

Active Players or Rubber-Stamps?

An Evaluation of the Policy-Making Role of Latin American Legislatures

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Abstract

Legislatures are critical institutions in the effective functioning of a democratic system and in the policymaking process. They are expected to represent the needs and wishes of citizens; identify problems and adopt statutes to address them; and oversee the implementation of policies. However, the extents to which Latin American legislatures fulfill these roles vary greatly from country to country. Despite the recent proliferation of research on executive-legislative relations in Latin America, comparative knowledge of how legislative institutions operate in these countries is still quite limited. In an effort to improve understanding in this area, I evaluate the extent and nature of the policymaking role played by 18 Latin American legislatures. Specifically, I use multidimensional scaling (MDS) techniques to test if and how the dimensions by which these legislatures have been previously distinguished correspond to observed similarities among them. The analysis reveals that four types of legislatures can be identified. The findings also confirm that those legislatures with greater capabilities are the ones that play more active roles in the policy making process

Introduction

Legislatures are critical institutions in the effective functioning of a democratic system and in the policymaking process. Legislatures are expected to represent the needs and wishes of citizens in policymaking; identify problems and formulate and approve laws to address them; and oversee the implementation of policies by monitoring, reviewing, and investigating government activities to ensure that they are transparent, efficient, and consistent with existing laws and regulations (Beetham 2006).

The extent and nature of the role played by legislatures in the policymaking process vary greatly from country to country. At the more proactive and constructive end of the spectrum, legislatures such as the U.S. Congress are able to develop their own legislative proposals and thus participate along with the executive in directing the policy agenda. Given their policy capabilities, such legislatures are also likely to be active and effective in overseeing policy implementation. At the other end, legislatures may be fairly marginal players, serving as a rubber stamp on the executive's legislative proposals and having little capacity or willingness to scrutinize the conduct of government (Morgenstern 2002). Between these two extremes, there is a wide area in the middle where legislatures can exhibit different degrees of activity either in simply blocking much of what the executive proposes or in reformulating and/or amending executive initiatives. Among such legislatures, there can also be considerable variation in the intensity and effectiveness with which they perform the oversight role.

How the legislature plays its policymaking roles can have an important effect on the nature of policy outcomes. If the legislature is a marginal actor, this will give the executive free rein to enact policy changes that it perceives to be necessary. But the lack of legislative deliberation as policies are formulated and the weakness of oversight may mean that the policies adopted are poorly conceived in technical terms, poorly adjusted to the real needs or demands of organized interests and citizens, lacking consensus and therefore politically unsustainable, and/or ineffectively or unfairly implemented. On the other hand, legislatures that are involved more heavily in policymaking in a constructive sense can contribute to the adoption of policies that are more sustainable because they are

based on a broader social and political consensus and are more carefully scrutinized in technical terms. In addition, in a constructive legislature the effective oversight of policy implementation should increase the likelihood that policies fulfill their intended objectives rather than being carried out for the benefit of particular individuals, groups, or sectors.

Legislatures with limited capacity to play a constructive role in policymaking may nonetheless be important players in the sense of obstructing or vetoing much of what the executive proposes. Such legislatures have many of the potential negative traits of more marginal legislatures in regard to policymaking, and they may also prevent the executive from advancing a positive agenda of policy reform. Given their limited capacity, such legislatures are also unlikely to play an effective role in overseeing the implementation of policies.

In this paper, I re-examine the analysis presented in the Inter-American Development Bank's 2006 report on *Economic and Social Progress in Latin America* (IADB 2006) to evaluate the extent and nature of the policymaking role played by 18 Latin American legislatures. Specifically, I use multidimensional scaling (MDS) techniques to test if and how the classification of the legislatures made in that study corresponds to observed similarities among them. The results show that the legislatures can be effectively arranged in a two-dimensional space. The horizontal dimension can be interpreted as a representation of their relative capabilities. The second dimension captures how proactive or reactive are these legislative bodies. Therefore, in line with the characterization made by IADB (2006), the analysis reveals that four types of legislatures can be identified. These findings also confirm that those legislatures with greater capabilities are the ones that play more constructive roles in the policy making process.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section I present the characterization of the 18 Latin American legislatures, and the main findings obtained from the MDS analysis. In the second section, I discuss the reliability and validity of my empirical findings. In the third section, I evaluate the role of these legislatures in the overall policymaking process. A final section concludes.

1. A Characterization of Latin American Legislatures

Against the backdrop of Latin America's history of dictatorial rule and presidentialism, scholars had tended to consider legislatures in this region to be largely irrelevant throughout much of the 20th century and not worthy of study. Some prominent experiences in the past two decades, such as the closing of the legislature by President Fujimori in Peru and the frequent use of decree powers by many Latin American presidents, continued to reinforce the commonly held view that Latin American legislatures often abdicate (or are forced to abdicate) their constitutional prerogatives to the executive.

However, recent studies suggest that, while legislatures in the region in general may not be heavily involved in formulating and advocating policy change, they are nonetheless relevant to policy outcomes (cf. Taylor Robinson 1992; Nacif 2002). Legislatures in some countries are active in policymaking in the sense of mainly being blunt veto players, blocking legislation proposed by the executive. Others, however, are involved in negotiating policy issues behind the scenes with the executive or in amending or reformulating executive legislative initiatives (Cox & Morgestern, 2002; Amorim Neto, Cox and McCubbins, 2003).

