

# The Study of Local Democracy in Latin America

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“We’ve had a period of dictatorship, then transition, and then dictatorship, do you understand me, that is how the government of Vicky Barahona was,” I was told by a local councilperson from Renca, a popular municipality about twenty minutes by bus from the center of Santiago, Chile (Interview #17).<sup>1</sup> He was referring to Mayor Barahona’s sixteen years of uninterrupted rule in that municipality. He was not the only person to classify Barahona’s rule as a dictatorship. In a newspaper interview, Gastón Arce, a young social leader from Renca, noted publicly and quite frankly: “Here we’re experiencing bullshit that’s very North Korea.”<sup>2</sup>

How can it be possible that, in a country like Chile (until recently considered a Latin American paradigm of democratic transition and one of the region’s most stable and developed democracies), some citizens were enduring conditions more akin to an authoritarian regime? Renca is not a remote rural municipality of the kind that might typically be considered susceptible to local authoritarian rule. Despite being part of the urban semi-periphery, it is located in the capital city, close to the center of national political power and the gaze of mass media. Barahona belonged to a national post-Pinochetist party, Unión Demócrata Independiente (Independent Democratic Union, UDI), but national politicians, in general, seemed not to care.

A few weeks later, I interviewed a national congressperson who was well informed about the everyday comings and goings in Renca. “I tried everything, but I could not [oust her],” this politician told me, with some frustration, referring to Barahona’s continuity in the mayor’s office (Interview #22). A similar tone of disappointment was also common among the opposition leaders in Renca and other municipalities. The message was relatively clear: there was little they could do about the continuity of local caudillos in their municipalities. The mayors are “autonomous” and we “can do nothing about it,” they conceded (Interviews #46, #47); some even considered them “virtually unbeatable” (Interview #18). How can these caudillos survive in office? And then, why do they ultimately step down, in countries in which (unlimited) reelection is legally permitted?

These anecdotes illustrate a more general phenomenon of local caudillos or family clans in Latin American countries, mayors and political families governing their municipalities for prolonged periods of time in a highly arbitrary and abusive manner, using a wide variety of informal political practices to maintain control and in some cases turning these municipalities into personal fiefdoms. Examples abound. Some observers have identified “local dictatorships” in Colombia, and others have seen “local oligarchies” in Ecuador;<sup>3</sup> in Paraguay local political “clans” endure, and in other parts of Chile “regional caudillos” control the politics.<sup>4</sup> These examples suggest that democracy and its exercise is uneven not only in Latin American federal countries but often in unitary ones as well.<sup>5</sup>

Existing research has focused almost exclusively on federal countries, however, thereby lapsing into a strong “federal bias.”<sup>6</sup> Most of our knowledge comes from the analysis of Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, but the majority of countries in Latin America and elsewhere have unitary political systems.<sup>7</sup> Thus, our understanding of subnational democracy is largely limited to provincial- or state-level subnational regimes, and explanations of the continuity and demise of these regimes hinge predominantly on interactions with national-level politicians. As a consequence, our understanding of how politics and democracy work at the local level in unitary countries is quite limited. Many of the local caudillos such as Barahona remain outside the processes of uneven or incomplete democratization at the national level as the path-breaking analysis of subnational regimens has posited.<sup>8</sup> This is all the more concerning in the context of the decentralization reforms of the last three decades and ever more empowered local governments.

Thus, in this book I seek to understand how democracy “is practiced” at the local level in Latin American unitary countries after the third wave of democratization in the region.<sup>9</sup> My main objective is to explain how these local caudillos and clans reproduce and survive in power and why

some are more successful than others. I focus on six cases of caudillos and clans in metropolitan areas of capital cities across three countries—Chile, Paraguay, Peru—and offer a comparative account of how these politicians achieve continuity in power, finding striking similarities despite contextual differences. In more general terms, I show how local politics works day to day in these settings.

### **The Argument in Brief**

I offer a new analytical perspective on the study of local democracy in unitary countries. I shift the analytical focus to the local level of the political system, which tends to be more important in many unitary countries than in their federal counterparts. Municipal governments have more tradition, more resources, and are popularly elected in all the unitary countries in Latin America.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, local governments are relatively autonomous and of limited interest for national-level politicians. On the one hand, these politicians participate only rarely in the formal mechanism designed to depose municipal mayors.<sup>11</sup> For example, in Chile and Peru it is the electoral justice authorities that investigate and decide whether to expel a mayor or not. On the other hand, the size of the localities covered is necessarily smaller than those of regional governments and thus their electoral weight is minor. Provinces and states normally constitute the territorial bases of electoral districts for national legislative elections, and regional elites might therefore play an important role in selecting congressional candidates, whereas the participation of municipalities in this process is limited.

