

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE
PUBLIC INTEREST AND CONFLICT IN
LATIN AMERICAN
POLITICAL CULTURE

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Latin Americanists commonly stress the traditional cultural and philosophical differences between the region they study and the United States. A frequent contention holds that such historical contrasts persist to the present. For example, Howard J. Wiarda asserts, "Latin America . . . remains paternalistic, hierarchical, authoritarian, Catholic, corporate, personalist, and elitist to its core."¹ In contrast, the United States is presumably more egalitarian, Protestant, and impersonal than her southern-hemispheric neighbors.

Hypothetically, one key difference between Latin America and North America lies in contrasting conceptualizations and valuations of "the public interest." The Iberic-Latin orientation supposedly values highly the public interest, which is viewed as being separate from, and frequently antagonistic to, the private interests of individuals. An example of this line of argument is provided by Glen Dealy: "It is a teaching of the Catholic religion that the common good has an intrinsic worth and character of its own which is apart from the sum of many private interests. Participants within this world view are convinced that to the extent one pursues his private interest to that degree the public interest is being sacrificed; 'for private and common pull in different ways,' as Saint Thomas phrased it."²

Dealy asserts that in contrast, "Protestantism sees a coincidence between private and public goods."³ Similarly, Kalman H. Silvert observes that according to the classical liberalism so influential in the United States, "the argument is that there is only private interest, and that public mechanisms are justified only insofar as they satisfy private needs and wants."⁴ Contrasting this conception with the Latin corporate ideal,⁵ Silvert states: "The ultimate corporate ethic proposes that the public

interest is primary, for it is society that is divine and not man. . . . The ultimate liberal ethic is the view that the private interest is primary, for it is man that is divine and not society.”⁶

Views about conflict and consensus may be related to the conceptions of the public interest. It would seem that the Latin emphasis on a legitimate, overriding public interest implies a belief in *consensual* social activity which strives to realize the common good. On the other hand, the North American view of the public interest would seem to imply that *competitive* social activity among individuals is legitimate as a manner of achieving the derivative public interest. Indeed, some social theorists explicitly state that Latin Americans stress the value of consensus, in contrast to the North American acceptance of individual conflict and competition.⁷

However plausible such statements may be, their relevance to the real world remains doubtful in the absence of substantiating empirical data. In this research note we present the results of preliminary data relating to views of the public interest and conflict in one Latin American country. Our data come from a questionnaire being pretested for use in another research project.⁸ The first of our three response groups is composed of twenty-six Venezuelan municipal councilmen attending a short course on municipal administration at the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración (IESA—Caracas, Venezuela). The other respondents are thirty-one middle-level Venezuelan business executives attending another short course at IESA, and a group of eighteen IESA students pursuing graduate programs in administration and Latin American economic integration (several of these students come from parts of Latin America outside Venezuela). With few exceptions, the following analysis merges together the three groups of respondents.

Five of our questions counterpose the public interest (or closely related terms) against individual interests. Of course, there is no *necessary* conflict between these two categories; as noted above, a person of classical-liberal persuasion would conceive of the public interest as an aggregation of individual interests. However, Latin political culture may very well support the view that the two kinds of interest are distinct and contradictory. Three other items examine attitudes toward conflict. All the items consist of a statement and five agree-disagree options:

- a. muy de acuerdo (agree strongly)
- b. de acuerdo (agree)
- c. algo de acuerdo (agree somewhat)
- d. en desacuerdo (disagree)
- e. muy en desacuerdo (disagree strongly)

The five public interest items are the following:

6. En el proceso de diseñar e implementar un programa determinado es más importante tomar en cuenta los intereses de individuos que relacionar el programa con algún plan general de la nación. (In the process of designing and implementing a given program, it is more important to take into account the interests of individuals, than to relate the program with some general national plan.)

10. Generalmente es deseable implementar programas que sirvan al interés público, aún si en el proceso se dañan los intereses de muchos individuos. (Generally, it is desirable to implement programs which may serve the public interest, even if in the process the interests of many individuals are damaged.)