Several factors drive a legislature's role in the policy making process. These include, the extent of its formal powers; the amount of political space/discretion afforded by other power holders (executives, parties); the capacity provided by its procedures/structures/support; and the goals of the members and leaders of the legislative bodies themselves.

IADB (2006) presents a tentative categorization of Latin American legislatures. The authors group these legislatures according to the nature of their policymaking role and the intensity with which they carry out that role. In part, the nature of the role is shaped by their capabilities. Therefore, in their categorization, a major focus is on legislative capabilities, including the experience and qualifications of legislators, and the strength and degree of specialization of committees.

The general idea is that legislatures that have more legitimacy, more experienced legislators, and well-developed committee systems will tend to be more constructive and/or proactive. Legislatures with weaker capabilities will tend either to play a limited policymaking role or to be active, but only in a fairly obstructionist way rather than a constructive one (IADB 2006).

1.1 Observable Indicators.

The IADB report uses the following indicators to characterize the policymaking capabilities of the 18 Latin American legislatures:

Confidence in Congress: The nature of the role that legislatures play is likely to influence the way in which they are regarded by the citizenry. At the same time, the level of citizen trust in the legislative branch will probably affect the likelihood that legislators will make investments in building its capacity. The indicator was constructed as the average percent of respondents from 1996 to 2004 and the percentage of respondents in 2004 in the Latinobarometer survey that stated that they had a lot or some confidence in the congress (IADB 2006: 44).

Effectiveness of Lawmaking. In cases in which the legislative branch has little credibility, it is likely to be less effective in representing societal interests, and the executive will have a greater incentive to seek to bypass it in the policymaking process. This indicator is the mean score given by business executives in the 2002-2005 World Economic Forum survey to the question: *“How effective is your national parliament/congress as a lawmaking and oversight institution?”* (IADB 2006: 44).

Experience of Legislators. Term length is thought to influence legislative behavior, with longer terms insulating legislators more effectively from electoral pressures than shorter ones. The modal term in office for lower house members in the countries analyzed in the IADB report is 4 years. The rest of the countries have 5-year terms (except for El Salvador and Mexico where terms only last for three years). One fundamental difference across some of these legislatures is the existence in some of them of limitations on the number of terms a member may serve. In Venezuela legislators can be immediately reelected, but only up to two legislative terms, and both Mexico and Costa Rica prohibit immediate reelection of lower house members. Also, besides term length/restrictions, rates of immediate reelection to the congress are quite low in the countries under consideration (Saiegh 2005). Therefore, all these factors have an effect on the average experience of Latin American legislators.

Education. Turning our attention to the constituent units of a legislature, we should also take note of how their influence and participation in the policy making process varies at

the individual level. Legislators' behavior is shaped by a variety of factors; these include personal motivations, how they view their jobs, and the variety of ways that they can respond to constituents. An observable indicator of this source of heterogeneity across legislators is their educational level. One such measure is the percentage of legislators with a college degree based on the data collected by Universidad de Salamanca's Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA) project.¹

Legislative Specialization. Legislative rules usually shape the size of committees, how members and committee leaders are selected, and the number of committees on which each legislator can serve. As such, another indicator of a legislature's ability to enact policy changes through statutes is given by the degree of specialization of its members. The average number of committee memberships per legislator attempts to measure the degree of specialization of legislative committees, and thus their effectiveness (Saiegh 2005).

Table 1 compares the 18 Latin American legislatures according to these indicators. The evidence presented in Table 1 suggests that in most countries, the general public does not have a high degree of confidence in the legislative branch. Over the past decade according to the Latinobarometer, on average, respondents have the most favorable view of congress in Uruguay, Chile, Honduras, and Costa Rica and the least favorable view in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guatemala. A deficit of representation and accountability may be one the reasons behind the low esteem that legislatures have among Latin American citizens. Table 1 also indicates that the average ratings given by business executives, as reported by the World Economic Forum, are highest in Chile and Brazil and lowest in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Argentina. The most important differences in the views of the general public and business executives are for Venezuela and the Dominican Republic, where in each case the general public has a comparatively more favorable view than business executives.

< Table 1 Here >

With respect to the qualifications and experience of legislators, the evidence suggests that Uruguay and Chile have the most experienced of legislators. In contrast, the average

¹ For a detailed description of the Elites Parlamentarias en Iberoamérica project, see García and Mateos (2000) and Alcántara (2008), or go to <http://americo.usal.es/oir/elites/>

experience of legislators is quite low in Mexico, Costa Rica and Argentina. Table 1 also indicates that Peru and Colombia exhibit the highest percentage of legislators with higher education. On the other hand, less than half of the legislators in the Dominican Republic have university education. Finally, can also see from Table 1 that Colombia and Brazil show the most specialized committees, while Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Paraguay have too many members serving in their committees.

The comparison of the Latin American legislatures presented in IADB (2006) makes use of the aforementioned indicators to characterize their capabilities. However, the authors rely on a set of ancillary subjective indicators and a qualitative evaluation to make their final assessment of their policy-making roles. The purpose of the analysis presented below is to examine the robustness of such characterization when only the quantitative indicators are used, and we let the data “speak for themselves”.

