
Paul Almeida’s empirically rich account of social protests in the six Central American countries studied in Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest, significantly advances understandings of the conditions under which mass protest campaigns take hold, or fail to emerge. On the basis of a comparative analysis of the contrasting cases of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panama, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras, during the period between 1980 and 2013, the book significantly advances understandings of the conditions that enable, or prevent, social mobilisation against economic reforms commonly associated with global economic integration and state retrenchment. In particular, Almeida offers an engaging analysis of the nature of the multi-sectoral alliances that have characterised successful protest campaigns across the region, as well as insights into the ways in which popular protest groups strategically learn where to organise and which tactics to employ. The book combines in original ways path dependency analysis of varying state development processes in Central America, with due consideration of sub-national patterns of social mobilisation. With regards to the former, Almeida’s account of the central role that the distribution of state infrastructure (local government offices, roads, public universities) and community organisational resources (non-governmental organisations, labour-based associations, local opposition parties) play in facilitating protest campaigns, sheds important light on often overlooked factors shaping patterns of social mobilisation.

The protest campaigns studied in the book highlight the contradictory and uneven processes of political and economic liberalization in Central America, and Latin America more broadly. Political democratization has enabled mobilisation, reducing, in many countries, the risks associated with state repression of social protest. One would, perhaps, like to take issue with the book’s broad characterization of a favourable political climate in the countries studied. True, the democratic transitions in the region have indeed enabled political mobilisation, and the formation of opposition political parties that regularly participate in electoral processes. Democracy remains, however, in Central America, as in many other parts of Latin America, more formal than substantive. After all, the frequency, intensity, and limited success of the numerous social protest events mapped out and examined in the book all too clearly illustrate the limits of formal electoral democracy in the region. Moreover, the formally democratic societies across Central America remain, with few exceptions, extremely violent. Although direct state responsibility for the contemporary violence that inflicts societies such as Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, is often elusive, reported targeted assassinations of social activists and trade union members are disturbingly regular. This also suggests that an important gap in the book could be found in the absence of any sustained discussion of the authorities’ social control efforts, including policing of public protests.

The scope and depth of the reforms associated with economic liberalization in Central America, as well as in the broader region of Latin America, also highlight the significant challenges facing protest campaigns. The book, in effect, provides explanations for the successful emergence and relative intensity of protest movements, and, to a certain extent, their degree of sustainability over time. It is less concerned with assessing the impact of social protest activities on the economic systems that have generated the (neoliberal) policies mobilised against. True, some of the various protest
campaigns examined in the book had limited success in preventing, or even reversing, specific pieces of legislation and/or government policy initiatives. This emphasis on resistance only highlights, however, the limits of the political (and economic) visions studied in the book. Indeed, Almeida defines the focus of the study as a concern with protest campaigns understood as “shorter-term collective actions”, which are contrasted to “more enduring social movements, which often maintain multiple goals and objectives (p.29).” Campaigns, in other words, target “specific policy measures (in this case, policies directly tied to economic globalization such as privatization, labour flexibility, price control deregulation, of free trade agreements) (p.29)”, in ways that are essentially reactive. Framing protest campaigns as resistance might be analytically accurate, but this frame also demonstrates the strength of the neoliberal political and socio-economic project in that alternative forms of governance that might have been demanded in the protests covered by the book are passed over in silence. Almeida does frame the social conflicts explored in the book in terms of “social citizenship rights versus free market reforms (p.6)”. Yet, the reader has to deduce what alternatives protestors may be mobilising for by juxtaposing with what the protesters are shown to be against. It would have been interesting therefore to get a better sense – through the voices of the participants themselves, for example – of the politically and quite possibly ideologically exciting world of ideas inherent in the various protest campaigns studied by Almeida. This notwithstanding, Mobilizing Democracy is an engaging, and engaged, book, which should be required reading for anyone who seeks to understand the contemporary politics of social protest in Central America, and beyond.

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