

PRESIDENTIAL CRISES AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY
IN LATIN AMERICA (1990-1997)

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In just five years, between 1992 and 1997, three Latin American presidents have been impeached and a fourth one was asked to resign and investigated by congress. This is a new trend in Latin America, for in previous decades extreme executive-legislative conflict typically ended with military coups. This paper traces the common roots of impeachment crises in Brazil (1992), Venezuela (1992-1993), Colombia (1994-1996), and Ecuador (1997). After a historical survey of the cases, the paper shows that some common elements have been present in all crises: media scandals, public outrage against the executive, and a hostile legislative coalition. Examples from Argentina and Perú in the 1990s are used to contrast this hypothesis. The relevance of this trend for new democracies is discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the wave of democratization that has benefited the region since the 1980s, during the last five years Latin American countries have shown important signs of political instability rooted in executive-legislative confrontation. Between 1992 and 1997, two presidents attempted *autogolpes* – in one case successfully -- three presidents were impeached, and another one was threatened with impeachment. Although extreme executive-legislative conflict has been common in previous decades, the 1990s have offered a new pattern of resolution. In previous decades, most constitutional crises were solved through military coups -- imposing either short-term, moderating interventions (Stepan 1971), or long-term, bureaucratic authoritarian regimes (Collier 1979, O'Donnell 1988). In the 1990s, this model has faded away and crises have been solved through self-coups (where the president forced the dissolution of the legislature) or through impeachment (where congress dethroned the executive).

Although self-coups have attracted much scholarly attention (e.g., Ferrero Costa 1993, McClintock 1993, Villagrán 1993, Cameron 1994, 1997, Kenney 1996, 1998) impeachment crises have remained almost ignored. In this paper I trace the common origins of impeachment in the 1990s. The first part of the paper presents the historical facts behind the crises in Brazil (1992), Venezuela (1993), Colombia (1996) and Ecuador (1997). In the rest of the paper I explore the common causes behind these events. I claim that impeachment crises have shared a common background of media scandals, public outrage against the government, and weak legislative support for the president. I use the first term of Carlos Menem (1989-1995) in Argentina, and the Peruvian crisis of December 1991 (that preceded the 1992 coup) as “control cases”. In Argentina, presidential crisis did not emerge despite strong similarities with the other four cases. In Perú, Congress attempted to charge against the president with no success. The conclusions explore the significance of impeachment crises for democracy.

IMPEACHMENT CRISES IN THE 1990S

Impeachment crises take place when an adverse legislative coalition asks for the resignation of the president, and seeks for a legal way to dissolve an elected government. In parliamentary systems this would be achieved through a vote of non-confidence, but in presidential regimes this typically means a major constitutional crisis. Indicators of this situation are not only the public statements of congressional leaders, but also – and essentially – the formation of special oversight committees to investigate the president, and treatment on the floor of declarations against the executive.

In contrast to *autogolpes*, recent impeachment crises have not compromised democracy. In Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela, presidents were ousted from power without direct military intervention. In Colombia, president Samper faced a likely impeachment but was protected by his party in congress. In this section, I briefly review the historical facts behind the four crises and what I consider some of the most interesting interpretations of such cases. Some of explanations emphasize institutional factors, others focus on structural forces. Some of them concentrate on the actors' strategies, others on macro-historical trends. All interpretations, however, share a common trait: they rely on case studies.

Brazil: Weak Institutions and an Isolated President

The youngest president in Brazilian history, Fernando Collor de Mello won in 1989 the first direct presidential election Brazil had seen in 29 years. Governor of the poor state of Alagoas, Collor was backed by his own party, the tiny *Partido da Reconstrução Nacional* (PRN). Running on an anti-political establishment platform, supported by the largest national TV network, and perceived by many as the only alternative to the leftist PT candidate, Inacio “Lula” da Silva, Collor obtained 30.5% of the vote in the first round, and 53% of the vote in the runoff election.

The administration was immediately forced to face the challenge of inflation that reached a monthly rate of 84 percent during March 1990. Immediately after taking office, the government introduced the first “Collor Plan.” In order to reduce liquidity, the plan changed the currency and froze around 80 percent of the country’s savings (Bresser Pereira 1991, 18). Unable to control inflation, the plan moved into more “orthodox” policies in May, and was finally replaced by the “Collor II” plan in January 1991. Still lacking visible success, the minister of the Economy resigned five months later.

On May 13, 1992, the president’s brother, Pedro, accused Collor’s campaign manager, Paulo César Farias, of funneling corruption money into ghost companies established in foreign countries. Two weeks later, Pedro told the journal *Veja* that Farias was managing a corruption network for the President. Fernando Collor denied the accusations, while the police started to investigate Farias’ business. In early June, Congress created a bicameral committee to examine the accusations. Soon, the committee realized that Farias had routed 6.5 million dollars to Collor’s (and his cronies’) bank accounts. On August 11, 1992, the Cabinet virtually withdrew its support for the President.

By the end of August, the congressional committee finished its report and civil society leaders requested Collor’s impeachment. On September 29, the Chamber of Deputies approved -- on a 441-38 vote -- the impeachment by the Senate and suspended Collor from office for a period of six months (Lins da Silva 1993, 126). Three months later, the Senate voted 73-8 to oust Collor and authorized his prosecution on 22 charges of corruption. The President, anticipating the decision, presented his resignation.

How come a president backed by 35 million votes was so easily impeached? Weyland (1993) has proposed a “political interpretation” of the Brazilian crisis, claiming that the very factors that helped Collor to become president were the ones that ultimately sealed his faith. In his view, “Collor’s fall was intimately connected to his dramatic rise in 1989” (Weyland 1993, 3). Collor de Mello came to power as an anti-establishment politician with no commitment to any major political structure. Once in power, the President built an isolated command in order to: (a) preserve his autonomy vis a vis interest groups, and (b) and centralize power in his personal office instead of building a stable, but costly, legislative coalition.

According to Weyland, two consequences followed from this strategy. First, Collor and his team carved an exclusive niche for corruption. Political isolation made traditional lobbying channels ineffective. In order to influence policymaking, corporations and interest groups were now forced to deal with Collor’s personal operatives headed by PC Farias. Second, isolation made impossible the formation of a dominant center-right party, or even the emergence of a solid legislative coalition beyond the uncertain support of the PFL. This failure deprived Collor of a strong political structure able to contain the collapse of his government once the scandal was triggered.

The effects of political isolation were joined by a changing political culture at the mass level. In contrast to previous decades, Brazilians had come to reject the idea that the president can be above the law. At the verge of municipal elections, popular demonstrations against Collor proved to politicians that the president should be ousted from power (Weyland 1993, 20-25).

After holding several interviews with Brazilian politicians in the critical months of 1992, Flynn (1992) “mapped” the Brazilian crisis as the result of three factors: unfortunate institutional arrangements, an electorate who had been sensitive to a populist campaign, and the explosive mixture of betrayal and inefficiency of the Collor administration. Flynn began by noting that politicians have criticized the presidential constitution that had allowed Collor’s “imperial” style, an electoral system that weakened political parties and created disproportionality in the representation of states, and campaign laws that were unable to prevent corruption and political opportunism. In addition, the mostly young, mostly poor, and mostly illiterate Brazilian electorate, deeply disenchanted with politics and traditional politicians, had been open to the anti-establishment appeals of the Collor camp, and finally seduced by its marketing strategy. Last but not least, the Collor administration had been unable to govern. The PRN never surpassed a meager 10% of the seats in the Low Chamber, and was unable to forge a broad legislative coalition. The administration turned to *Medidas Provisórias* (temporary decree powers) to implement public policy, and yet it was unable to stop inflation, foster a widespread privatization plan, or deliver the modernizing economic program it has promised.

Venezuela: the Collapse of Partyarchy

Carlos Andrés Pérez won the 1988 elections with 53% of the vote. Pérez was an experienced leader of the powerful Acción Democrática (AD) party, and had been already president of the country between 1973 and 1977. During his first term in office, the oil boom helped raising living standards in Venezuela and the Pérez administration followed a populist model nationalizing the production of iron and oil, expanding the role of the public sector, and denouncing multinational corporations and international financial institutions. Pérez program for his second term, however, was radically different. Early in his “honeymoon” he announced an economic reform package that included an increase in the prices of gasoline. Honeymoon ended soon, for mass reaction against the increase in the price of public transportation and scarcity of basic foodstuffs adopted a violent character. On February 27 1989, riots erupted in the city of Caracas causing more than 300 deaths.