1.2 Multidimensional Scaling Results

Multidimensional scaling (MDS), a statistical technique for analyzing the structure of data, is the appropriate way to examine how the indicators presented above “map” into a characterization of Latin American legislatures. This method represents measurements of similarity (or dissimilarity) among pairs of objects as distances between points of a low-dimensional multidimensional space.

The data, in this case, are correlations among the Latin American legislatures based on the indicators presented in Table 1, and the MDS representation shows them as points in a plane. The graphical display of the correlations provided by MDS enables us to literally “look” at the data and to explore their structure visually (Borg and Groenen 2005). Besides using MDS as a method to represent the data as distances in a low-dimensional space in order to make them accessible to visual inspection, this technique also allows me to test if the dimensions by which IADB (2006) conceptually distinguishes Latin American legislatures corresponds to observed similarities among them.

Figure 1 presents a two-dimensional MDS representation where each national legislature is shown as a point.² The points are arranged in such a way that their distances correspond to their correlations. Namely, two points are close together (such as the Peruvian and Paraguayan legislatures) if their characteristics (as measured by the indicators presented in Table 1) are highly correlated. Conversely, two points are far apart if their characteristics are not correlated that high (such as Argentina and Brazil).

< *Figure 1 Here* >

More generally, Figure 1 shows that these legislatures are primarily distributed along a horizontal dimension which, in accordance with IADB (2006), can be interpreted as “Low-capacity vs. High-capacity” legislatures. The vertical axis, in turn, can be interpreted as a “Reactive-Proactive” dimension. Namely, it seems to be reflecting the fact that some legislatures play a relatively limited policy making role (such as the Argentinean and Dominican ones), while some others, despite being quite reactive in nature, can occasionally take the initiative in shaping the policy agenda and developing policy proposals (such as the Colombian and Brazilian legislatures).

2. Main Results: Reliability and Validity

In this section, I demonstrate how the spatial map constructed using MDS provides a good representation of the policymaking roles of these legislatures. I first analyze the reliability of this approach to determine whether the recovered spatial configuration corresponds to observed similarities among the Latin American legislatures. Second, to evaluate the validity of the MDS solution presented above, I examine the extent to which my estimates are comparable to other characterizations of these very same legislatures carried out by some of the existing studies.

² The MDS representation was found using KYST, a computer program that provides a best-possible solution in a space with a dimensionality selected in advance by the user. In this case, I sought the best-possible solution for a two dimensional space.

2.1. Reliability Checks

The goal of this section is to demonstrate the reliability of the scaling estimates. Specifically, I rely on a badness-of-fit measure or *loss function* to examine how well the *representation function* maps the similarity data (based on the indicators presented above) into the distances of the 2-dimensional MDS configuration displayed in Figure 1. The loss function is a mathematical expression that aggregates the representation errors over all pairs of observations (Borg and Groenen 2005).

As Borg and Groenen (2005) note, MDS models require that each proximity value be mapped *exactly* into its corresponding distance. However, empirical proximities such as the ones used in this paper usually contain noise due to measurement error, sampling effects, and so on. Therefore, it is convenient to drop the equality requirement in the mapping between actual proximity and recovered distances (Borg and Groenen 2005).

Most studies employ the statistical concept of error to evaluate the accuracy of the representation. A normed sum-of-squares of these errors defines *Stress*, the most common loss function in MDS. Stress is an index that assesses the mismatch of (admissibly transformed) proximities and corresponding distances. In a way, Stress is analogous to a correlation coefficient, except that it measures the badness-of-fit rather than the goodness-of-fit (Borg and Groenen 2005).³

Figure 2 exhibits the observed dissimilarities (based on the data in Table 1) plotted against the corresponding distances of Figure 1. This plot is known as a *Shepard diagram* (Borg and Groenen 2005). The blue circles represent the pairs of proximities/approximated distances. They all lie on a monotonically descending line. More importantly, the graph shows that there is very little scatter around the representation function. The vertical distances of the points from the step function are generally quite small, indicating the absence of real outliers.

< Figure 2 Here >

³ See Borg and Groenen (2005) for a detailed discussion of how the Stress value is calculated.

Besides looking at the Shepard diagram, it is customary to condense all of its information (the size of the deviations from the representation function, possible outliers, etc.) into a single number, the Stress index. The Stress of a given MDS solution usually allows us to examine the “proper” dimensionality of our representation. How Stress should be evaluated is a major issue in MDS. However, one possible criterion is to compute MDS solutions for different dimensionalities and then pick the one for which further increase in the number of dimensions does not significantly reduce Stress (Borg and Groenen 2005).

Measured in terms of Stress, the badness-of-fit of the 1-Dimension, 2-Dimensions, and 3-Dimensions solutions using the data in Table 1 are 0.073, 0.010, and 0.009. The Stress of the one-dimensional solution, while acceptable, is not very good. Adding one additional dimension leads to a considerable Stress reduction. However, adding another dimension has very little further effect (in fact, the two-dimensional solution is close to zero already). Therefore, a two-dimensional solution seems to be a reasonably precise representation of the data.

