contributor was the perceived government's ability to satisfy the needs and demands of its citizens, as well as the perceptions of corruption and victimization by corruption in such a system. Trust in the government institutions, its armed forces, communication media, electoral processes, congress political system, etc. and government accountability in its service delivery, are factors that are essential in safeguarding the legitimacy of government and the democratic support that government.

Ways to legitimacy: transparency and accessibility

The perceived positive performance of government in its service delivery is directly linked to the perceived legitimacy of that government. In other words, government legitimacy is dependent on a government's democratic accountability in its service delivery. One way to improve service delivery is by making government more transparent. Dealing with issues of corruption, for instance, and holding corrupt officials accountable for their acts is crucial.

Moreover, democracy is based on the assumption that all citizens should have equal rights and deserve equal representation in the setting of priorities in society. In order to guarantee democratic accountability in service delivery one needs to safeguard the representative nature of the political process and make government institutions accessible to all its citizens. This often happens mainly at the local level, as local government seems to be closest to the citizens. In order to ensure accessibility, decentralization as well as citizen empowerment, and also a functioning relationship between local, state, and national governments play major roles.

Accessibility in Latin America

After having experienced extremely centralized dictatorships in several countries, Latin America made major efforts of decentralization since the 1980's, in many cases with the help of the World Bank, the United Nations, the United Nations Development Program and other international organizations. For many governments, decentralization policies were adopted as a way of establishing service delivery on a 'demand led' basis. This view assumed that administrative agencies with the most contact with the citizenry, e.g. local governments, are in a better position to gather information on local preferences and respond more efficiently to variations in demand than the remote national agency/government (Albarran and Garcia-Zamor 2010). Behind the push for institutional decentralization were several considerations. Among these was not just an attempt to improve the government's ability to take in, and adapt to, changes in local preferences for development, but also an effort to maintain legitimacy and faith in the system (Manor 1999, cf. ibid). By bridging the gap between government and civil society, it was believed that greater political accountability could be achieved. In other words, decentralization could help promote accountability and reduce corruption as a result of constituent pressure on government due to their familiarity and knowledge of sub-national

governments' actions vs. the actions of the remote national government (ibid). The focus on decentralization has brought an enormous increase in the importance of local governments, which makes citizen involvement and participation much more accessible and feasible.[3]   By having greater access to local government, vs. the national government, citizens could demand democratic accountability in service delivery.

Transparency in Latin America

As mentioned previously, as a result of decentralization, local municipal bureaucracies have become the locus point of decision making regarding social infrastructure projects and service delivery. The above mentioned move towards decentralization and the fostering of local governments places the light of transparency on a more tangible target. Local governments have the possibility to make their processes more transparent, for example by encouraging citizens to participate and get involved in local government initiatives. Also, by guaranteeing the public transparency; access not only to records, meetings, and government reports, corruption can be addressed and fought.

Corruption is a global issue; however, surveys indicate that in Latin American, the perception of corruption is above the world average, and improvements from 2005 to 2009 were marginal[4].

Since corruption occurs, with high probability, everywhere in the world, many theorists and practitioners have dedicated themselves to come up with strategies to minimize and eradicate it.

For example, key institutional features of proposed anti-corruption procedures are;

1) The creation of strong and independent legal systems,
2) The reinforcement of the state to guarantee the rule of law,
3) Increasing external controls as well as monitoring and evaluation measures; this includes launching anti-corruption civil society organizations (such as legal advice centers for citizens)
4) And introducing preventive reforms that reduce opportunities for corruption (Spector 2005, Vogl 2012).

In terms of procedures;

Enforcing laws that criminalize the abuse of public office is of utmost importance. Imposing strict accountability of officials for their actions, developing international frames and regulations, and at the same time launching policies on the micro level, i.e. on a sector-by-sector basis are necessary measures (Vogl 2012, Schaeffer 2005, Spector 2005, Pepys 2005).

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[3] Other works advocating decentralization because of its purported effects on levels of democracy and development are Putnam, 1993; Rondinelli, 1990; Smith, 1985; World Bank, 1997, 2000.

[4] 2009 Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer, retrieved from
http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/gcb

On the economic level;

 Incentives and sanctions on corruption are useful, as well as the improvement of employment conditions in terms of appointment, remuneration, trainings etc. (Winbourne 2005, Pepys 2005).

Finally, corruption can – and must – also be fought with measures on the cultural level. Awareness should be raised by carrying out campaigns that point out the negative effects of corruption, as well as the dissemination of information though social media, and investigative reports. Public officials can be trained more thoroughly regarding the implications of public service, the public interest, and anti-corruption measures.

In the end, there is one element that is vital and without which anti-corruption procedures will most probably fail: the political will to change, to fight the origins and the features that facilitate the continuation of corruption must be present. The stakes are high; the 'legitimacy' of government is an essential element for a stable democracy.[5] In fighting corruption, one can secure democratic accountability of service delivery, and thus the legitimacy of government.

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[5] Gibson, James L.; Gregory A. Caldeira & Lester Kenyatta Spence. "Why do People Accept Public Policies They Oppose? Testing Legitimacy Theory With a Survey-Based Experiment." *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2005):187-201.