A focus on local government and on countries with unitary systems requires shifting the analytical lens from access to power (the regimen question) to the exercise of power (actual political practices). To be sure, mayors can hardly influence access to power in the way that governors in federal countries can. They cannot reform local electoral institutions, manipulate local electoral authorities, or commit fraud, as might be the case in federal countries. Institutions and electoral authorities are designed and imposed by national government. Therefore, the regime dimension is less important in explaining caudillos' and clans' continuity. As Behrend suggested, even for federal countries, in many cases subnational politicians need not manipulate elections or commit electoral fraud; the exercise of power during their periods of government grants them sufficient advantage over their adversaries when elections come.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the particularities of municipal governments require a perspective with a focus on local power dynamics.

In this book I argue that caudillos' and clans' continuity in and de-

parture from office is shaped by local factors and explained by the ways they exercise power. This depends on the strategic use of informal political practices ranging from clientelism and patronage to harassment of local media and physical threats to opposition social and political leaders. These practices serve three basic goals—fostering one’s own electorate, controlling local political opposition, and neutralizing other local actors (social movements, media, etc.)—that, together, enable caudillos’ and clan members’ reelection. Clearly, the first goal is the most important but is nonetheless neglected in the comparative literature. Failure to cultivate loyalties with electoral bases opens the door to alternation. Thus, I place the agency of mayors (who constitute the caudillos studied here) at the center of attention. Their actions not only explain how they reproduce in power but also suggest that their eventual departure from office is largely of their own doing. Contrary to the predominant explanation based on interactions between national and subnational actors, I argue that caudillos’ exit from power can be explained more in terms of their failure to secure electoral support, poor strategic decisions, excessive ambitions, unforced errors, scandals, or blatantly violent practices.<sup>13</sup>

From the focus on the local government level we can see some indication that national politicians might be less interested in local power dynamics. This indifference is more pronounced in cases where political actors do not belong to national parties and where the latter have limited presence at the local level. Indeed, party machines with significant territorial implantation are the exception rather than the norm in contemporary Latin American politics. Thus, the theory derived from federal countries with major party organizations—such as Mexico, with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) and Argentina, with the Partido Justicialista (Justicialist Party, PJ)—is of limited application to many (unitary) countries in the region.<sup>14</sup> These factors contributing to a diminished interest on the part of national politicians, in turn, favor the reproduction of rule by local caudillos or clans more by omission than by the sort of direct intervention, inherent conflict, or bargaining and mutual convenience seen in federal countries.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, a key exception is the case of Paraguay, one of Latin America’s less decentralized countries, in which the partisan connection between levels of political system and the greater involvement of national politicians in local power dynamics resembles the Mexican and Argentine contexts.

### **Contributions to the Study of Local Democracy**

I hope this book will contribute to current comparative research on subnational democracy in both theoretical and empirical terms. On the the-

oretical side, I propose a new analytical framework for the study of local democracy in unitary countries in Latin America. I highlight the limitations of directly applying the existing framework to the local level in unitary countries, and I even question the idea that it can be used for analysis in these countries.<sup>16</sup> The inter-level dynamics of municipalities in unitary countries differ significantly from those of regional governments in federal ones. The former municipalities can hardly be considered regimes as they do not have their own constitutions and cannot modify or establish their own electoral rules. As a consequence the regime dimension is less important and the exercise of power is key.

I propose an alternative framework based on three theoretical and conceptual innovations. First, I propose the concept of the local caudillo or clan as opposed to the subnational regimes used in federal countries. Second, I focus directly on the exercise of power and on actual informal political practices rather than on access to power, which centers on institutional reforms and electoral manipulations. Third, I draw attention to local factors and question the predominant focus on multilevel interactions between national and subnational politicians. I argue that, in many cases, national politicians ignore their local counterparts or are restricted by local governments' autonomy and, thus, that caudillos' survival depends on local factors, particularly their own agency. The disconnection between national and subnational politics is more pronounced in cases such as Peru where different political organizations operate at each level.

