

# **UNDERSTANDING LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS: SIX FACTORS TO CONSIDER**

by

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**This essay is the first version of a longer piece that is  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Students who have spent most of their time studying long-standing pluralist democracies like the United States, Britain or Sweden, often run into problems when first studying Latin American politics. The main reason is that they use knowledge of these pluralist systems as a reference point to try and understand other systems.

However, to understand the essence of Latin American politics we need to put this knowledge aside together with our experiences and values and think more fluidly and in a more open-minded way. What follows are six brief points to aid in thinking in this different way about Latin American politics.

### **1. A FEUDAL TRADITION**

Latin America was settled by Europeans at the end of the feudal era not in a time of early capitalism, emerging pluralism, the Enlightenment and modernity as was the U.S. in the eighteenth century. Many who settled what became the U.S. were fleeing the religious and social constraints of Europe. They established small family farms as in New England and had opportunities to buy cheap land as the nation moved West. These yeoman farmers formed the backbone of an emerging liberal democracy. In contrast, the settlers of Latin America transplanted the Spanish and Portuguese

institutions of the Catholic Church, a strict hierarchical and patrimonial social system dominated by large landowners, and authoritarian rule.

This hierarchical and authoritarian streak in Latin American politics was dominant until well after the independence movements of the 1820s. The problems of establishing effective governments in the half century after independence, when regional strong men (caudillos) dominated politics, led to a centralization of authority and the development of a corporatist-type state (where government worked with or co-opted major interests like the military, landowners and later unions) to insure order. Both centralization and corporatism reinforced authoritarian rule. This authoritarianism and intolerance for dissent and political opposition is still an underlying element in many quarters of Latin American politics today.

## **2. LACK OF A COMMON POLITICAL CULTURE:**

### **NO AGREED UPON RULES OF THE POLITICAL GAME**

In essence, a political culture is the values and beliefs about the form and extent of political processes—what is and is not acceptable behavior—and government operations including governmental power and limits on it. In the U.S. and in most of Western Europe there has long been an overwhelming consensus on political culture. This includes: formal political power is acquired through election or appointment by elected officials, civilian control of the military, the right to form organizations such as

political parties and interest groups to freely advance a cause, and the protection of civil liberties and civil rights through an independent judiciary. While there will always be disputes about policy in these societies, there are widely accepted rules of the political game by which policies are considered and decided.

In contrast, despite an increasing consensus around a participatory, democratic political culture in Latin America in the past two decades, for much of their history, Latin American countries had no consensus on political culture. There were no widely agreed upon rules of the political game. Election was seen as only one way to acquire political power, the coup d'état and violence were also seen as legitimate among some segments of society. The authoritarian and elitist culture of the landed and mining interests opposed increasing democratization. Their values clashed with the rise of radical (socialist and communist), populist (promoting the interest of the masses) and even western-style democratic values promoted by some immigrants after the 1880s and by the "middle sectors" of society (those between the mass of the uneducated poor and the landed and social elite) who favored curtailing the power of the old landed and mining elites. The result was the co-existing of several political cultures, none of which was dominant. These often clashed and produced political instability in many Latin American countries until very recently.

Added to this is an all-pervasive culture of political corruption in the form of bribes to public officials, passing contracts to friends, and so on.

This is not to say that corruption does not exist in the U.S. and other liberal democracies. But in these societies it is not an acceptable part of the political culture and is much less wide-spread and the vast majority of public officials, and particularly judges, are likely not corruptible.

### **3. A PLETHORA OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND POLITICAL ECONOMIES**

In the United States the consensus on political culture and the relationship of politics to the economy (political economy) produces a narrow range of political ideologies that drive politics. The vast majority of politicians and citizens fall into the moderate conservative to moderate liberal range with the vast majority accepting the liberal democratic tradition based on a capitalist economic system. This is in sharp contrast to Latin America. Here, the fragmented political culture has produced a spectrum of political ideologies from Marxism and communism on the left, to populism and moderate social democracy in the center, to extreme conservative and authoritarian ideologies including fascism on the right. Many of these ideologies have formed the guiding principle of Latin American governments such as communism in Cuba, and various brands of authoritarianism and fascism in countries like Paraguay, Brazil and Chile.