Three years later, in February of 1992, a group of young Army officers attempted a coup d’etat. After the situation was controlled, the former president (and reputed founder of the COPEI party) Rafael Caldera gave a speech in congress condemning the military action but also blaming Pérez for his unpopular policies. A second coup attempt was carried out by Navy and Air Force officers in November of that year. The coup failed again, but Pérez administration was under siege. According to some observers (Rey 1993, 101-112, Rodríguez-Valdés 1993) alternative institutional ways of dethroning Pérez were explored in those days. Some politicians called for constitutional reform in order to shorten the presidential term. In October 1992, the Senate voted to hold a plebiscite on the permanence of Pérez in office, but the bill was killed in the Chamber of Deputies (Kornblith 1998). At that point, important opinion leaders started to call for the resignation of the president.

In November of 1992, 19 days before the second coup attempt, the press began to publish stories about the unknown destiny of more than 17 million dollars earmarked as “secret security funds” for the Ministry of Interior. According to the reports, the money (250 million Bolívares) had been converted to dollars using the Preferential Exchange Regime (RECAD), and routed to the president’s office. In the verge of scandal, the Presidency refused to provide any information claiming national security reasons, and the oversight committee (*Comisión de Contraloría*) of the lower Chamber created a special sub-committee to investigate the lack of the funds. On March 11, 1993, the Prosecutor-General (*Fiscal General de la República*) asked the Supreme Court to evaluate the merit of the case in order to prosecute the President.

On May 20th, the Court declared the case merited further investigation. The next day the Senate suspended Pérez from office on a temporary basis, and authorized the Judiciary to prosecute the President. In late August, a joint session of Congress removed Pérez from office and named Ramón J. Velásquez to fill in for the rest of the term.

Explanations of the Venezuelan crisis typically focus on the collapse of the “Petro-state” with a resulting decline in living standards and the dissolution of the old system of two-party dominance and elite conciliation. In such accounts, the ousting of Carlos Andrés Pérez appears as a mere episode –although a critical one-- in this historical chain. In an early attempt to understand the Venezuelan crisis, Rey (1993) presented institutional conflict as the manifestation of a deeper “global legitimacy crisis of the social and political order in Venezuela, that, for many reasons (...) has focused on criticism against the person of President Carlos Andrés Pérez.” (Rey 1993, 72; see also Crisp, Levine and Rey 1994). In Rey’s perspective, the crisis of the Venezuelan economy that was driving down living standards had created widespread frustration among the population. “The decline in average real income of the wage and salaries of Venezuelan workers, which took place during the 1980s, has no match in all Venezuelan history, and it has been accurately said that it is only comparable in international terms with the impact of the Great Depression in the United States and Europe” (Rey 1993, 77). On top of this frustration, Rey argued, President Pérez added betrayal. Voters had supported his candidacy because they saw him as an alternative to the neoliberal program sponsored by the COPEI candidate, and because Pérez was himself associated with the good old times of prosperity, and nationalist economic policy. Immediately after taking office, however, Pérez announced a strict adjustment program.

Collapsing living conditions and presidential betrayal were joined, according to Rey’s account, by institutional failure. The AD elite failed to provide an alternative to Pérez’s unpopular program, but also failed to mobilize mass support for it. In this sense, Rey claims, the *Adecos* -- and to some extent all parliamentary parties -- “abdicated” from their political responsibilities. Military rebels attempted to fill this vacuum in February and November of 1992, until the corruption charges gave Congress an excuse to regain control and oust Pérez from power.

The causal story told by Rey depicts a crisis of legitimacy triggered by economic decline and fueled by presidential betrayal (plus isolation), and institutional failure -- or abdication. In this context, the presidential crisis of 1993 was just the tip of the iceberg, the manifestation of a problem with deeper roots. This insight is also present in Michael Coppedge’s analysis of the Venezuelan problem. According to Coppedge (1994), the ousting of President Pérez was an indicator of the ongoing collapse of the Venezuelan governability formula. Since the late 1960s, Coppedge has argued, the regime had been organized as a *partyarchy*. This formula assigned a central role to the two major parties -- led by the political *adecopeyano* establishment -- that

managed to sustain inclusive patterns of representation and electoral competition, strong party discipline, consensus policymaking, and wide relationships between parties and interest groups.

By the 1980s, however, the formula started to crumble under the pressure of economic decline – which eroded the capacity of parties to control civil society. In a context of increasing corruption, ossified political structures with dated platforms were unable to meet the new challenges. The sequence leading to impeachment thus was the ultimate manifestation of this inability of Venezuelan institutions to adapt. Against popular expectations, Pérez imposed harsh economic measures that compromised his mass support. This weakness paved the way to the later coup attempts in 1992, and created a sense of vacuum that ultimately fostered his impeachment. Impeachment became, from this perspective, the first stage in the search for a democratic alternative for the old governability formula (Coppedge 1994, 51).

Colombia: The Conspiracy of the Reformists?

President Ernesto Samper narrowly defeated the conservative candidate Andrés Pastrana with 50.6 percent of the vote in the runoff election on June 19 1994. Immediately after the election, some tapes came to light relating Samper's campaign to contributions made by the drug lords. In late June, another tape would link Samper's campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina, to the Cali cartel. The origin of the tapes was unknown, although most people believed that the DEA was using them to put pressure on the Colombian government¹. Later on that year, Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso, collected further evidence implicating Samper's campaign treasurer.

On July 26, 1995 Santiago Medina was arrested and confessed he had received campaign contributions from the drug lords. In late June, the prosecutor asked the Supreme Court to investigate the Minister of defense and former campaign manager, Fernando Botero. In a preemptive move, Samper himself requested the congress to investigate the accusations. Botero resigned in the first week of August and was prosecuted later on, while some journalists and political leaders claimed that Samper should be investigated too. On December 14, 1995 the congressional oversight committee that investigated the case presented a 74-page report stating that the evidence presented by Medina was inconclusive. The committee, packed with members of Samper's *Partido Liberal* recommended to drop the affair. Polls showed that most people believed Samper to be guilty, but did not consider the scandal outrageous enough to justify an impeachment (*The Economist*, September 2, 1995, 38).

An earthquake came in January, when Fernando Botero gave a TV interview from prison and declared that Samper knew about the campaign funds. If any money had been taken from the drug lords, Samper answered, it was without his knowledge. Liberals claimed that the country was undergoing a "governability crisis". In a televised speech in late March, the president discussed alternative solutions to the crisis: referendum, government of national unity, holding presidential elections in advance. In May, however, the congressional oversight committee voted 10-3 in favor of clearing Samper. Despite the protests of the Conservatives (Victoria 1997) and of important civil society leaders (*Comisión Ciudadana* 1997) the president had built an important shield in congress. On June 12, 1996, the House of Representatives voted 111-43 in favor of clearing the president.

According to López Caballero (1997) the crisis in Colombia was the result of a latent conflict between two social coalitions: one confronting the emergent neo-liberal model, and the

other one pushing for economic (and social) reform. López Caballero has presented this as an ongoing battle between the “real” country and the proponents of a “New Colombia”. In his view, the crusades for the New Colombia are typically well-educated citizens (often formed in foreign universities) who defend neo-liberal policies, disdain traditional politics as clientelistic and corrupt, disregard parties and institutions (since they understand politics purely as a matter of spin control), and hold a “pragmatic” approach to politics that justifies any means in order to end with the “old Colombia”. This social coalition made the social base for César Gaviria’s economic policy and the constitutional reform of 1991, and saw in the Samper administration an obstacle for the consolidation of the new socio-economic model. With the support of powerful media (including *Semana* and *El Tiempo*) and the American intelligence, they would have pushed scandal in order to force impeachment. The plan, however, failed due to the lack of direct proof involving Samper. In López Caballero’s account, the crisis is thus the result of deeper political cleavages: “what has truly motivated and triggered the trials and scandals is not a desire for correcting the [political] system, or for purifying it from its failures, but a desire to take it back over” (López Caballero 1997, 155) .