On the empirical side, as Eaton argues, the comparative literature also needs to study territorial dynamics and subnational democracy in unitary countries.<sup>17</sup> I take up the challenge to offer new insights on how municipalities are governed in South American unitary countries, particularly in cases where mayors manage to control municipalities for prolonged periods. Research on federal countries uses municipalities in order to explain regional dynamics but does not take them as an object of study per se. Thus, I offer a comparative study of how democracy "is practiced" at the local level in six municipalities and three countries.<sup>18</sup> The research design and findings allow for more external validity of the principal arguments than do the existing single-country subnational studies. I offer six in-depth case studies that describe how power is exercised by local political elites in three different national contexts. Previous studies offer single case analysis, both on the regional and the local levels and are rarely comparative.<sup>19</sup>

The book also has important normative implications. In the conclusion I take a somewhat pessimistic view of the workings of local democracy. The weakness of national-level institutions, the limited territorial penetration of the state, and the growing disconnection between national and

local (party) politics all suggest that the fate of local democracy depends largely on local politicians. A caudillo's rule is normally brought to an end by their own errors, strategic miscalculations, scandals, or explicit and publicized violence. The combined effect of weak local opposition and the indifference of national-level politicians is rather gloomy for local democracy, even though not all local politicians are or want to be caudillos. But for those who do, the lessons to be drawn here are that there are few checks on the arbitrary use of power and that continuity in office depends on the caudillos' political learning. Social media might help to constrain mayors' abuses, as these platforms make it more difficult for politicians to hide their informal or illegal political practices.

### *Alternative Explanations*

The focus of existing studies and explanations of subnational democracy is mainly on federal countries and on intermediate levels of government. I propose a double shift—both from federal to unitary countries and from the provincial to the local level. I argue that existing conceptualizations and explanations do not “travel” well to these cases, although they do offer some useful hints for the analysis.<sup>20</sup>

First, some of the early studies of subnational democracies emphasized the importance of local structural factors such as relative levels of socioeconomic development, rural-urban location, scarcer economic opportunities and limited social mobility, and the preponderance of less plural and more culturally traditional areas. Thus, the typical municipality or province susceptible of nondemocratic subnational regimes would be a small district in a poor rural area, with greater dependence on state-provided jobs, controlled by traditional conservative elites without any substantial local opposition.<sup>21</sup> In these areas, local elites find it easier to control the political game and attract less attention from national-level mass media or politicians. Consequently, the solution for opening up is, primarily, social and economic modernization with its concomitant political effects.

These analytical perspectives on the reproduction of local caudillos and subnational authoritarian regimes do not actually explain this continuity, however, as they are limited to identifying certain contributing conditions in light of the relatively static character of structural variables. Although several of the emblematic cases identified by the comparative literature are located in the zones identified above, caudillo rule and undemocratic regimes can also exist in more socioeconomically developed provinces or even metropolitan areas.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, not all provinces or municipalities with the above-mentioned characteristics are governed by caudillos or authoritarian regimes. These studies thus pay relatively little

attention to agency-based explanations and have difficulties in showing why some local politicians are more successful than others. Social and economic changes are relatively slow, and political alternation seems to happen faster than these structural changes might predict.<sup>23</sup> Thus, even if nondemocratic rule is more probable in less socially and economically developed areas, more attention should be given to the actions and leadership of local leaders.

Second, the focus of the predominant current explanations of the reproduction of subnational “undemocratic” or “authoritarian” regimes is on the interactions between national-level politicians (normally the president) and provincial or state governors.<sup>24</sup> These scholars assume, albeit implicitly, an inherent conflict or bargaining process between national and provincial politicians, which is not necessarily the case at the local level in unitary countries. Their explanations are probably better suited for regional regimes in federal countries than for local governments in unitary ones. The position and relative autonomy of municipalities are significantly different—their role in national politics is more limited, the institutional mechanism of national executive intervention normally absent, and the interest of national-level politicians reduced. This type of explanation from federal contexts hinges largely on the presence of strong parties with organizational presence at different levels of the political system, which is not necessarily the case in many unitary countries in the region.

