



Justice in Transit: Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Latin America

Julian Switala, swit0032@umn.edu

Advisor: Prof. Leigh Payne, Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities



Introduction

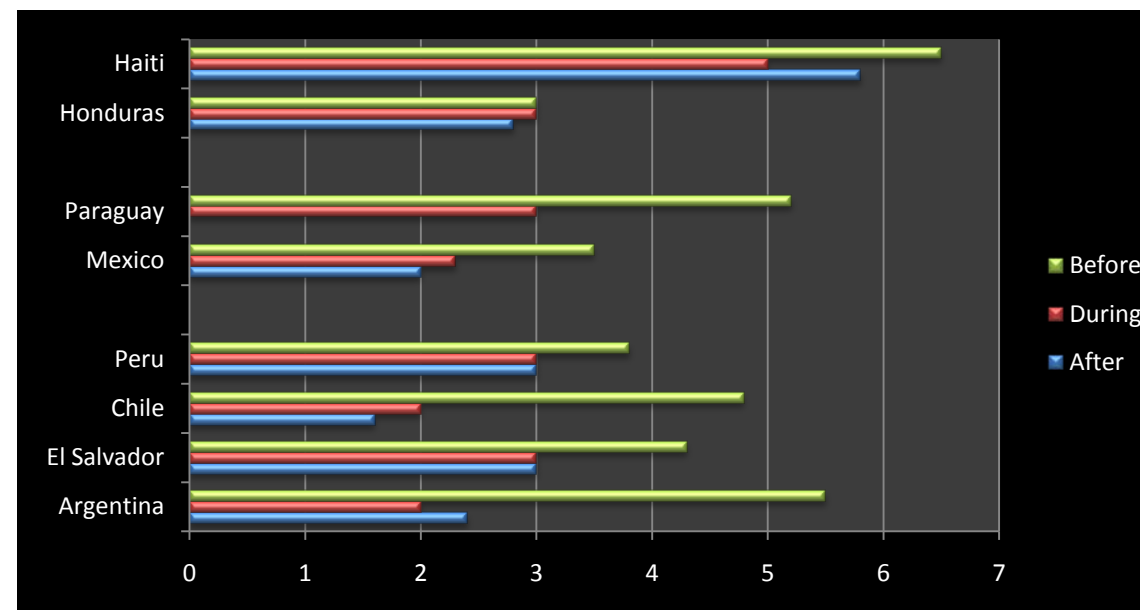
- Human rights violations show no sign of stopping. During the 20th Century alone governments ruthlessly mass murdered more than 200 million persons.¹
- Many Latin American countries established truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) to redress gross human rights violations committed within their borders.
- Political scholars hypothesize that a TRC is most successful if it is established soon after a governmental transition, but they offer little to no empirical support for this hypothesis.²
- This research project investigated the use of TRCs in Latin America in order to test this relatively unsupported hypothesis so that policymakers could know when and why TRCs are most successful.

Methods

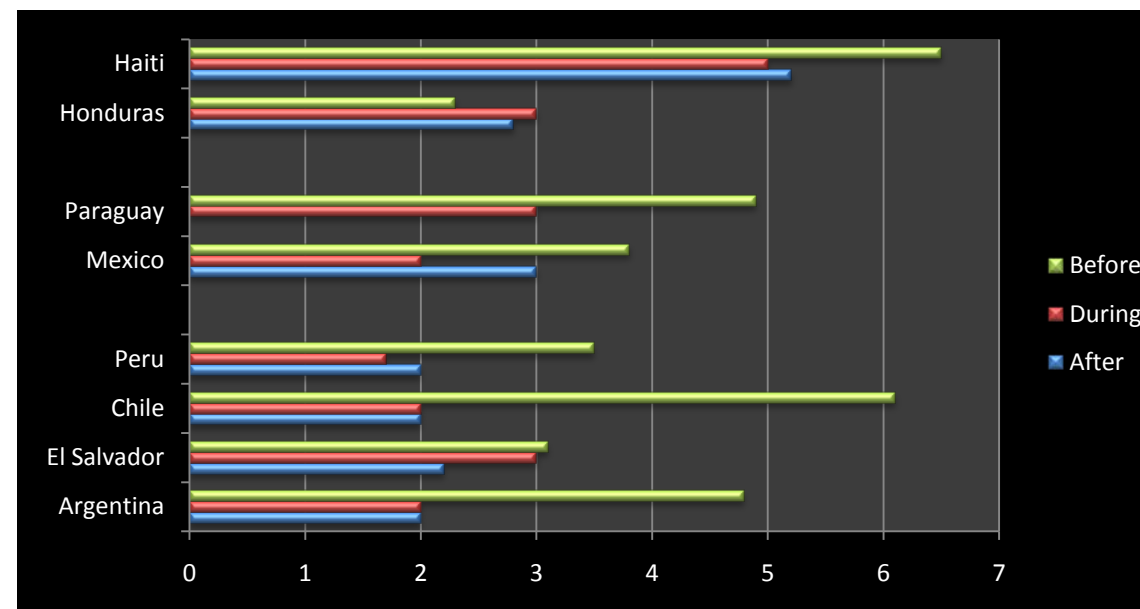
- TRC success was operationalized in terms of strengthening democracy, improving human rights protection, and deterring rights violations.
- Data from Freedom House (FH) and the Political Terror Scale (PTS) were analyzed. Both databases release statistics for each country in the world. FH measures the strength of citizens' civil liberties and political rights, and PTS measures the degree and frequency of state-sanctioned killings, torture, disappearances, and political imprisonment.
- For each TRC, these data were analyzed for 3 separate time periods: (1) the period investigated by the TRC, (2) the period during which the TRC operated, and (3) the period after the TRC completed its operations.
- The differences in scores from FH and PTS over these three periods determined whether a TRC's effect on democracy and human rights was statistically significant.