2.2. Cross-Validation: Alternative Characterizations.

The analysis in the previous section centered on the reliability and overall fit of the two-dimensional MDS solution presented in Figure 1. However, the recovered location of each country’s legislature can also be used to further validate the results. In particular, Figure 1 suggests that these legislatures can be ordered along a horizontal dimension, which can be interpreted as “Low-capacity vs. High-capacity” legislatures. In this section, I evaluate the validity of the scaling estimates by contrasting them with alternative measures of legislative capacity.

One of these alternative measures is the index of legislative institutional power (IPIL) developed by García Montero (2008). The index is based on fifteen institutional indicators of legislative procedure, and measures the differential lawmaking abilities of a number of Latin American legislatures. Higher values reflect a higher legislative

institutional capacity of the parliament to intervene in legislative activity (García Montero 2008).⁴

Figure 3.a. presents a comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and the IPIL values for 13 legislatures in Latin America.⁵ It should also be noted that, except for the case of Uruguay, the location of the national legislatures generated by the MDS solution matches very closely the IPIL values. In fact, the correlation between the MDS and IPIL values is 0.56.

< Figures 3.a. -3.b Here >

Another measure seeking to gauge the strength of a cross-section of national legislatures is the Parliamentary Powers Index (PPI) developed by Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig (2009). The authors constructed this index using the Legislative Powers Survey (LPS), a list of 32 items that assess the legislature's sway over the executive, its institutional autonomy, its authority in specific areas, and its institutional capacity. The PPI ranges from zero (least powerful) to one (most powerful).⁶

Figure 3.b. presents a comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and the PPI index for all the legislatures in the IADB study. In this case, the correlation between the first-dimension MDS scores and the aggregate strength of the national legislatures (measured by the PPI) is 0.51. Interestingly enough, the correlation between the IPIL and the PPI is 0.28, which suggests that the MDS scores are actually capturing some important elements of the characterization of these legislatures that each of these measures by itself is missing. More importantly, the fact that the MDS estimates closely match those obtained from these alternative characterizations lends further support to the validity of using the indicators in the IADB report to characterize the policymaking roles of the Latin American legislatures.

⁴ For a detailed description of how the index was constructed, see García Montero (2008).

⁵ Unfortunately the remaining five legislatures examined in the IADB study were not included in García Montero (2008).

⁶ For a complete description of the methods by which the data were generated and detailed coding rules see Fish and Kroenig (2009).

2.3. Cross-Validation: Alternative Observable Indicators

One possible objection to the conclusion drawn above is that the correlations between the MDS estimates and alternative indicators such as the IPIL and the PPI are spurious. Specifically, it can be argued that those binary relationships are actually driven by some other omitted variable. In order to explore such possibility, and to further examine the validity of my results, I now turn to a couple of observable indicators that were not included in the IADB report.

The existence of an ample and competent staff to assist legislators with the tasks of administration, research and analysis, and document preparation is vital to enable them to evaluate bills initiated by the executive and supervise policy implementation effectively. For example, in Argentina each legislative committee has access to a secretary, an administrative secretary and two clerical assistants. In contrast, in El Salvador each committee has only one technical assistant and one secretary. Therefore, a plausible argument is that an examination of a national legislature's policymaking abilities should start by looking at each country's economic conditions.

Figure 4.a. presents a comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and income per capita of the 18 Latin American countries.⁷ It is quite clear from Figure 4.a. that the differences in the national legislatures' policymaking abilities do not stem from their countries' income levels. In other words, it is not the case that legislatures in richer countries possess higher policymaking abilities than those legislatures in poorer countries. This finding is quite consistent with the view presented in the IADB report, which stresses the role of individual legislators' incentives to invest in the capabilities of their respective legislatures rather than level of economic development of the countries under study.

< Figures 4.a. -4.b Here >

⁷ GNI per capita is measured in Purchasing Power Parities (2006 dollars); source: World Bank's World Development Indicators (2007).

Moving onto those incentives, the question is whether partisan and/or electoral considerations matter in determining the policymaking abilities of these lawmaking bodies. It is important then, to take into account partisan alignments. When a single party controls both the executive and legislature, then the chances for independent legislative decision-making diminish. For example, a governing party (or parties) may circumscribe its role in the legislature to merely transforming government policy into law.⁸ In contrast, a highly fragmented party system is likely to result in a more active legislature. However, such configuration may limit the legislature's role to being mainly a veto player, or a site of bargaining over particularistic expenditures rather than an arena for proactive policymaking or effective oversight of the executive.

Differences in the extent to which parties are centralized and disciplined also entail trade-offs with respect to the legislatures policymaking role. On the one hand, party centralization may help presidents secure support in the legislature and facilitate inter-party negotiations. On the other hand, high levels of party centralization are likely to limit legislators' incentives and possibilities of responding directly to their constituents, as well as their incentives to participate independently in the policymaking process and in oversight responsibilities. Subservience to party leaders, especially when parties tend to be clientelistic, can contribute to a weak policy role for the legislature and weak incentives for legislators to invest in developing the capacities of congress. In general, legislators are most likely to represent constituent interests when (i) they know precisely who their constituents are, (ii) they interact with them frequently, and (ii) their political futures depend on gaining and keeping constituent support.