Placing too much emphasis on these interactions diverts attention from how local leaders in fact construct their leadership, cultivating their local electoral base, and the variety of informal political practices they use to strengthen their position. The impossibility of electoral system reform or manipulation of local electoral authorities requires a shift of focus toward the actual exercise of power at the local level and away from the relations that mayors uphold with presidents. However, the necessary focus on local-level factors does not imply that interactions with other levels of the political system do not exist or are not important. Nevertheless, as I will show, they have a fundamentally different character and are initiated mostly from the bottom up, depending on personal contacts and networks of local politicians.

I combine insight from both of the preceding perspectives with a focus on local factors, but I also put emphasis on the agency of the local actors. I place local politicians at the heart of the analysis, and I center my argument on their exercise of power as the most important factor in explaining their continuity in and departure from office. I take on the literature about “practices” by expanding, formalizing, and measuring this underlying concept, as well as by expanding the menu of practices used by local

caudillos.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the existing single-country studies that analyze practices and explore the role of local factors, I offer a comparative analysis of cases from three different countries.<sup>26</sup> The focus on local contexts, actors' actions, and the combination of within- and between-country comparison thus offers a more general theoretical argument.<sup>27</sup>

## **Research Design, Case Selection, and Methodology**

The explanation I put forward for local caudillos' and clans' continuity is tested through a multilevel research design and the use of qualitative methods. At the most general level, I propose a "subnational comparison across borders," combining case selection at two different levels of analysis and between- and within-country comparisons.<sup>28</sup> The comparison includes six municipalities in three structurally different countries: Chile, Peru, and Paraguay.

As my main cases of comparison, Chile and Peru differ significantly across a series of theoretically relevant variables, including levels of decentralization, the relative importance and territorial presence of political parties, the disconnect between levels of political competition, state capacity and territorial reach, and local electoral rules, particularly those governing the way mayors are elected and the possibility of reelection.<sup>29</sup> These two countries provide useful contexts for a paired comparison at the local level of broadly similar cases. The between-country differences help to rule out national-level explanations both for the reproduction of local caudillos and clans and for their departure, which I analyze at the local level. This research design enables greater external validity than single-country studies. Leveraging both logics of comparison, the core cases of Chile and Peru serve primarily for theory building.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the Chilean and Peruvian cases, Paraguay serves as a shadow case study through which to test the argument in different settings and to examine the scope conditions of the main theoretical argument.<sup>31</sup> Here the logic of comparison shifts from contrasting pairs of municipalities in different countries to the comparison of two municipalities within the same country. Paraguay exhibits various important differences with respect to Chile and Peru. First, it is one of the least decentralized states in the region, and thus it can be leveraged to show that the phenomenon of caudillos and clans appear also in this context. Second, and more important, Paraguay has two strong traditional parties that dominate political competition at all levels. Third, the Paraguayan constitutional order incorporates the mechanism of national executive intervention in municipal governments, roughly similar to the institution of "federal intervention." These latter two characteristics make Paraguay, paradoxi-



cally, more similar to the federal cases from which much of the theory is derived, which facilitates the examination of theoretical bridges between the (formally) unitary and federal cases and helps to establish the scope conditions of the argument.

At the local level, I explore broadly similar caudillo rule in Chile and Peru, and the between-country pairing of four municipal cases allows for an explanation of the reason that some caudillos have been more successful than others.<sup>32</sup> The cases in each pair are selected based on the “most similar systems” logic.<sup>33</sup> The similarity in question stems mainly from the type of informal political practices used by the caudillos and, insofar as is possible to ascertain, the structural characteristics of each municipality. Thus, all cases are characterized by the use of informal practices and at least three periods in office by the time the research was carried out in 2017–2018. They are among the most prototypical cases in the two capital cities, including some of the most long-standing and best-known local caudillos.

Meanwhile, the two Paraguayan municipalities serve to test how the theoretical argument applies in a context characterized by the prohibition of indefinite reelection as well as the presence of strong and territorially organized political parties. In the Paraguayan cases, it is possible to ask how the phenomenon of local caudillos and clans adapts to these conditions. They constitute shadow case studies that approximate the core studies in their focus on within-case analysis, but they are used to explore external validity; they should not be taken as mere case illustrations.<sup>34</sup> At the descriptive level, the Paraguayan cases demonstrate that caudillos and clans also exist in the metropolitan areas of the region’s least decentralized countries, and that their reproduction rests on many of the same mechanisms as in the Chilean and Peruvian cases. At the explanatory level, they impose a scope limit on the explanation of caudillo and clan departure, attesting to a more important role played by national-level factors such as multilevel political parties and their internal factions and the existence of national executive intervention.