Ecuador: the Populist Legacy

In July 1996, the *Roldosista* candidate, Abdalá Bucaram, won the second-round presidential election with 54.5% of the vote. In the May election, the PSC (*Partido Social Cristiano*) candidate Jaime Nebot had narrowly defeated Bucaram in the first round, with 27.4% of the vote against Bucaram’s 25.5. Bucaram’s victory was one of the few known examples in a majority runoff electoral system where the winner of the first round (who would be the elected president under a plurality system) had been defeated in the second round. A similar situation had taken place in Ecuador in 1984, when Rodrigo Borja narrowly defeated in the first round León Febres Cordero (28.7 to 27.2%), who became president in the runoff election. The other cases of outcome inversion in Latin America had been the election of presidents Fujimori of Perú in 1990, Serrano of Guatemala in 1991, and Fernández of the Dominican Republic in 1996². Not a good prospect in terms of executive-legislative relations.

Despite the populist overtones of his campaign, and his attacks against the “oligarchy”, Bucaram soon proposed a neoliberal economic plan, designed by former economic minister of Argentina, Domingo Cavallo. In the meantime, the press from Quito denounced the flamboyant style of the president and widespread corruption in the administration.

In response to the economic measures, some demonstrators began to protest in early January against the raises in transportation and natural gas. An alliance of trade unions and social movements (the *Frente Patriótico*) called for a general strike on February the 5th, 1997. Since mid-January, notable politicians and former presidents like Rodrigo Borja and Oswaldo Hurtado, began to call for the resignation of the president (Carrión 1997, 139). With other civic organizations announcing they would join the strike, the US ambassador, Leslie Alexander, denounced on January 29 “rampant corruption” in the customs service. The demonstrations of February 5 ended up with a mobilization in front of the congress that demanded the impeachment of the president. After some negotiations, the legislature decided to declare Bucaram “insane” and named the speaker, Fabián Alarcón, as temporary president. Bucaram rejected the decision as a coup, while the vice-president Rosalía Arteaga declared that she was supposed to be the legal successor of Bucaram in case of impeachment. After some mediation of

the military, Arteaga accepted to remain in power for two days and then allowed the congress to name Alarcón as the new president, while Bucaram fled to exile in Panamá.

In the case of Ecuador, interpretations of the crisis have been typically framed in the context of the populist tradition in the country. A sharp observer of Ecuadorian politics points out that: “Undoubtedly, populism has been the most important political phenomenon in contemporary Ecuadorian History” (de la Torre 1997, 12). According to this author, the populist tradition, inaugurated by the five-times president José María Velasco Ibarra in the 1930s, has permeated much of the political life of the country. In his ethnographic study of the “electoral rituals and characters” of the Ecuadorian runoff election of 1996, de la Torre (1996) has shown that Bucaram, clearly invoked a populist rhetoric and style of mobilization. This meant two important consequences for the emergence of the crisis. The first one was that Bucaram came to power with a vulgar political style and discourse against the oligarchy that terrorized traditional elites (de la Torre 1996, 1997). His candidacy was supported by the emergent bourgeoisie from Guayaquil that, despite its rising economic power, had not achieved social recognition among traditional families and was seen with suspicion (de la Torre 1996, Paredes 1997). Second, popular support for Bucaram was provided by volatile followers. For many authors, Bucaram relied on clientelistic networks, or received rational but *negative* support from low class sectors that saw him as a weapon to defeat the elite incarnated in Jaime Nebot (de la Torre 1996, 58-59, 72). Negative support was amplified the majority runoff presidential system that encouraged voters to vote against the PSC candidate in the second round (Pachano 1997).

These two attributes (isolation from traditional elites and volatile support) were rooted in the populist nature of the winning candidate, and would turn out to be the ultimate cause of his fall. Despite Bucaram’s neoliberal agenda, the *patricios* feared that the privatization program would be manipulated to advance the interests of the new elite (mostly of Lebanese origins) that had supported Bucaram during the campaign (Paredes 1997, Pachano 1997). For most voters, on the other hand, the economic policy clashed with the populist overtones of the campaign. The reduction of subsidies threatened to erode real income in the short run and alienated much popular support (Luna Tamayo 1997, Acosta 1997). This dual isolation of Bucaram was, observers insist, deepened by a flamboyant and nepotistic style of government. In this context, the mobilization of early February emerged as a unique opportunity to terminate the Bucaram administration. Both, elites and masses supported the move, creating strong incentives for legislators to oust the president.

The previous pages outline important differences but also interesting similarities across impeachment crises. Crises have shared a common background of media scandals, the pressures of economic adjustment, and presidents striving to control hostile legislatures. Unfortunately, we lack a comparative perspective to deal with presidential impeachment in the 1990s. Historical interpretations have sought to make sense of presidential crises within each national context and thus have presented very dissimilar historical paths leading to very similar outcomes. We may be tempted to conclude that, as Michael Coppedge has sharply pointed out, “every country *is* unique, history never repeats itself *exactly*, and every event is the product of a long and densely tangled chain of causation stretching back to the beginning of time” (Coppedge 1997, 3). The question, however, is whether different historical paths may create, or *converge into*, similar conditions operating in the short-run. In the following sections I attempt to show that this has been the case.

PROXIMATE CAUSES OF IMPEACHMENT CRISES

What “thick” case-study interpretations have missed, unfortunately, is a common pattern underlying all impeachment crises in the 1990s. To some extent, all crises have been shaped by three common elements. First, media scandals have put into question the moral authority of the president and his or her team to rule the country. Second, a social coalition typically involving elites and masses has charged against the president, eroding his capacity of survival. The third element has been the formation of an anti-president coalition in Congress. Strictly speaking, it was not until this stage that the institutional crisis truly broke.

The ways in which these three proximate causes have been articulated has shaped the resolution of the crises. As I show later in this paper, the resolution phase—when congress decided whether to impeach the president or to drop the case—has been highly dependent on the developments during the previous phases.

Political Scandal

Historical accounts of recent impeachment crises show important commonalities, the most visible of them being the recurrent presence of media scandals. By scandal I refer to a process by which the press exposes questionable acts carried out by the president or his/her close collaborators. According to this definition, scandal is triggered every time the mass media discloses information that puts in question the moral authority of the president and his or her team to rule the country.

This definition is close to Waisbord’s (1994, 21) who defines scandals “as news events, as media stories unmasking formerly secret political pécadillos.” Although most scandals are related to money (bribes, campaign funds, manipulations of the budget and so on), any socially outrageous behavior has some potential to feed scandal. Political scandal is a necessary component of impeachment crises because it allows Congress to call for the resignation of the president. Even if the crisis is rooted in deeper causes—as it was in the cases of Carlos Andrés Pérez or Abdalá Bucaram, for instance—legislators need scandal to justify the accusation of the chief executive.

To allow for a congressional accusation of the president, scandal must expose an illegal act in which the chief executive seems to be involved personally. Unless the president is personally related to a typified crime, legislators will be in a weak position to call for impeachment. In this context, however, the component of illegality is defined politically rather than in legal terms. The problem is not whether a crime can be proved in court, but rather if public opinion *believes* that the president was involved in a crime. Discussing the accusations against Carlos Andrés Pérez, several members of the Venezuelan elite told me that this had been “a political trial”—meaning that a typified crime had never been proved. The same claim has been made in the case of Samper (López Caballero 1996). In fact, the very key of the process is that accusations against the president are political, not judicial, in nature. Not surprisingly, the label “juicio político” is used in Spanish as the legal term for impeachment.

The conditions of *involvement of the president* and *illegality* create three types of scandal. The first type takes place when the president him or herself is linked to an illegal operation that justifies impeachment. This pattern, best reflected by the Watergate scandal in the US, is the most dangerous form of scandal. The second type is one in which presidential aides are linked to

illegal affairs (e.g., corruption, abuse of power), but a connection to the president can hardly be traced. Even if the president remains “clean”, a large number of scandals of the second type tend to suggest that he or she is sponsoring a team of crooks, and may erode presidential authority. The third form of scandal takes place when the president consistently shows an outrageous behavior (political, sexual, or of any other kind) that falls short from being a typified crime. In this case, even if there is a large number of events pointing to the president, there is no clear justification for impeachment – even if most legislators would like to dissolve the government.

Legislators investigating the Executive confront two basic problems. The first one is to what extent it is possible to “involve” the President in the scandal--another problem is to what extent is it *convenient* to involve the president, but this is related to the question of legislative support that I shall discuss later. The second one is how to charge against the executive when the act is not an “obvious” crime. In other terms, the problem many times is how to transform scandals of the second and third types into scandals of the first type.