14. A menudo hay que dañar los intereses de algunos individuos o grupos para poder implementar políticas de interés público. (It is often necessary to damage the interests of some individuals or groups in order to be able to implement policies in the public interest.)

22. Para mejorar el país es imprescindible pensar más en los intereses de individuos, en vez de los intereses generales de la sociedad. (In order to improve the country, it is essential to think more about the interests of individuals, rather than the general interests of the society.)

37. Muchas veces tiene que darse prioridad a los intereses de toda la sociedad sobre los intereses de determinados grupos. (Priority must often be given to the interests of the whole society over the interests of particular groups.)

The three conflict items run as follows:

7. Los conflictos políticos comúnmente resultan ser dañinos para la colectividad. (Political conflicts commonly turn out to be damaging for the collectivity.)

20. Los partidos políticos muchas veces agudizan los conflictos que surgen en la resolución de problemas sociales. (Political parties frequently intensify conflicts which arise during the resolution of social problems.)

30. Los intereses de todos los participantes en un conflicto son perjudicados cuando se desborda el conflicto. (The interests of all the participants in a conflict are prejudiced when the conflict spreads.)

Item 20 seems to measure attitudes toward political parties more than opinions about conflict. Nevertheless, as conflict forms a major part of this statement, we include it in the present analysis.

With the *a* and *b* responses pooled—and also the *d* and *e* responses—table 1 presents the distribution for the above eight items.

For each of the items there is a dramatic consensus in the pro-

TABLE 1. Distribution of Responses for Public Interest and Conflict Items

Response	Number of Respondents							
	Public Interest Items					Conflict Items		
	<u>6</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>30</u>
Agree strongly or agree (<i>a, b</i>)	11	55	60	4	65	52	54	52
Agree somewhat (<i>c</i>)	8	13	10	4	3	12	15	17
Disagree or disagree strongly (<i>d, e</i>)	54	5	4	66	6	11	5	4
No response	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	75	75	75	75	75	75	75	75

public-interest or anticonflict direction (responses *a* or *b*, except for items 6 and 22). Also noteworthy is the minuscule number of “no responses” for the public interest items: Our respondents apparently do not consider the public interest and individual interests to be artificial alternatives. Another indication that the respondents have definite opinions about these five statements is the relatively small number of *c* responses.

The three respondent groups are in close agreement on six of the eight items. The two exceptions are item 7, for which the students register a much lower percentage of *a* or *b* responses than do the two other groups—and item 20, for which the executives are considerably more anticonflict (and also more anti-political-party) than are the councilmen and the students.

To see how the items interrelate, we employ Yule’s *Q* as a measure of strength of association.⁹ Since *Q* applies to dichotomous variables, we dichotomize the responses for each item by merging the *c* responses with the *ab* or *de* category, in the manner which produces the less one-sided distribution. Given the preponderance of pro-public-interest and anti-conflict responses, the *c* answers are always dichotomized in the opposite direction.

Considering first the intercorrelations among the public interest questions alone, we see from table 2 that item 6 registers notably lower *Q* values than the four other items.¹⁰ The six correlations among items 10, 14, 22, and 37 are moderately strong: Only one *Q* falls below .50, and the mean of the six *Q* values is .59. Although the correlations are not so strong as we might like, they do suggest that the four items probably are related to the same underlying attitude.¹¹

Hence we feel justified in defining a Public Interest Score for each respondent as the number of pro-public-interest answers he gives to

TABLE 2. *Q Values for Associations among Public Interest Items*

	<u>10</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>37</u>
6	-.06	.13	.71	.63
10		.60	.56	.56
14			.70	.41
22				.71

items 10, 14, 22, and 37 (the pro-public-interest responses are *a* or *b* for items 10, 14, and 37, and *d* or *e* for item 22). Thus, the maximum possible score is four, and the minimum value is zero. Respondents not answering all four questions are not assigned a score and are dropped from the subsequent analysis (only four respondents failed to answer all of these items).