Results

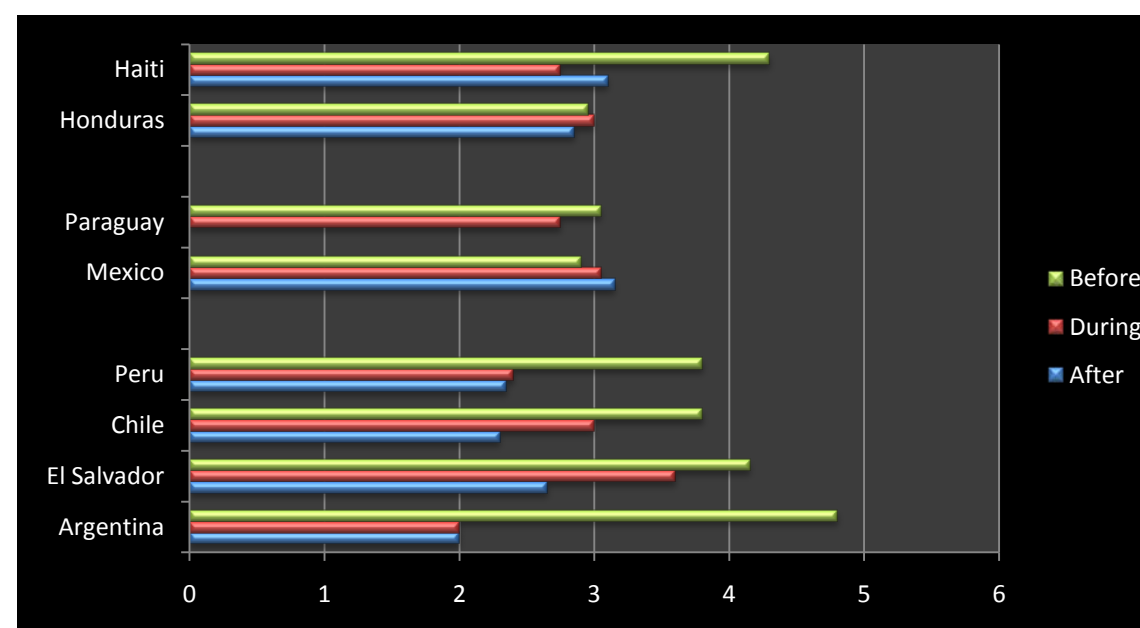
TRC Effect on Political Rights



TRC Effect on Civil Liberties



TRC Effect on Terror



Conclusions

After analyzing data on TRCs in Latin America, three distinct groups of TRCs had varying effects:

- (1) Mexico & Paraguay: TRCs established more than 10 years after a period of state repression did not have a significant effect on political rights, civil liberties, or political terror because changes had already been made to the government and these TRCs were trying to create a record of injustice, rather than deter.
- (2) Haiti & Honduras: TRCs established in countries that did not pursue punishment did not have a significant effect either because they had no deterrent mechanism to prevent future violations.
- (3) TRCs which were established one year after a transition from state repression and which accompanied some form of punishment had a positive significant effect on all human rights and democracy. This was achieved through criminal prosecutions or through public shaming by revealing the names of perpetrators in the TRCs final report.

This provides preliminary prescriptions for policy makers who wish to know when, why, and how TRCs are most effective, thereby increasing their prospects and preventing them from being established in vain.

References

1. Rummel, R.J. *Death by Government*. London: Transaction Publishers, 1994. Pg 9.
2. Hayner, Priscilla. *Unspeakable truths: confronting state terror and atrocity*. London: Routledge, 2001. Pg 221.
3. Freedom House. "Freedom in the World 2008." www.freedomhouse.org/.
4. Gibney, Cornett, and Wood. "Political Terror Scale 1976-2006." <http://www.politicalterror scale.org/>.

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