Involving the President. Typically, investigations began by involving some distant collaborators of the president. As the issue becomes more and more relevant in the public eye, some legislators and public officials realize that the future of their careers may depend on this opportunity and take advantage of media attention to gain spin for their investigation. Accusations, in turn, move upwards in the ladder of power when prosecuted, low-rank officials start to involve their bosses. A major breakthrough usually comes when an insider names the president. This is the peak of the “feeding frenzy” and at this point it is very unlikely that a presidential crisis can be avoided.

The cases of Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil seem to fit this pattern. In Colombia, accusations against Samper were published early in his administration by the conservative press, but it was not until the Prosecutor-General Alfonso Valdivieso arrested Samper’s former campaign treasurer that the scandal took off. The confession of Santiago Medina involving high-rank officials and the later statements of former minister Fernando Botero involving Samper put the president against the ropes. In Venezuela, the process started in November 1989, when journalists Andrés Galdo and José Vicente Rangel disclosed that the Pérez administration had withdrawn funds from a secret account in the Ministry of Interior and multiplied the money using a preferential exchange rate. The case gained spin when the Chamber of Deputies formed a special oversight committee, and officials from the ministry of Interior and Miraflores (the President’s office) began to involve higher-rank politicians (La Roche 1993). In January 1993, former attorney general (*procurador general*) Nelson Socorro linked President Pérez with the story and was followed a few weeks later by the former Minister of Interior, Alejandro Izaguirre, who admitted that the president had commanded the operation. The Prosecutor-General Jorge Escovar-Salom completed the investigation and asked the Supreme Court to initiate the impeachment process. In Brazil, the scandal broke when Pedro, the president’s brother, denounced to the journal *Veja* that a broad corruption network was commanded by Collor’s former campaign manager. Because Pedro spoke on the record, the story was highly credible from the start. The work of the police and the Parliamentary Investigative Committee unveiled additional proof in later months.

In some cases, like the Bucaram or the Menem administrations, close collaborators of the president have been involved in scandals but the congress failed to investigate the connection to the President’s Office. Instead of being affected by one, highly investigated event, the Bucaram administration was permanently eroded by a background of minor scandals involving the president, his family and his closest collaborators. Like Pérez, Bucaram was accused by the press of stealing secret funds of the presidency (Carrión 1997, 127). Business people complained that –

like in Collor's Brazil -- public officials requested a "party-tax" (usually a 10% of the transaction devoted to the PRE) to release any bureaucratic authorization or service (Rodríguez Vicéns 1997, 40, 47, 67). In addition, the customs was depicted as highly corrupt structure. Assigned to the customs service, Bucaram's young son offered a boisterous party to celebrate his first million dollars. The minister of education, Sandra Correa, was accused by the press of plagiarizing her doctoral dissertation. In this case, it was not the formal investigation carried out by state institutions (judiciary, prosecutors, or oversight committees) what put the president against the ropes, but rather a constant background noise of scandal investigated by the press. It was the *number* of scandals, rather than the *burden of proof* what supported the crisis.

Menem started his first administration in 1989, in the midst of a hyperinflationary process. Like Collor, he had gained executive experience as governor of a poor province (La Rioja). Like Pérez and Samper, he enjoyed the support of a traditional party (the *Partido Justicialista*) with a large delegation in congress. Like Bucaram, he came to power with a populist discourse just to implement a neoliberal program. Like all of them, his administration was assaulted by scandal. Despite this recurrent pattern, Menem was never deeply affected by scandal, and he won reelection in 1995. Writing at the end of Menem's first term, Silvio Waisbord noticed that

The long list of political scandals includes the following highly publicized cases. "Swiftgate," exploded after the daily *Página/12* published a letter from Terence Todman, US Ambassador in Argentina, to the Menem administration complaining that government officials "demanded 'substantial payments' from the Swift-Armour meatpacking firm before it could import machinery" (...) "Yomagate" involved president's Menem former appointments secretary (and former sister-in-law) Amira Yoma, her husband, and other government officials in drug money laundering operations. "Milkgate" implicated one of the president's former closest personal assistants in the selling of spoiled milk to a government-sponsored children's program. Finally, "Saadigate" erupted as members of the administration of former Governor Ramón Saadi, the heir of the family that has controlled the northwestern province of Catamarca in a feudal style for the last 40 years, were charged with hiding and destroying evidence that implicated local politicians in the murder of a high school student (Waisbord 1994, 20)

Scandal without crime? The second problem is how to deal with scandals of the third type, that is, when the president is clearly involved but there is not alleged crime. This is, of course, the weakest position for legislators promoting impeachment. This situation is well illustrated by the examples of (again) Abdalá Bucaram and Alberto Fujimori. In addition to charges of corruption, Bucaram and some of his close collaborators showed a pattern of behavior that many politicians and opinion leaders considered overtly outrageous. Bucaram would call his critics "donkeys" or use vulgar language to refer to his adversaries. Ministers and advisers would threaten to "crush" reputed journalists or call them "lunatics" (Carrión 1997). In this sense, the Bucaram administration presents a risky combination of repeated scandals involving close collaborators plus a pattern of behavior considered "unacceptable" by many political leaders.

A similar pattern of offensive behavior was present during the first administration of Alberto Fujimori in Perú (1990-1992). In this case, however, the president was not clearly linked to an illegal operation like in Brazil, Colombia or Venezuela. There were, for sure, some

corruption scandals involving his team, but this was not a recurrent pattern like in Argentina. The administration suffered when the president's wife, Susana, denounced to the press that clothing donated for the poor by Japan had been traded by Fujimori's relatives. But the commission that was to investigate the case was dissolved after the self-coup in 1992 (McClintock 1993, 114). In addition, during 1991 a much bolder corruption scandal involving former president Alan García attracted public concern.

Somewhat like Bucaram, however, Fujimori displayed a consistent pattern of behavior that was outrageous for important sectors of the political elite. Many Peruvian leaders were offended by Fujimori's "arrogance towards political leaders, including his own advisers, [and] his vitriolic slander of civilian institutions" (McClintock 1993, 114). The president confronted opposition politicians, denounced "sterile parliamentarism," criticized the judiciary, and suggested that congress had to be dissolved. This kind of behavior triggered a spiral of conflict. Congress members used Fujimori's Japanese origins to dispute the "true" nationality of the president and claimed that his statements put in question his "moral capacity" to rule. With mounting executive-legislative conflict, Fujimori declared in December of 1991 that Congress was under the influence of money laundering (Kenney 1998, chapter 6). Congress reacted sharply against this offense, and threatened to declare the presidency "vacant". This pattern of scandal, however, appeared to be ineffectual because there was no illegal act compromising the position of the president or his team, and the offense was narrowly targeted to congress members and other officials. It is hard to believe that the president's actions – no matter how disgusting -- were highly offensive for most citizens.

The examples of the Fujimori and the Bucaram administrations suggest that scandals of the third type are less instrumental in providing an excuse for impeachment. Because there is no "crime" at stake, the formal mechanism of impeachment cannot be activated. One way to overcome this problem is to target one case uncovered by the press and use the oversight powers of the legislature to dig into it. In-depth investigation of this event thus turns diffuse scandal into a specific case. The problem with this strategy is that it takes time and effort – and technical skills – that impatient legislators may not be willing to invest.

Opposition legislators may also overcome this problem if they are able to find out a "functional equivalent" for impeachment. Some constitutions allow the legislature to pass judgment on the moral or intellectual faculties of the president to rule the country, and this may become a powerful weapon. Peruvian legislators attempted this move in December 1991, with no success. The Senate approved the motion that virtually declared the "moral incapacity" of Fujimori to rule the country, but the declaration was killed that night in the Lower Chamber³. In this case, the "scandal" was weak and rather isolated, and so was the impeachment charge. Legislators were unable to preserve the leadership during the erupting institutional crisis and just a few months later Fujimori dissolved the legislature by force. In Ecuador, in contrast, legislators relied on the background of scandal to declare Bucaram "insane", and then proceeded to vote a provisional president in.

Scandal has been present in every impeachment crisis, but its role has been different across cases. Sometimes (as in the cases of Nixon, Collor, or Samper), Scandal has triggered the crisis, and has been the core of the confrontation with congress that ultimately lead to impeachment. In others (Pérez, Bucaram or Fujimori in 1991), scandal has worked more as an excuse, as a legal justification to oust the president from power, despite the fact that the executive-legislative confrontation had deeper roots. Together with the example of the Menem administration, this fact suggests that scandal may be a necessary, but it is hardly a sufficient

condition for impeachment. This leads us to the discussion of other two factors: public anger and legislative support.