Not surprisingly, given the distribution of answers to each of the component items, the Public Interest Scores are highly skewed in the pro-public-interest direction. Indeed, over half of the seventy-one respondents (40) receive a score of four; twenty-two score three, five respondents score two, two score one, and two score zero. Sixty-five percent of the students have a perfect pro-public-interest value of four, compared with 54 percent of the councilmen and also 54 percent of the executives. Utilizing the dichotomization procedure outlined above, we group all scores less than four into one category; the four-scorers constitute the other category by themselves.

As for the conflict items, two of the three correlations among them are very weak: $Q(7, 20) = .17$, $Q(7, 30) = .10$, and $Q(20, 30) = .51$. Hence we suspect that these items might be measuring to a significant degree something besides attitude toward conflict; or perhaps these items tap different dimensions of orientation toward conflict. In any case, we do not formulate a single conflict measure analogous to the Public Interest Score. However, by correlating the dichotomized Public Interest Score separately with each of the dichotomized conflict items, we obtain an indication of how strongly attitude toward the public interest relates to several isolated opinions about conflict.

When we carry out this operation, we find that the Public Interest Score has a *Q* value of .43 with conflict item 7, a value of .19 with item 20, and a value of $-.14$ with item 30. Though positive in two of the three cases, these relationships certainly are weak.¹² If we dichotomize the Public Interest Score in a different manner, all three associations with the conflict items are moderately weak and positive. That is, if scores of three and four are placed in one category and scores of zero, one, and two form the other

category, the Q values for the associations with the Public Interest Score are .32 for item 7, .46 for item 20, and .35 for item 30.

In short, our preliminary data show that our Venezuelan respondents overwhelmingly support “the public interest” over the interests of individuals and also register one-sided opposition to political conflict. However, attitudes toward the public interest and toward conflict are weakly (though positively) related; knowing an individual’s stance on the public interest does not tell us very much about his orientation toward conflict, and vice versa. More extensive research might show that different elements of the hypothesized, dominant Latin American political culture—elements such as attitudes toward the public interest and conflict—are much less strongly interrelated than is generally assumed.

Before generalizing about the political culture of Venezuela as a whole, however, the nature of our response groups should be taken into account. In no sense do our respondents constitute a random sample of the country’s entire population; they are certainly higher than average in class position and in political awareness and activity. Although we suspect that the above-reported attitudes toward the public interest and political conflict are in fact dominant in Venezuela as a whole, a general population sample would be necessary to determine whether this supposition is correct.¹³

Whatever may be the results provided by surveys probing political culture, the analyst is left with the thorny challenge of relating expressed attitudes to actual political behavior. Certainly, any Latin Americanist with a fertile imagination could trace dozens of parallels between pro-public-interest, anticonflict attitudes and observed political patterns. In Venezuela, for example, one could interpret many political developments as being results of a conflict-avoiding thrust in the country’s political culture: The painstaking construction of viable democratic “rules of the game,”¹⁴ the recurring search for interparty consensus on important legislation,¹⁵ the frequent resort to coalition government, and so on. The observer could also point to very common appeals to the symbol of the public interest, together with attempts to picture political opponents as advancing selfish individual interests. This political culture-political reality game could be played almost interminably.

The troublesome problem is that the abstraction called “political culture” may only *appear* to influence patterns of political behavior. In his insightful study of the development of effective democratic norms in Venezuela, Daniel H. Levine downplays vague “ideational” interpretations in favor of an analysis emphasizing the more concrete, immediate perceptions of self-interest by political elites.¹⁶ According to this view, the development of consensual norms is explainable without having to resort to an underlying, largely static political culture as a causal force.

Are political culture—and expressed attitudes toward the public interest and conflict—merely epiphenomenal, without political efficacy? We leave that colossal question dangling but do conclude with the observation that deep cultural values and concrete self-interest may *both* shape political actions. The two levels of analysis, in other words, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and political culture remains a worthwhile focus for future research.