Figure 4.b. presents a comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and a measure of legislators' incentives to develop a personal vote. This index, developed by Hallerberg and Marier (2004) ranges from zero (no incentives for personal vote) to one (lot of incentives for personal vote). Figure 4.b suggests that in those countries where

⁸ For example, despite having relatively weak constitutional powers, Mexican presidents before 1997 dominated policymaking, since they could count on solid majorities for the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in both houses of congress. But when control over the government was divided between the PRI and their opponents in the House of Deputies, the legislature became more assertive.

legislators develop a personal vote, the likelihood that they will invest in greater legislative policymaking abilities is higher.

3 Discussion: Active Players or Rubber Stamps?

Overall, the discussion presented above suggests that the MDS characterization based on the IADB data provides a very good picture of the different types of legislatures in Latin America. Armed with this information, it is time to address the main questions that motivate this paper: Can we come up with a characterization of Latin American legislatures according to their role in the policy making process? How do the assessments the legislatures' capabilities that arise from the previous analysis compare to the qualitative evaluation of their roles discussed in IADB (2006)? Is it true that legislatures with greater capabilities tend to play a more constructive role in the policymaking process?

Turning back to Figure 1, all the points in the “south-west” quadrant correspond to legislatures that are classified as being reactive limited/obstructionist and having low capabilities by the IADB (2006) report. These legislatures can be characterized as being (quasi) marginal, somewhat obstructionist, but mostly passive. The quasi-marginal role of these legislatures is due to the excessive powers of the executive and/or the lack of professionalization of their members. These are legislatures where being a member is not worth much. Legislators do not have spending initiative and thus cannot deliver pork or public works. Most legislators in these countries often seek to continue their political careers somewhere else. Therefore, they may or many not be obstructive depending on how there are compensated. In the case of Argentina, control over political careers is enough to keep them in line. When the electoral mechanism is not enough, “compensations” may even be paid using monetary resources. Argentina, Peru and Panama are good cases in point. Unless policy would directly affect legislators' interests, the president may have an easy sailing. But policy reversal is also possible. So, legislation is of low quality, poorly drafted and easily reversed.

As we move to the “north-west” (i.e. legislatures will low capabilities, but slightly more active) we find those legislatures that were characterized as being reactive

limited/obstructionist, but with medium capabilities by the IADB (2006) report. These are the prototypical rubber-stamp legislatures. In these cases, most of the policies are decided outside of the legislature, mainly in the governing party (or parties). Executives tend to get pretty much what they want and the currency is mainly partisan endorsement or other government posts. Some of these legislatures were able to adopt a more active role when presidential powers were reduced (such as in Mexico in the post-PRI period). However, these legislatures do not have very good capabilities, and therefore their scope of action is greatly reduced when their partisan composition is at odds with the preferences of the executive.

The points in the “north-east” quadrant, correspond to those legislatures deemed to be reactive constructive and endowed by high capabilities by the IADB (2006) report with one exception (Uruguay; see below). Even though these legislatures possess greater capabilities, they still play a reactive role in the policy making process. This limited role can be due to the excessive powers of the executive (Brazil) and/or the alignment of legislative majorities with the executive (Chile). For example, in Brazil, presidents can get their legislation passed using their extensive legislative and non-legislative powers. In the case of Chile, individual legislators can submit initiatives under very restricted conditions. Everything indicates that these legislatures can “step up to the plate” and become more active players in the policy making process under different institutional and/or political conditions (In fact, the Brazilian legislature did so when Collor was impeached). The Colombian congress became more “powerful” after the 1991 reforms, but it can still be characterized more as reactive rather than proactive.

Finally, the Uruguayan legislature is located in the “south-east” quadrant of the MDS representation. Unlike the IADB (2006) report, which characterizes this legislature as being reactive constructive, I find that it looks more like a reactive obstructionist one. In accordance with the IADB, the results also indicate that Uruguayan legislators tend to be of high quality. However, these legislators tend to be quite ideological, making them hard to be “bought”. Instead of compensations paid in cash or transfers, legislators are more likely to demand cabinet posts or policy compromises. Therefore, whenever the executive faces a lot of legislative opposition, the most probable consequence is political stalemate between the branches of government.

Conclusions

The main goal of this paper was to examine the role played by the legislatures of 18 Latin American countries, and to evaluate their potential to become an important actor in the policymaking process. The evidence presented in the paper indicates that the extent and nature of these roles vary greatly from country to country. At the more constructive end of the spectrum, legislatures such as the Brazilian and Chilean have the potential to become active and effective players capable of participating in setting the policy agenda and overseeing policy implementation. On the other hand, other legislatures in the region lack the capacity to serve as a mature and autonomous point of deliberation in the policy process.

Therefore, these legislatures –very much like the U.S. Congress at the end of the nineteenth Century – operate more as a blunt veto player (exercising gatekeeping and some other types of delay strategies) than as effective policy making bodies. These results have an important implications for those interested in strengthening the role of legislative institutions in the policy making process throughout the region. The main lesson is that reformers should keep in mind is that they will not be able to empower legislatures if the right incentives for individual legislators are not established first. Many of the resources that make a legislature a proactive player in the policy making process are “endogenous” to how much the legislators are motivated to develop them. The institutionalization of any legislature starts with the recognition on the part of its members that they need to spend part of their time and effort on building a stronger collective body. Therefore, the focus should be on the incentives that legislators have to have in order to “invest” in the legislature.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Measures of Legislatures' Capabilities