Public Outrage

The second component of impeachment crises has been public mobilization against the president. Public outrage is particularly important because it signals the elite that media scandals are having (or may have) substantive political consequences. Without public outrage, political scandal is nothing but media entertainment. Civic reaction, on the other hand, creates new opportunities for ambitious politicians. It backs the stand of legislators in the opposition and create incentives for defection among legislators in the president's camp. In the case of Ecuador, an observer has pointed out that "without the massive and sustained protests demanding Bucaram's removal, it is unlikely Congress would have impeached him given the questionable constitutionality of its actions." (Selverston 1997, 12). According to Margaret Keck, in Brazil "the size of the demonstrations influenced wavering politicians. Municipal elections were only a month away, and close identification with Collor began to look like political suicide" (Keck 1992, 6).

Because of this reason, "heroic" accounts of presidential crises have depicted a mobilized civil society taking the streets and virtually ousting the corrupt president. This image has been particularly sticky in the case of Ecuador. Rocío Jácome, for instance, has presented the demonstrations of February 5 and 6, 1997, as the action of a cohesive "Ecuadorian social being" in fight against corruption (Jácome 1997, 176), and emphasized the role of the underdog (particularly women and indigenous movements) in this process. Similarly, Luna Tamayo (1997) has claimed that the demonstrations were the "voice of the profound movements" in Ecuadorian society. Following this heroic image, in the conclusion of his memoirs the late Pedro Collor asserted that "it was not me who debunked the president Fernando Collor de Mello. It was the Brazilian society, the congress, the judiciary, businessmen, workers, students, professionals, housewives. The country decided to say enough, to put a stop. It was a lesson on political maturity never seen in any other place -- especially in a country just coming from an authoritarian regime" (Collor de Mello 1993, 282-83).

The very same year Pedro published his book, another "lesson on political maturity" would take place in Venezuela. Describing the events, Ellner (1993, 13-14) would argue that "What has brought the [corruption] issue to such prominence, however, has been the continuous expression of public discontent in local elections, demonstrations, spontaneous unruly protests, and even quiet support for the two abortive coups, whose banner was opposition to corruption in the government and the armed forces" (Ellner 1993, 13-4).

The latter quote suggests that popular manifestations against the president have taken different forms. In Brazil and Colombia, public demonstrations originated in the scandal itself. In Venezuela and Ecuador, on the other hand, public anger was a monster already alive that scandal just fed. Ecuadorian demonstrations against Bucaram's economic plan began in early January of 1997. On January 11, a group of major trade unions and social movements formed the *Frente Patriótico* against the economic program. The Patriotic Front called for a general strike on February 5. During late January civic associations began to support the strike and the public response "snowballed" (Luna Tamayo 1997, 202). Until late January, however, the strike was "just another protest" planned against the economic program. At this point, the US ambassador complained against "rampant corruption" in the administration, and former presidents Borja and

Hurtado started to suggest that Bucaram should resign. Rumors spread out that the demonstrations would seek the ousting of the president, inspiring the support of the middle class⁴. On February 5, more than two million people would join the now called “civic strike”. Here, like in Brazil five years earlier, people dressed in black in signal of national mourning (Ribadeneira 1997).

In the case of Pérez, mobilization against the president long predated the emergence of the specific scandal. Soon after Pérez took office, he announced the adjustment program that triggered the *Caracazo* in February 27-28 of 1989 (Kornblith 1998, chapter 1). The fatal riots made an early impact on the popularity of the president. As Ellner suggests, the two coup attempts that followed in 1992 enjoyed the support of important sectors. On the evening of March 10, 1992, people in Caracas carried out a *cacerolazo* (pan beating) against the government. That night, a leader of COPEI drove around the city to evaluate the level of support for the demonstration. Despite being a member of the main opposition party, he was deeply shocked:

Through all my life, through all my political experience, I had never felt the tension, the aversion, the rancor, frustration and bitterness that was distilled by the walls of every house and building, by every human group I saw and heard that night. I could see how democratic, how homogeneous, and how deep was the feeling of rejection against Carlos Andrés Pérez. I felt the President was definitely hurt. The folk man, the important and reputed man, the dominant, the twice president, the ambitious, the manager of History Pérez had been, was now reduced [in the mind of the people] to a bitter memory and to a controversial and rough reality, for whom Venezuelans felt more irritation and hate every day (La Roche 1993, 150).

As the previous examples suggest, popular outrage preceding specific scandals has been as relevant for presidential crises as particular demonstrations arising from the accusations themselves. When outrage precedes scandal, legislators already know that the president is falling down and media scandal comes as the perfect justification for the formation of a hostile legislative coalition. In the opposite case, manifestations following the scandal *unveil* the political weakness of the president to the members of congress.

At this point, it is important to make a brief mention to the role of policy success in preventing presidential crises. Latin American democracies in the 1990s have been marked by an underlying ground of institutional and policy challenges. Most governments in this period have faced the lasting effects of the “lost decade”, and an inescapable need for economic reform (McCoy and Smith 1994). In some countries, like Colombia or Perú, this challenge has converged with problems of political violence that created even bolder demands for the government. The chances to achieve policy success in this context have been slim, but the few successful governments have enjoyed, because of this reason, a valuable reservoir of public support that was hard to erode through scandal.

Some of the examples discussed above illustrate this factor. By the time he confronted congress, Fujimori was doing important progress towards the reduction of inflation. According to Kenney (1998, 46): “Inflation in 1991 would turn out to be 139 percent, down from 1,722 percent in 1988, 2,775 percent in 1989, and 7,650 percent in 1990. The gross national product would also see a modest growth rate of 2.8 percent in 1991, after rates of decline of -8.4 percent

in 1988, -11.7 in 1989, and -5.4 percent in 1990.”⁵ Similarly, the Menem administration was able to curve hyperinflation from 3,079% in 1989 to 23% in 1992 (Acuña 1994, 30).

On the other hand, presidents like Pérez or Collor were unable to show policy success.⁶ During the first year of the Pérez administration, inflation rose from 35.5 to 81.0 percent. By 1991, the economy was showing important signs of recovery, but two coup attempts in 1992 ended with public expectations of policy success. An opinion poll made by *Consultores 21* in March 1992--after the first coup attempt—showed that 64 percent of respondents believed that the government had already failed. By September of that year, 72% of respondents expected failure. The inflation rate in 1992 was 32%, close to the departure point (Naím 1993, 78).

In Brazil, Collor inherited an inflation rate of 1,322% in 1989. Inflation rose to 2,562 percent in 1990, declined next year, and was bouncing back to around 1,000% in 1992 (Sola 1994, 150, 165). It is clear that the *magnitude* of the inflationary threat was different in Brazil and Venezuela, but the political sense of *failure* was similar. In this context, public opinion was critical of economic adjustment, sensitive to scandal and impatient with the chief executive. In Margaret Keck’s terms,

This is not to say that Collorgate was not about corruption or about equal treatment. But more than these, I think it was about repeatedly raised expectations and about repeated failure and disappointment. Collor presented himself as the proverbial savior, the man on a white horse, who would clean out the corrupt politicians and speak for the marginalized poor. He did none of those things, and worse still, he alienated the middle class, whose standard of living has fallen precipitously over the last few years, by confiscating their savings accounts for 18 months without bringing down inflation. (...) Not only was the government incompetent, it lacked dignity, and people cared. (Keck 1992, 7)

Lying somewhere in between, Samper emerges as a president that was seen by many as “moderating” the pace of neoliberal reform imposed by the Gaviria administration (1990-1994). Samper took office with an inflation of 22.6 percent in 1994, and preserved this relatively low rate throughout his period: 19.5 in 1995, 21.6 in 1996, and 17.7 in 1997 (Banco de la República 1997). The administration was not able to implement effective negotiations with the guerrillas and violence kept rising. Although the police was able to arrest important leaders of the Cali Cartel (what reduced, to some extent, the credibility of the scandal), the US Congress de-certified Colombia for two years in a row. Thus, it is hard to claim that the administration enjoyed great policy success. However, Samper was perceived by many Liberals as the alternative to crude structural adjustment. In this context, public opinion became divided as whether to support the resignation of the president. The result was a society less cohesive against the executive and less prone to mass mobilization. Describing the situation in the midst of the crisis, *The Economist* pointed out that “Colombians do not take the streets readily, as do their neighbors in Venezuela and Brazil. (...) If Mr. Samper’s enemies do not have the wits and power to push him out in the few months after Congress rules on the affair, they may well not do it at all. Most Colombians will shrug their shoulders.” (*The Economist*, June 1 1996, 41)

Building a Legislative Shield

The impact of media scandals in congress is mediated by the capacity of the president to prevent the formation of a hostile legislative coalition. In the previous paragraphs I have emphasized the external factors (namely, public mobilization) that encourage the formation of such a coalition. Here, I emphasize internal characteristics of the parliament that may favor (or condemn) the president. When legislators are, other things equal, very sensitive to scandal, the president is highly exposed – for an impeachment coalition will be easy to form. When, on the other hand, legislators are reluctant to give credit to media scandals, the president is, so to speak, *shielded*.