All six municipalities studied here are located in metropolitan areas and are part of an urban semi-periphery. In contrast to the traditionally studied conservative elites and authoritarian subnational regimes in rural areas, these six municipalities are closer to national political power and, at least theoretically, under more scrutiny from mass media as they are situated in or near capital cities. This, in turn, should make it more difficult for local caudillos and clans to survive and persist over time. However, this is not necessarily the case as, in practice, these politicians often endure for several consecutive periods in office.

The first pair consists of Augusto Miyashiro, five-term mayor of Chor-

**Table I.1 Six Local Caudillos and Clans**

	Continuity	Departure
Worst Offenders (more severe and less severe practices)	Augusto Miyashiro (1998–2018)	Vicky Barahona (2000–2016)
Politics as Usual (less severe practices)	Santiago Rebolledo (2004–2021)	Felipe Castillo (1995–2014)
Party Machines (mix of both types of practices)	Albino Ferrer (2007–2019) Gómez Verlangieri Clan (1991–2015) (shadow cases)	

*Source:* Prepared by the author with data from JNE, SERVEL, and TSJE.

rillos (Lima, Peru), and Vicky Barahona, four-time mayor of Renca (Santiago, Chile) (see Table I.1). Both represent the “worst offenders” and are characterized by frequent use of the more severe practices such as extortion, persecution of local opposition and political leaders, and even alleged electoral fraud during Election Day. Miyashiro can be considered the more successful of the two caudillos as he won all of the elections in which he ran, and he eventually managed to put forward his son as his successor in the post of mayor, while Barahona declined her candidacy and did not manage to impose her mayoral heir-apparent. The second pair comprises Santiago Rebolledo, four-term mayor of La Cisterna (Santiago, Chile), and Felipe Castillo, five-term mayor of Los Olivos (Lima, Peru). Both caudillos used more severe practices only exceptionally and represent what might be considered “politics as usual” at the local level. By the same metric as above, Rebolledo is the more successful case, having won all the elections in which he ran, unlike Castillo who lost his bid for mayor of Lima and failed to install his son as the next occupant of the mayoralty. The final pair is made up of Albino Ferrer, three-term mayor of San Lorenzo, and the Gómez Verlangieri clan, which has controlled Limpio from 1991 following the transition to democracy two years earlier.<sup>35</sup> Both municipalities are located in the metropolitan area of Asunción, Paraguay. Ferrer and the successive members of the Gómez Verlangieri clan used more severe informal political practices with less frequency, and the two cases can be conceived as “party machines,” given the importance of Paraguayan traditional political parties’ structure. Both Ferrer and Gómez Verlangieri clan ultimately lost control of their municipalities, although their departures were the result of different mechanisms and their comparison allows for an exploration of the limits of the main theoretical argument proposed here.

I trace the processes that led to the establishment and reproduction of these local fiefdoms and identify the factors that led to the continuity of some and the collapse of others.<sup>36</sup> The six cases represent “typical” cases of the studied phenomenon, and I insert them in a broader theoretical and empirical typology of local power dynamics of metropolitan areas’ municipalities.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the more successful caudillos (or “positive cases”) of Chorrillos and La Cisterna are contrasted with the less successful caudillos (or “negative cases”) of Renca and Los Olivos in order to examine the reasons of departure in the latter. In this regard, both Paraguayan cases serve as shadow cases to analyze the reproduction and departure of one local caudillo and one local clan.

The case studies are based on seven months of fieldwork in the three countries between 2017 and 2018.<sup>38</sup> I conducted almost 130 in-depth interviews with key informants in the six municipalities, including national party leaders, local politicians, party brokers, social leaders, municipal bureaucrats, and local journalists contacted via snowball sampling method, enhanced by the use of social media, particularly Facebook.<sup>39</sup> In these municipalities I also participated in or visited party meetings, campaign activities, and municipal council sessions. For the case selection and contextual background information on each municipality I conducted exhaustive research about each of the cases in national and local media archives (including newspapers, magazines, and radio and television broadcasts, local blogs) and Facebook. I complemented this research with dozens of informal interviews with local residents and with country experts and academics in each country. Given the scarcity of secondary studies on the six cases, in this book I rely heavily on this primary information, particularly the interviews.