NOTES

1. Howard J. Wiarda, "Social Change, Political Development, and the Latin American Tradition," in Howard J. Wiarda, ed., *Politics and Social Change in Latin America: The Distinct Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 18. Similar arguments are made in other selections in this book.
2. Glen Dealy, "The Tradition of Monistic Democracy in Latin America," in Wiarda, ed., *Politics and Social Change*, p. 77.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
4. Kalman H. Silvert, *Man's Power* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 134.
5. Corporatism is essentially the organization of society around occupationally defined "pillars of society" such as business, labor, the church, and the military—each component institution being stratified internally by social class. See Silvert, *Man's Power*, pp. 136–38 and Howard J. Wiarda, "Toward a Framework for the Study of Political Change in the Iberic-Latin Tradition: The Corporative Model," *World Politics* 25 (January 1973): 206–35.
6. Silvert, *Man's Power*, p. 138. Cf. Banfield's typology of "unitary" vs. "individualistic" conceptions of the public interest in Martin Meyerson and Edward C. Banfield, *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest* (New York: The Free Press, 1955), pp. 322–29. Most of the North American political science literature on the public interest consists of arguments about the utility of the concept and also analyses by scholars of other scholars' use of the concept. For a recent critique of the literature, see Clarke E. Cochran, "Political Science and 'The Public Interest'," *Journal of Politics* 36 (May 1974): 327–55. Three of the more notable contributions on the topic are Richard E. Flathman, *The Public Interest* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966); Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *Nomos V: The Public Interest* (New York: Atherton Press, 1962); and Glendon A. Schubert, Jr., *The Public Interest* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960).
7. For example, Dealy, "Monistic Democracy," pp. 73–76, as well as other selections in the Wiarda volume.
8. The advice of our colleague José Antonio Gil helped us considerably in drawing up the questionnaire. A description of the larger research project can be found in Eric P. Veblen, "Technical and Political Policy Orientations: Some Preliminary Notes" (Caracas: unpublished paper, 1975).
9. The possible values of Q range from -1 (perfect negative association) to $+1$ (perfect positive association). Values near zero indicate a very weak relationship. The contingency tables are set up in such a way that if the predicted (hypothesized) relationship exists, Q will have a positive value. Yule's Q (also referred to as Kendall's Q) is a particularly appropriate measure of the strength of interrelationships among a set of items hypothesized to relate to a single, underlying attitudinal dimension. On Yule's Q, see Lee F. Anderson, Meredith W. Watts, Jr., and Allen R. Wilcox, *Legislative Roll-Call Analysis* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966), pp. 50–51 and 102–3; Oliver Benson, *Political Science Laboratory* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969), pp. 151–52 and 241–45; and Hubert M. Blalock, Jr., *Social Statistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), pp. 231–32.

10. This overall weakness of item 6 is probably explainable by its wording: The item taps attitudes toward the national plan and does not refer directly to the public interest or general interests of the society.
11. We think that significance testing is inappropriate for our data, since our respondent groups are not samples drawn randomly from well-defined populations.
12. As explained in note 9, a negative sign indicates that the association runs in the direction opposite that of the predicted relationship. In this case, a negative value means that higher Public Interest Scores tend to go together with less opposition to conflict.
13. While not forming a random sample of the Venezuelan population, the CENDES Conflict and Consensus surveys do represent a variety of social-class and occupational groups. Unfortunately, however, none of that project's questions are comparable with our public interest and conflict items. See Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo, *Estudio de conflictos y consenso: Serie de resultados parciales* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1967).
14. See Daniel H. Levine, *Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), and Juan Carlos Rey, "El sistema de partidos en Venezuela," *Politeia* 1 (1972): 175–230.
15. A case in point is the controversial oil nationalization bill, which was being considered by the Congress as this research note was being written. Despite a majority in the Congress and strong party discipline, Acción Democrática made extensive efforts to obtain a law that represented a consensus. The position of AD leaders seemed to be that a law passed on the basis of its majority alone would be taken as mere partisan imposition.
16. Levine, *Conflict and Political Change*, especially chap. 9. See also Daniel H. Levine, "Issues in the Study of Culture and Politics: A View from Latin America," *Publius* 4 (Spring 1974): 77–104.