The legislative shield has several components. The first one is the relationship the president has established with congress and partisan leaders over time. A typical situation behind impeachment crises is one of a president who is trying to implement substantive changes to the status-quo (especially through structural adjustment programs) without the commitment of congress. Presidents feel many times that congress is unable to understand their policy, so they move towards an isolated pattern of policy making. In this context, congressional leaders may “tolerate” the reforms, but they hardly back them. The image of an isolated president who fails to use cabinet nominations in order to form legislative coalitions, turns more and more to technocratic decision-making, and is prone to bypass congress whenever necessary, is very common in accounts of presidential crises.

In reference to Pérez’s closest advisers, Rey (1993, 82) noted that “it appeared as if being a member of the ruling party, rather than being a merit, was an obstacle to join the economy cabinet.” Cynthia McClintock has noted that: “After his first six months in office, almost all of Fujimori’s cabinet members were political independents appointed by Fujimori himself and indebted directly to him” (McClintock 1993, 114). Bucaram was accused of forming a government full of cronies, and of centralizing decision making: “negotiating with a minister was impossible for everything had to go through the hands of the president” wrote Milton Luna Tamayo (1997, 211). Fernando Collor never built a strong center-right coalition in the legislature, and it has been said that “especially in the beginning (...he) deliberately refrained from nominating powerful, able ministers who might have challenged his dominant position” (Weyland 1993, 10).

Second, presidents are more shielded when congressional leaders are potentially involved in the scandal. Personal corruption is prone to trigger impeachment, institutionalized patronage is not. On one hand, legislators have less incentives to foster a presidential crisis when the investigation may harm their own careers too. Calling for impeachment in this situation is opening a Pandora Box. On the other hand, legislators have greater incentives to terminate an administration sustaining a corruption pattern that does not benefit them. Members of congress pay the costs in terms of public image – since public outrage may touch them too – but they do not enjoy the benefits of patronage. In this situation they will seek to distinguish themselves from corrupt politicians to avoid political costs. Calling for impeachment will emerge as a dominant strategy.

Thus, I sustain that isolating forms of corruption – the ones that only benefit the president and his or her close advisers – tend to erode the legislative shield. The evidence indeed suggests that impeachment crises are more prone to emerge around particularistic forms of corruption. The events affecting Bucaram, Collor or Pérez did not involve congressional leaders. In the case of Samper, in contrast, the investigation carried out by the prosecutor general involved the

president and legislators of both parties. At least four representatives and five senators were convicted on charges similar to Samper's. One of them, former senator María Izquierdo, even agreed to cooperate with the prosecutor. Conservative representative Pablo Victoria requested that she declared in the case against Samper, but according to Victoria, the oversight committee never called her because she knew too much about congress itself (Victoria 1997, 149; 233-34).

Isolated policy making and isolating forms of corruption are not, however, the only obstacles to meet a friendly congress. The third factor shaping legislative support is given by the size of the president's party in Congress and the loyalty of those legislators to the chief executive. I am referring here to what Mainwaring and Shugart (1997) have called "partisan powers" of the president.

The issue of partisan powers calls for careful consideration of the evidence. Not only presidents with very small legislative parties, like Collor or Bucaram, but also presidents with large parties, like Pérez or Samper, faced impeachment crises⁷. Moreover, systems with highly disciplined parties, like Venezuela, allowed crises in the same way other countries with less disciplined parties (Colombia, Brazil) did. This proves that weak partisan powers are not a necessary condition for a impeachment crisis.

This does not mean, however, that legislative support is not related at all to impeachment crises. We should expect that, other things equal, a president with greater partisan powers will be more able to prevent the formation of a hostile coalition when scandal takes place. If two presidents face a similar scandal and confront similar degrees of popular outrage, the one with a strong legislative backing should be more capable of blocking the emergence of crisis than the one with a very weak congressional party.

Due to measurement and sample-size problems, this proposition is hard to test, but some evidence is presented in table 1 below. Latin American presidents between 1990 and 1997 have been classified according to the extent of their legislative support. I took 40% of the lower chamber as a cutoff point⁸. Whenever presidents were supported by a coalition that helped to elect them and preserved a unified legislative label after the election (e.g., Aylwin and Frei in Chile, Paz Zamora in Bolivia, Chamorro in Nicaragua, Endara and Pérez Valladares in Panama) I counted the size of the coalition as the measure of legislative support. Otherwise, I considered the size of the president's party⁹.

Table 1 about here

If the degree of legislative support for the administration changed during the term because of mid-term elections I divided the administration into several observations¹⁰. I did the same when coalitions broke down or were reshaped, like in Nicaragua after 1992 (McConnell 1993, 23). Thus, the units of analysis for this test are *congressional terms*, defined as the time period in which a given administration and a given congress overlap. The appendix presents a full list of the congressional terms included in the sample. Terms were coded according to the executive-legislative relationship: either they went smooth, or they generated impeachment crises. Although the number of crises is very small, this test yields significant results: the table confirms that presidents with weak partisan powers are more exposed to impeachment crises. In the 1990s, the probability of facing an impeachment crisis has been significantly larger for presidents who lacked congressional support. This finding is consistent with Kenney's (1998) claim that minority presidencies between 1960 and 1997 have been more prone to "premature cessation".

Presidential Survival

Table 2 below summarizes the information about the administrations described in this paper. The evidence suggests two conclusions. The first one is that media scandal is a necessary condition for the emergence of impeachment crisis. No matter how different in other aspects, the administrations of Bucaram, Collor, Fujimori, Menem, Pérez and Samper were all touched by scandal. In the cases of Menem and Bucaram, scandal adopted a rather diffuse form but was present throughout the term. In the case of Fujimori scandal had a much lower profile, until legislators reacted against Fujimori's imprudent statements in December of 1991. Because the scandal was too weak and appeared to be relevant only for the political elite, congress found hard to charge against the president and legislators ultimately failed to lead the crisis.

Table 2 about here

The second conclusion is that scandal is nevertheless not sufficient to trigger an impeachment crisis. Other elements must be present. The first one is public outrage, but public opinion seems to react moderately when the government is expected to deliver policy success. The other element is a hostile legislature – that is, a congress very sensitive to accusations against the president. For Menem and Fujimori, policy success presumably prevented the emergence of public reaction against the president. Samper faced a divided society, but still had to deal with powerful sectors that demanded his resignation. Bucaram, Collor and Pérez, in contrast, confronted broad social coalitions that questioned their right to rule. Last, but not least, Menem and Samper enjoyed powerful legislative allies that “shielded” them. Pérez had a large legislative party, but the party was reluctant to support his policies and--in contrast to the former president Jaime Lusinchi--Pérez never made the party a central partner of his government. By the end of his term, after two coup attempts and with mounting accusations, partisan support had eroded and many members of his party were prone to defect; his legislative shield had weakened considerably. Presidents like Bucaram, Collor or Fujimori, lacked strong legislative machines. Summarized in table 2, the evidence thus suggests a basic hypothesis: impeachment crises emerge when presidents face scandal *combined with* public outrage *and/or* weak legislative support¹¹.

The hypothesis also suggests the existence of different types of congress-led crisis, shedding some light into the phase of resolution. If this interpretation is correct, congress-led crises may emerge under three alternative configurations. In the first one, the congress echoes scandal, but there is no public support for the legislature. In the second one, a social coalition against the president emerges, but the executive is able to moderate its impact on congress. The third scenario depicts a president who faces a mobilized society *and* a hostile congress. One may hypothesize that those configurations represent different levels of risk for the president.