	Confidence in Congress, average	Effectiveness of Lawmaking bodies, average	Average experience of legislators (years)	Percentage of legislators with university education	Average number of committees per legislators
Argentina	20.5	1.6	2.9	69.6	4.5
Bolivia	19.9	1.8	3.3	78.4	1.66
Brazil	24.9	3.1	5.5	54	0.92
Chile	36	3.7	8	79.4	1.95
Colombia	20.3	2.7	4	91.6	0.86
Costa Rica	29.9	2.2	2.6	80.4	2.09
Dom. Rep.		2	3.1	49.6	3.54
Ecuador	13.3	1.7	3.5	83.1	1.26
El Salvador	27.7	2.1	3.9	64	2.44
Guatemala	19.9	1.8	3.2	68.4	3.24
Honduras	30.8	2.6	3	73.1	2.34
Mexico	27.4	2	1.9	89.5	2.43
Nicaragua	23.1	1.6	3.5	85.6	1.96
Panama	22.5	1.8	5.8	81.3	1.86
Paraguay	25	2.2	5.5	75.4	3.15
Peru	22.1	1.7	5.2	92.9	2.44
Uruguay	38.2	2.7	8.8	68.4	0.98
Venezuela	27.8	1.4	4.9	74.6	0.97

Source: IADB (2006)