## **Book Structure**

The book is organized as follows. The theoretical and conceptual framework is laid out in chapter 1, with existing accounts of the continuity of local caudillos and nondemocratic subnational regimes. I highlight the reasons why the analytic framework based on federal countries is not suitable for analyzing how democracy is exercised at the local level in unitary countries. There are three main sections of the chapter in order to present an alternative analytic framework. In the first section I propose the use of “caudillo” as a concept and define “informal political practices” as a way in which these politicians exercise power. In the second section I propose a descriptive typology to take into account the number of terms in office together with the exercise of power so as to identify the patterns of local power dynamics in metropolitan areas over the last two decades. In

the third section I present the main explanatory argument, showing why some caudillos or clans are more successful than others. I argue that the persistence of local caudillos in unitary countries depends more on their own (in)action than is suggested in the literature and that their departure from power owes to the erosion of their electoral base, which in turn benefits opposition candidates and can be accompanied by growing social mobilization and public criticism.

In chapter 2 I contextualize both the national and the subnational cases and provide an overview of the empirical patterns of the typology of local power dynamics. I further develop the logic of the case selection by underlining the differences among the three countries. I explain the role and position of the municipal governments in the three countries. At the local level, I set out basic information about the six municipalities, the electoral results, and details about the respective leaders. I also present the evidence based on secondary sources from each country, in the form of complaints against the six leaders for employing informal political practices. Finally, we see that the presence of local caudillos or clans is relatively common in the near one hundred municipalities of the three metropolitan areas, as is the use by mayors of informal political practices to stay in power but failure to accomplish three terms in office.

In chapters 3–5 I cover the empirical case studies. In chapter 3 I analyze the two cases of caudillos who frequently used the more severe practices. After describing in the first two sections how both Barahona and Miyashiro managed to stay in power for more than fifteen years using a wide range of informal political practices, in the third section I argue that Barahona did not run for a new term (even though everybody expected it and she herself had planned on it) because of uncertainty as to how she might perform in the forthcoming elections. Her abuses of power coupled with her gradual disconnect from and neglect of her electoral base caused her electoral support to wane, and she strategically withdrew her candidacy. I thus show how the end of one of the most serious cases of caudillismo in Chile in the post-democratization period owed to Barahona's own (in)actions and decisions rather than to inter-level conflict with national politicians jeopardizing her continuity in office.

In chapter 4 I explore the cases of two local caudillos who represent what might be called (local) "politics as usual." Both used somewhat less severe informal political practices such as clientelism or patronage to reproduce while in power, which, according to some scholars is how local politics is done in Latin American countries. In the third section I show why Castillo did not run for a new term in Los Olivos, did not manage to establish his son as his successor, and was not successful in the mayoral elections for the city of Lima. This case illustrates that Castillo gradually

lost support locally and miscalculated his chances of becoming mayor of Lima. These errors led to alternation in “his” municipality after almost two decades.

In chapter 5 I compare two Paraguayan cases: Albino Ferrer, the caudillo of San Lorenzo, and the Gómez Verlangieri clan, led by its caudillo, Optaciano, in Limpio. I delve into the cases that are the most similar to the dynamics of federal countries such as Mexico and Argentina. The different contexts are linked by the relative importance of political parties and national politics and institutions in local politics. In the first two sections I describe the various informal political practices (characterized here as “more severe” and “less severe”) that these two typical municipal party machines used to achieve continuity in office. In the third section I demonstrate how the Gómez Verlangieri clan lost the election (rather than the opposition winning) because of their own unforced errors, while Ferrer resigned two years before the end of his term because of a change in national balance of power, local factional opposition from within his political party, and growing dissatisfaction with his municipal administration. In the contrast between the two cases I illustrate how the caudillo’s departure in the San Lorenzo case followed a multilevel dynamics in a context of crucial role of political parties and existence of national executive power intervention similar to cases such as Argentina.

In the conclusions, I revisit the book’s main argument. I review the contributions and consequences for the theory of subnational democracy in the Latin American unitary and federal countries. I also examine the implications for the study of subnational democracy and propose some tentative lessons for policy-makers. I close by discussing some of the pending issues of the research agenda of local (urban) politics in unitary countries in the region.