Figure 1 below shows those “paths” leading to impeachment crisis. The historical examples indeed suggest that alternative paths involve different degrees of danger for the executive. In the case of Fujimori, congress was unable to sustain the charge against the president, and the conflict soon reverted into a president-led process that ended with the self-coup of May 1992. In the lack of a powerful scandal, and deprived of public support, many legislators feared the institutional consequences of asking for the resignation of the president, and some members of the opposition parties stopped the course of the process. Fujimori became, in this context, an empowered president. The charge against the president was weak, short-lived,

and mainly symbolic in nature. In the view of the brutal action that would follow in May 1992, it is even hard to recognize it as a presidential crisis.

Figure 1 about here

The situation of Samper, on the other hand, proved to be riskier than the one of Fujimori. Under public pressure, the congress *had* to charge against the president, even though a majority of legislators was reluctant to do so. The division of society, coupled with the potentially explosive consequences of the scandal, finally encouraged majority legislators to go ahead and drop the case. The president got “trenched” in Congress, while important sectors pressed for his resignation. In this context, the resolution of the crisis remained uncertain throughout the process. Finally, the configuration leading to the crisis in the cases of Bucaram, Collor and Pérez seems to be the most dangerous one. Presidents with weak (or declining) legislative support who confront increasing popular mobilization face a devastating challenge. In fact, none of these presidents survived in office.

IMPEACHMENT CRISES AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

This article has argued that, in order to understand the emergence of impeachment crises, we must focus on three questions: Is there any reason-excuse for legislators to call for the resignation of the president? Is there any public support for this move? And, is the president able to prevent this threat in congress?

Besides the possible causes of impeachment crises, however, it is important to ask about their consequences. The emergence of this pattern in the 1990s suggests that impeachment could become in future years a functional equivalent for the role moderating coups (Stepan 1971) have performed in previous decades. Most observers have seen recent impeachment crises as a positive trend punishing corrupt administrations. This is a sensible argument, yet it overlooks the fact that crises always involve a tradeoff between greater accountability and government instability.

On one hand, impeachment crises may be an indicator that legislators are becoming more responsive to public outrage against corrupt executives. In this sense, crises would be a mature sign of growing accountability. Catherine Conaghan (1996, 6) has argued that "in a functioning democracy, the public sphere is 'influential'; that is, the politically relevant discussions that go in at least some of the organizations in civil society resonate in governmental institutions and affect the behavior of officials. Controversies that take place in the public sphere provoke governments to react through congressional hearings, investigations, and court proceedings that are geared to resolve, clarify, or at least examine the state of affairs surrounding the controversy and the role of public authority in relation to the issues in question".

In Conaghan's view, in low-quality democracies decision-making institutions are not sensitive to public debate. It is not that a public sphere does not exist: polyarchies allow free expression and open debate; but the impact of public discussion over political institutions is feeble. This isolation makes the government less accountable and policy more arbitrary, thus affecting the quality of democratic life.

On the other hand, impeachment crises have costs in terms of governability and political stability. As in the case of Venezuela, important policies may be delayed or abandoned because of the dissolution of the government. In addition, when legislators find a “fast-track” for

impeachment – as in the cases of Perú and Ecuador – the crisis signals to all political actors that the stability of the government may be put at risk overnight. In the lack of investigative committees or a long, formal impeachment process, this pattern of resolution typically forces the legislature to act “out of the blue”. Although whole process may be legal, observers (and protagonists) are many times left with the impression that they are attending a legislative coup d’etat.

Even when it works, the fast path to impeachment is particularly dangerous in institutional terms. The Ecuadorian “solution” was unable to justify why Fabián Alarcón, the speaker of the legislature, and not Rosalía Arteaga, the elected vice-president was to be the new chief executive. The result was a constitutional stalemate. In the morning of February 6, Ecuadorians found out that they had three presidents: Bucaram, who was entrenched in the Carondelet palace, Arteaga, who had requested support in the US Embassy, and Alarcón, backed by congress. Stalemate was solved only when military leaders intervened to reach a negotiated government transition. This tradeoff between accountability and stability suggests that impeachment is a complex institution with important consequences for democracy that should be studied more carefully in the future.

TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 1
PROBABILITY OF IMPEACHMENT CRISIS, P(C)
BY LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT
(1990-1997)

Percent seats in Lower Chamber	<i>Crisis</i>	<i>No Crisis</i>	P(C)
40% or more	2	34	.055
Less than 40%	3	12	.200*
TOTAL	5	46	.098

Notes:

Units of analysis are congressional terms

* Difference between the two groups is significant at .01 level

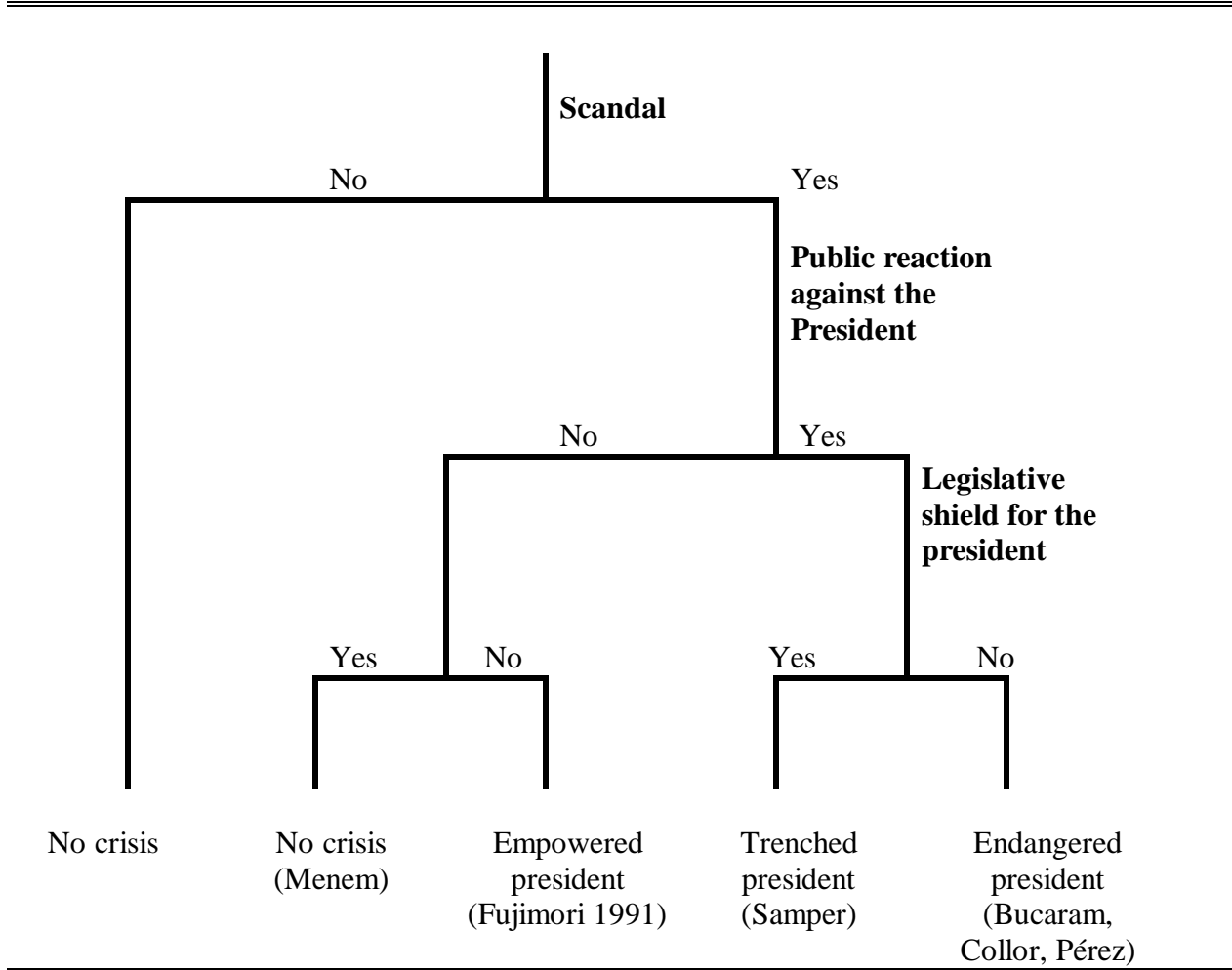
(one-tailed z-test)

Source: see Appendix

TABLE 2
IMPEACHMENT CRISES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE
(1990-1997)

Administration	Scandal	Policy Success	Public Outrage	Legislative Support	Outcome
Bucaram	Yes	No	Strong	Weak	President was declared insane
Collor	Yes	No	Strong	Weak	Impeachment
Fujimori	Yes (weak)	Yes	Weak	Weak	Congress failed to lead the crisis.
Menem	Yes	Yes	Weak	Strong	Crisis never took place.
Pérez	Yes	No	Strong	Weakened	Impeachment
Samper	Yes	No	Medium-strong	Strong	President resisted crisis.