Figure 1: Two-dimensional MDS representation of 18 Latin American legislatures

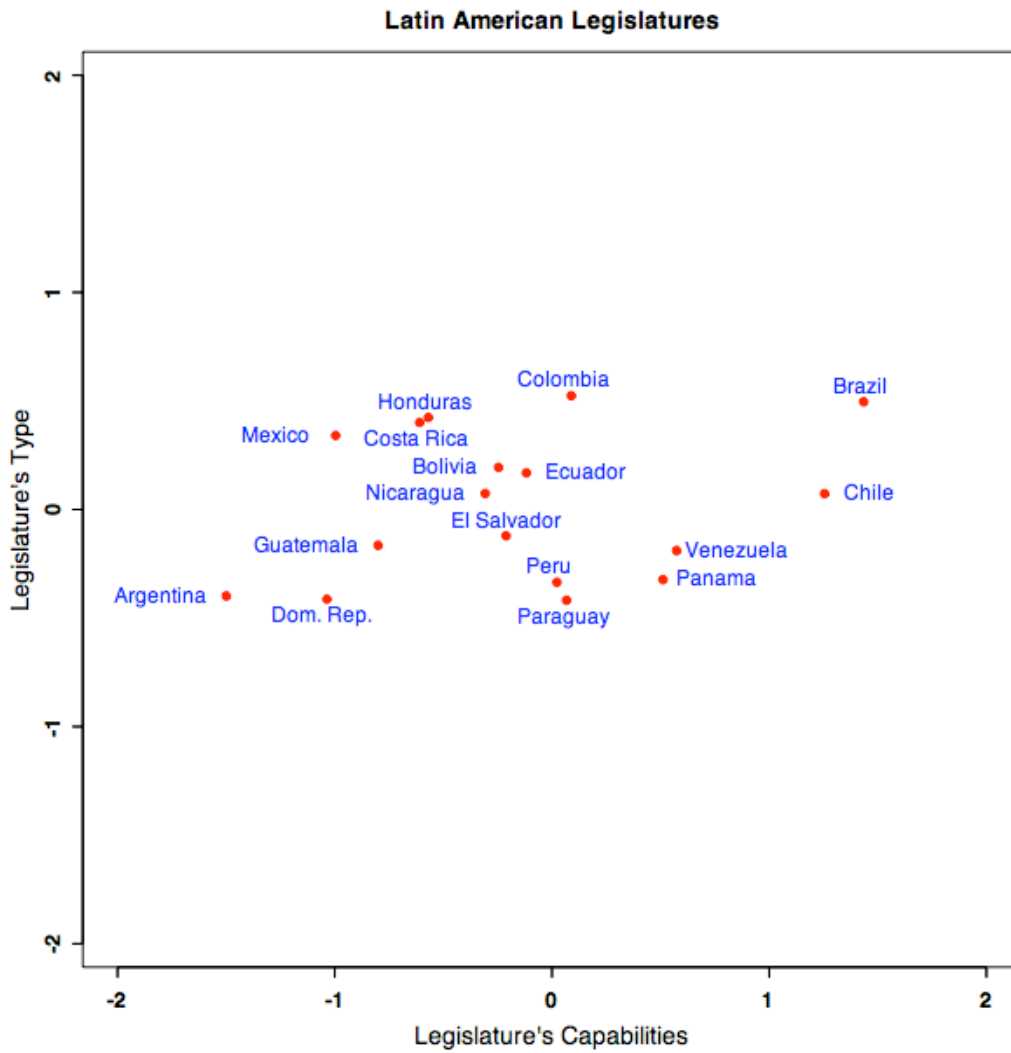


Figure 2: Shepard diagram for MDS solution in shown in Figure 1

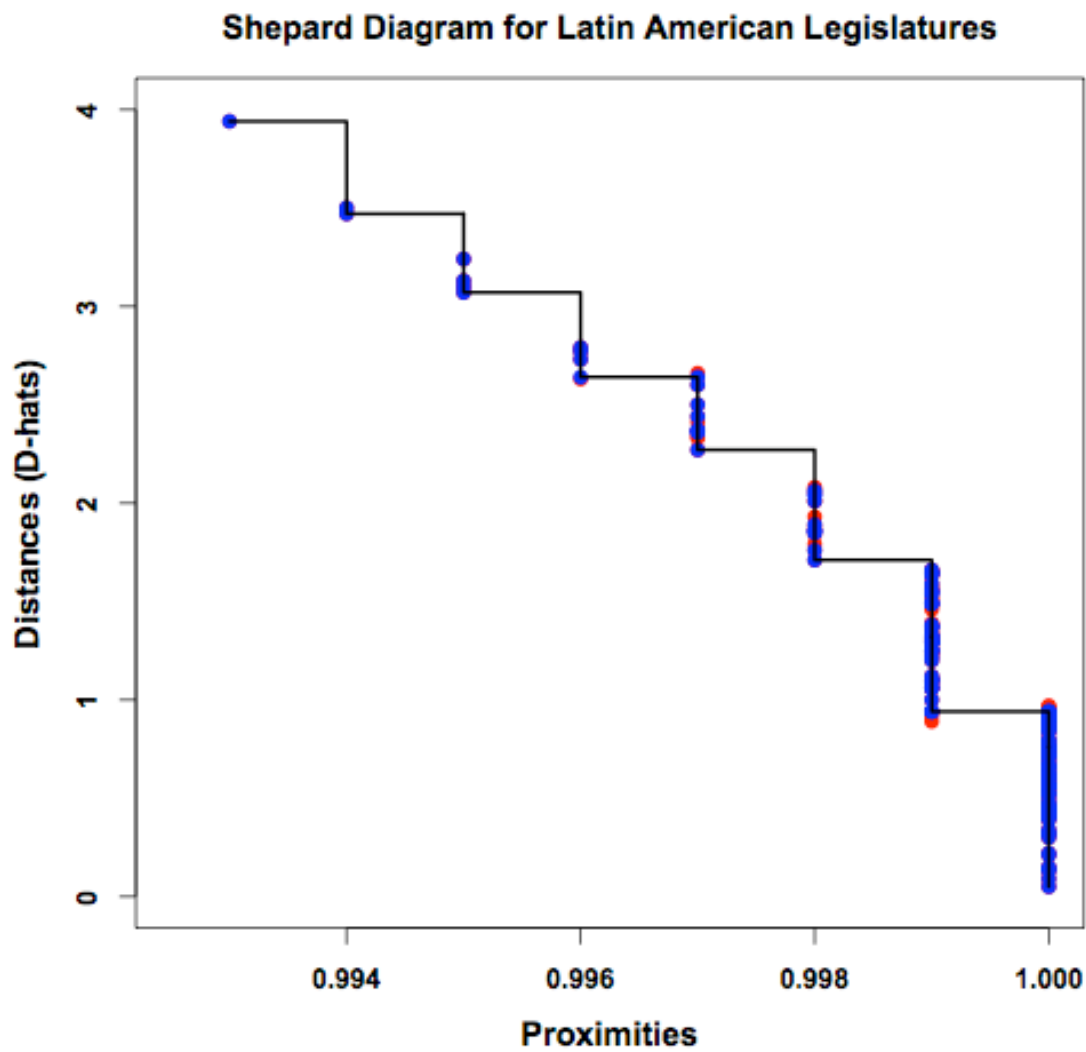


Figure 3.a.: Comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and IPIL values

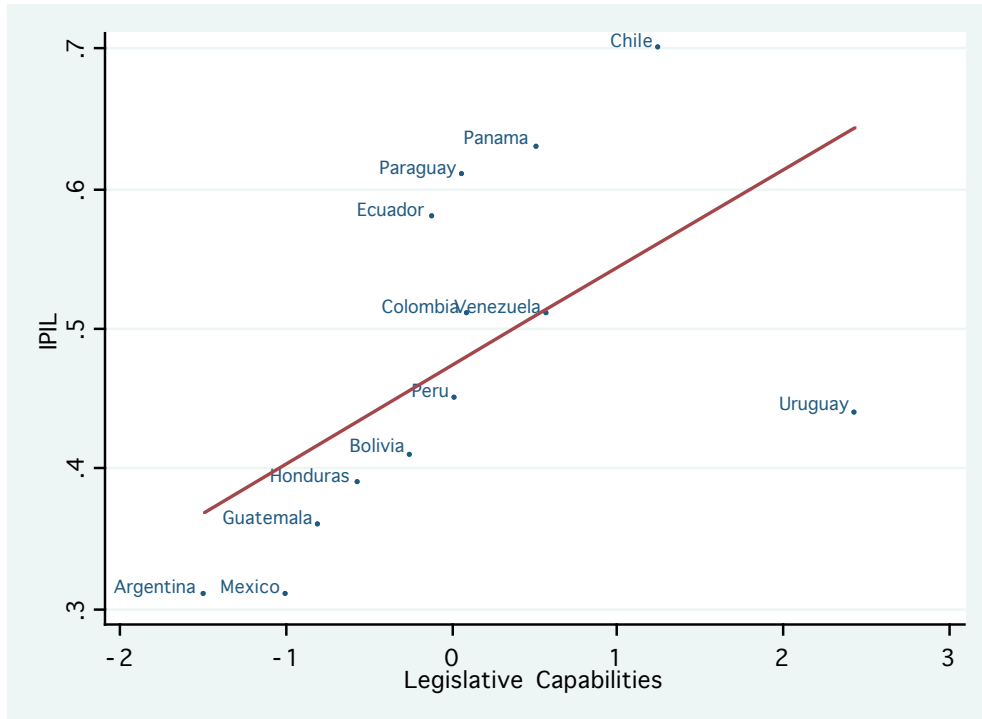


Figure 3.b.: Comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and PPI values

