

Governance Reform in Latin America

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Concept

When enacting bureaucratic reforms, governments have the choice of changing the system in a slow, piecemeal fashion, or conducting a large-scale, rapid overhaul. When leaders are elected on political platforms of change, the latter often seems like a better option. Examining the cases of transport and health reform in Brazil and Argentina, Dr. Katherine Bersch calls this logic into question.

Methodology

- Interviews with government personnel, political leaders, contractors, World Bank officials, and more
- Literature review, bringing together cognitive insights and studies of bureaucracy
- Project reports, historical records, and other indicators that give a thorough account of health and transport reforms

Key Factors

- Barriers to grand reforms include confirmation bias and team selection: often reform teams for overhauls are composed of likeminded outside experts with shorter time horizons
- Broad coalitions moderate reforms, as political leaders must compromise and delegate, yet lead to long-term success



BRAZIL



Transport: a halted overhaul leads to gradual change through problem solving



Health: political compromise leads to slow but successful problem-solving reforms

More coalitional presidentialism

More single-party cabinets



Transport: poorly designed overhauls lead to repeated crises as public transport is privatized and then nationalized once more



Health: after repeated overhauls failed to engender support, smaller problem-solving attempts succeed

Findings

Using theoretical insights on how decision-makers operate in bureaucracies, Dr. Bersch finds that cognitive constraints and confirmation biases stymie efforts at constructing entirely new systems. Instead, political leaders would do better to empower technocrats to experiment and tweak systems, guided by overarching political principles. Yet reform choice is often tightly linked to the organization of our political systems, with power sharing begetting compromise and single-party dominance encouraging overhauls. Powerful political leaders continue to demand large-scale overhauls, not realizing that such practices leave the bureaucracy empty of long-term advocates of these changes.

"What makes reform attempts succeed?"

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