FIGURE 1
 THE ROAD TO IMPEACHMENT
 (1990-1997)



APPENDIX
CONGRESSIONAL TERMS (1990-1997)

Obs	Country	Administration	Adm#	Start	End	Party	Deps Party	Size Chamber	Pct. Party
1	Argentina	Menem	1	1989	1991	PJ	112	254	44.1
2	Argentina	Menem	1	1991	1993	PJ	119	257	46.3
3	Argentina	Menem	1	1993	1995	PJ	124	257	48.2
4	Argentina	Menem	2	1995	1997	PJ	137	257	53.3
5	Bolivia	Paz Zamora*	3	1989	1993	AP	71	130	54.6
6	Bolivia	Sanchez de Lozada	4	1993	1997	MNR	52	130	40.0
7	Brazil	Collor	6	1990	1990	PRN	31	495	6.3
8	Brazil	Collor	6	1990	1992	PRN	41	503	8.2
9	Brazil	Franco**	7	1992	1995				
10	Brazil	Cardoso	8	1995	1998	PSDB	64	513	12.5
11	Chile	Aylwin*	9	1990	1994	CPD	71	120	59.2
12	Chile	Frei *	10	1994	2000	CPD	70	120	58.3
13	Colombia	Gaviria	11	1990	1991	PL	119	199	59.8
14	Colombia	Gaviria	11	1991	1994	PL	87	161	54.0
15	Colombia	Samper	12	1994	1998	PL	88	163	54.0
16	Costa Rica	Calderon Fournier	14	1990	1994	PUSC	29	57	50.9
17	Costa Rica	Figueres Olsen	15	1994	1998	PLN	28	57	49.1
18	Ecuador	Borja	17	1988	1990	ID	30	71	42.3
19	Ecuador	Borja	17	1990	1992	ID	14	72	19.4
20	Ecuador	Duran Ballen	18	1992	1994	PUR	12	77	15.6
21	Ecuador	Duran Ballen	18	1994	1996	PUR	3	77	3.9
22	Ecuador	Bucaram	18	1996	1997	PRE	19	82	23.2
23	El Salvador	Cristiani	21	1989	1991	ARENA	31	60	51.7
24	El Salvador	Cristiani	21	1991	1994	ARENA	39	84	46.4
25	El Salvador	Calderon Sol	22	1994	1997	ARENA	39	84	46.4
26	El Salvador	Calderon Sol	22	1997	1999	ARENA	28	84	33.3
27	Guatemala	Cerezo	23	1986	1991	DCG	51	100	51.0
28	Guatemala	Serrano	24	1991	1993	MAS	18	116	15.5
29	Guatemala	de Leon Carpio**	25	1993	1996				
30	Guatemala	Arzú	26	1996	2000	PAN	43	80	53.8
31	Honduras	Callejas	28	1990	1994	PN	55	128	43.0
32	Honduras	Reina	29	1994	1998	PL	71	128	55.5
33	Mexico	Salinas	30	1988	1991	PRI	260	500	52.0
34	Mexico	Salinas	30	1991	1994	PRI	320	500	64.0
35	Mexico	Zedillo	31	1994	1997	PRI	300	500	60.0
36	Mexico	Zedillo	31	1997	2000	PRI	239	500	47.8
37	Nicaragua	Chamorro*	32	1990	1992	UNO	51	92	55.4
38	Nicaragua	Chamorro*	32	1992	1996	UNO	47	92	51.1
39	Nicaragua	Aleman	33	1996	2000	AL	42	93	45.2
40	Panama	Endara (coal)	34	1989	1994	ADOC	55	67	82.1
41	Panama	Perez Balladares*	35	1994	1999	PU	33	72	45.8
42	Paraguay	Rodriguez	36	1989	1993	PC	48	72	66.7
43	Paraguay	Wasmosy	37	1993	1998	PC	38	80	47.5
44	Peru	Fujimori	38	1990	1992	C90	34	180	18.9
45	Peru	Fujimori	38	1992	1995	C90/NM	44	80	55.0

Obs	Country	Administration	Adm#	Start	End	Party	Deps Party	Size Chamber	Pct. Party
46	Peru	Fujimori	39	1995	2000	C90/NM	67	120	55.8
47	Dom. Rep.	Balaguer	40	1990	1994	PRSC	42	120	35.0
48	Dom. Rep.	Balaguer	41	1994	1996	PRSC	50	120	41.7
49	Dom. Rep.	Fernandez	42	1996	1998	PLD	13	120	10.8
50	Uruguay	Lacalle	43	1990	1995	PB	39	99	39.4
51	Uruguay	Sanguinetti	44	1995	2000	PC	32	99	32.3
52	Venezuela	Perez	45	1989	1993	AD	97	201	48.3
53	Venezuela	Velasquez**	46	1993	1994	AD			
54	Venezuela	Caldera*	47	1994	1998	CN	51	201	25.4

Notes:

All figures reflect the composition of the Low chamber

* Support for the president reflects size of the coalition

** Took over to complete the term of impeached president

Sources: Europa World Yearbook, Boletín Electoral Latinoamericano, Nohlen (1993), McConnell (1993), and Mainwaring and Shugart (1997).

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NOTES

¹ On the origins of the tapes, see Vargas et al. (1996: 32-26).

² Mario Vargas Llosa, running for the FREDEMO coalition, defeated Fujimori in the first round (April 8 1989) by 27.6 to 24.6%. In the runoff election, however, Fujimori obtained 56.5% of the vote and Vargas Llosa just 33.9%. The case of Serrano is even more striking. In November, 1990, Jorge Carpio (UCN) defeated Serrano by 25.7 to 24.1%. Next January, Serrano reached 68% of the vote, while Carpio only got 32%. In the Dominican Republic, José Peña Gómez won the first round of the 1996 election with 45.9% of the vote against Leonel Fernández (38.9%). Balaguer's PRSC supported Fernandez in the second round, and he won with 51.2 percent of the vote.

³ According to Kenney (1998) it is not clear how far were legislators willing to go that night. Apparently, some of them were decided to oust Fujimori, while others wanted to warn the president but without creating a major constitutional conflict.

⁴ I am indebted to Andrés Mejía for his useful comments on this issue.

⁵ McClintock (1993:116) similarly points out that: "During the course of 1992, Fujimori managed to maintain several accomplishments that Peruvians had welcomed during his first 20 months. Paramount among these was the low rate of inflation, estimated at 55 percent for 1992 (in contrast to over 7,000 percent in 1990)". Despite this success on the inflation front, she –like Kenney—notes that "the economy was faring poorly". This suggests that curbing hyperinflation is a particularly profitable achievement for any administration.

⁶ At the time of the crisis, Bucaram was also perceived as a case of "failure", since he was reducing subsidies and authorizing increases in the price of basic services – what ultimately raised the cost of living. His short tenure in office makes difficult to anticipate what the ultimate outcome of his policy would have been.

⁷ Collor inherited the congress from the previous administration, in which his party controlled six percent of the Chamber of Deputies. With the 1990 legislative election, the PRN reached only the eight percent. Bucaram's PRE had 23% of the unicameral legislature, while Fujimori's Cambio 90 controlled 19 percent of the Lower Chamber. Pérez's Acción Democrática, in contrast, had 48 percent of the Chamber, while Samper controlled 54 percent.

⁸ This cutoff point is of course arbitrary. I chose 40% because it seems that it is relatively easy for a president with 40% of the chamber to form a majority.

⁹ As the example of President Collor shows, loose coalitions may be prone to breakdown during a presidential crisis.

¹⁰ Countries with midterm elections are Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico. Some countries, like Brazil prior to 1994 or El Salvador, had electoral cycles that created, in practice, midterm elections. Although Colombia has, technically speaking, non-concurrent elections I took it as a case of concurrency because both, the president and deputies have four-year terms, and deputies are elected just two months in advance to the presidential election.

¹¹ Readers familiar with "Boolean" notation may formalize this hypothesis as $I = E(O+I)$; where I is an impeachment crisis, E is scandal, O is public outrage, and I is the absence of legislative support (see Ragin 1987).