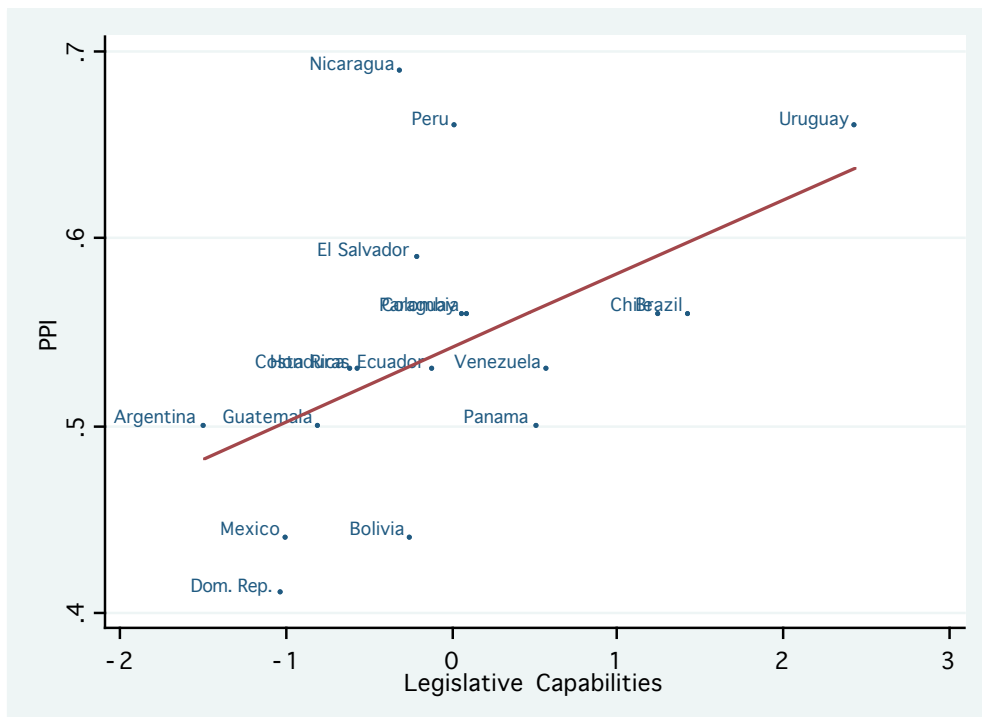


Figure 4.a.: Comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and GNI per capita

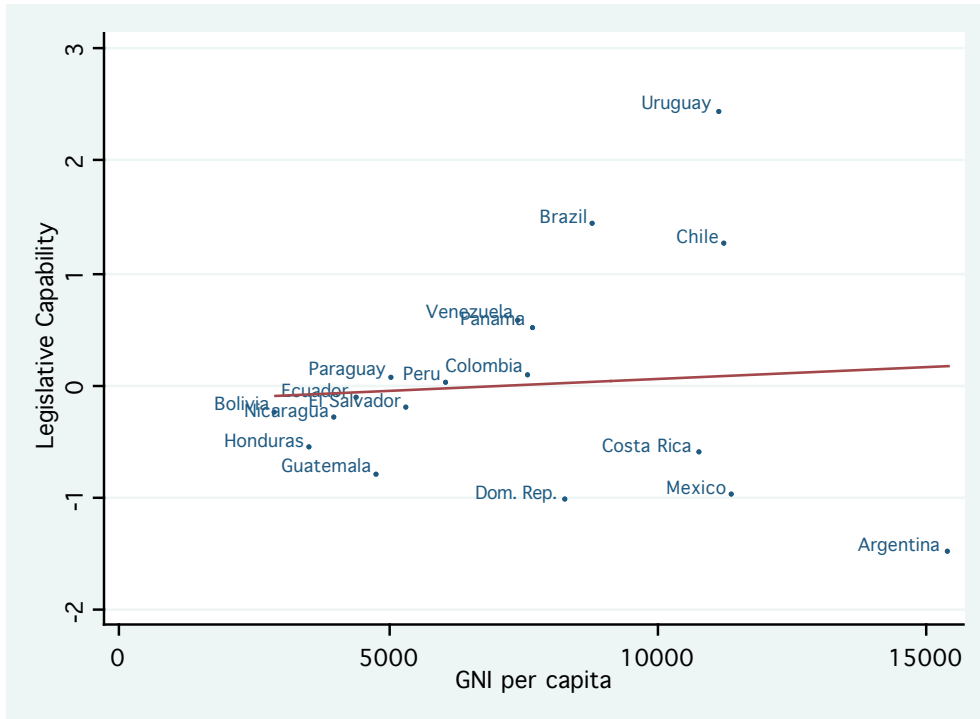


Figure 4.b.: Comparison between the MDS scores (first dimension) and Personal Vote

