Politics Of Modern Latin America Essay, Research Paper

As a North American Latin woman, I have gone through the educational system (14 years of schooling) without every learning much about the political system of Latin America. Most of my knowledge has become available to me by my parents who are loyal viewers of channel 41 and 47. These two channels are Spanish-speaking channels that along with the traditional game shows, talk shows, and soap operas also include a news broadcast that covers stories and events of all of America. Even with this small advantage, I have often identified Latin America as instable and unpredictable. I have associated Latin America with political insecurity. The thought of my parents desire to return to their ‘motherland’ has left me cringing. Their desire to return has left me uneasy because of my assumption that the characteristics of the Latin American political system consists of revolutions, demonstrations, violence, and terror. According to Charles W. Anderson, the countries that make up Latin America have predictable and stable political systems.

Anderson argues that the political system of Latin America has “certain relatively consistent patterns to the game of Latin American politics” (page 5). It is predictable and stable. The political system consists of negotiations between power contenders with different power capabilities. A power contender is “any individual or group which seeks to have its demands implemented through state machinery, to control the allocation of values for the society through state machinery, or to make a specific source of power legitimate for the society through the exercise of a power capability” (page 9). A power contender is a politician or a want-to-be politician that wants to influence political policies, have a say in the political distribution of resources, and/or to include a new political party into the political arena because of the political party’s resources. A power capability is “property of a group or individual that enables it to be politically influential, or a political resource” (page 9). A power capability or political resource can be anything that gives an individual or a group of individuals some sort of an advantage of others. This advantage could be semi-control of the armed forces, ability to influence public opinion, ability to organize mass protest, mass land ownership, and mass investment in the country itself. In summary, a power capability is having access to a source of power that is useful in a grand scale.

The system functions by negotiations or “taking into account” amongst existing power contenders with power capabilities “in planning their political strategies” (page 21). The negotiations are not always easy and newcomers are not welcomed with opened arms. A power contender must go through two phases in order to prove that he is worthy and that his power capability is important enough to gain him access and to be admitted into the political system. The first phase consists of “contenders ‘outside’ the coterie of elites…seeking to demonstrate a power capability that will gain them access to the political process” (page 21). This demonstration is done through revolutions, terror, and violence. The second phase consists of “manipulation and negotiation among power contenders with reciprocally recognized power capabilities” (page 21). The power contender must in these negotiations remind his fellow elites of his power capability and squeeze himself in for a piece of the “cake”. Since new power contenders are not welcomed with opened arms, the rules of admission are to prove that the power contender has the power capability to make him important to the small circle of elites. He proves his power capability through demonstrating. He does not necessarily want to use his power but he does want to illustrate to the “old” power contenders what he is capable of doing if he is not included into this small elite circle of contenders. The role of elections in this ‘everyone gets a piece of the pie’ system is “a measure of power and not a means of determining who governs” (page 13). An election is another form of demonstration of power capability. It demonstrates the capability of public opinion which according to this system is just one of the important power capability available to these elites.

The Latin American political system consists of many different pre-requites for power. Unlike that of the United States and Western Europe, Latin American countries do not centralize their political system on a slab of paper called “The Constitution” or in public held elections. The Constitutions of the Latin American lands are not seen as important as Ten Commandments of Moses, but just as a guideline. The United States and Western Europe view “The Constitution” as a godly drawn paper as important as The Ten Commandments that should be used in reference when deciding legal matters. Elections in the United States and W. Europe are seen as the determining factor in negotiations amongst elites. The elections give the US and W. Europe elites a ‘title’ or position with certain responsibilities no matter their political capabilities. The elections in Latin America are just a pre-requisite to membership into the circle of powerful elites or a demonstration of a power to influence popular opinion.

Anderson makes one understand how the countries that make up Latin America have predictable and stable political systems. The political system is predictable and stable because it follows a pattern. This pattern is not too far off the political pattern that the North American model of political system uses. With this newfound understanding, I understand the use and function of the revolutions, violence, and terrors that occur in Latin America. Maybe now I will consider giving my parents a blessing as they return back to their motherlands.