In its wide range of political ideologies and political economies, Latin America is more akin to continental Western Europe than to the U.S. The difference, however, is that Western European countries have a consensus

on political culture centered around the primacy of pluralist democracy and of capitalism though in various modified forms from minimal government intervention (conservatives) to more extensive intervention (social democrats). Thus, the wide range of ideologies and their relation to the economy has not produced political instability in Western Europe during the past hundred years as has been the case in Latin America.

#### **4. THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY**

One of the popular images of Latin America in the U.S. and Europe is of the military—the so-called “man on horseback” as often referred to in political science—intervening in politics. In most of the region, after independence the military replaced the crown as the ultimate force in society. Even today, after twenty years of a move toward democratic rule and the discrediting of many military governments of the 1970s and 1980s, the military is not far from the political arena and, judging by the past, the region is not free of a return to military rule.

This role of the military is in sharp contrast to the U.S., Western Europe and other liberal democracies. In these societies a deep-rooted part of the political culture of liberal democracies, including the military itself, is civilian control of the armed forces. This is not so in Latin America where the military has often seen itself as the savior of the nation with an obligation to intervene in politics and to rule if necessary. In addition, and

again unlike liberal democracies, the military sees itself as having an internal law and order (policing) role and not just one of protecting the society from external attack.

Military rule in Latin America was fundamentally different in the period before and after the 1960s. Before then the military took power, got things in order and then turned government back to civilians. But from the 1960s through the early 1980s the military took power for extended periods. In most instances its rationale for taking power was to change the pattern of “politics as usual.” This motive of the military has been described as the “politics of antipolitics”: an attempt to subordinate politics to the technical needs of dealing with urgent issues. In the study of Latin American politics this post-1960s phase in military rule is referred to as bureaucratic authoritarianism. In essence, this was an alliance between the military, the bureaucracy and in some cases the business community to achieve the various political and technocratic goals that the military thought essential to pursue. Depending on the country, this included everything from rooting out radicalism (particularly communism) to getting the economy back on track to dealing with poverty.

## **5. A ROLLER COASTER OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

Latin America has had a roller coaster ride of political development. Moves toward democracy and greater participation have been followed by

regression to authoritarian rule and the abuse of human rights. Again, this is in contrast to most western democracies where, despite the less than commendable record of some countries—such as segregation in the American South and the discrimination against French Canadians in Canada—there has been an essentially linear, consistent, upward progression toward increased political participation (including that of minorities and women) and the gradual expansion of civil liberties and civil rights.

In combination, the first four factors considered above explain much about this roller coaster ride. Authoritarianism (and the tradition of the caudillo in its past and present manifestations), a fragmented political culture (pitting authoritarianism against populism and many radical political ideologies) and wide acceptance of a domestic political role for the military has made most Latin American countries politically volatile undermining political stability and a linear progression to liberal democracy. A period of emergent democracy from the late nineteenth century to 1930 was followed by authoritarian military rule as Latin American economies collapsed during the Great Depression. Then the second wave of democratic development from the end of World War 11 until the 1960s was followed by an authoritarian, extremely repressive period as explained above. The period since the early 1980s has constituted a third wave of democracy. But it is far from clear whether this constitutes a consolidation of

democratic rule or is just another phase in this roller coaster ride of political development.

## **6. UNSTABLE AND UNDERDEVELOPED POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PERSONALITY**

In the United States and in other Western democracies, there are stable political and governmental institutions and established political processes. In general, this is not the case in Latin America. There are three interrelated reasons for this.

First, the roller coaster nature of Latin American political development has inhibited the solidification of long-standing and widely accepted roles for political parties, interest groups, legislative bodies and executives (though executives have been dominant) and judicial systems; and particularly the solidification of the relationship between these political and governmental bodies. The stability of institutions in the Western world or in the old Communist regimes has not been part of Latin American politics. There is a fluidity of political and governmental institutions that is hard to grasp by someone brought up or educated in a traditional democratic or authoritarian system.

Second, the fluidity is exacerbated by the personalized nature of much of Latin American politics. Since independence, politics and policies have often centered on an individual (for example, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil,

1930 and 1951-54; Juan Perón in Argentina, 1946-55 and 1973-74; and, more recently, Alberto Fujimori in Peru 1990-2000) and loyalty to that individual is often placed above that of governmental and political institutions as set out in a constitution. Furthermore, often, such as in the case of Fujimori and in Paraguay under the thirty-five year rule of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-89), the constitution was changed to personally benefit the leader, an action virtually unheard of in liberal democracies. As a result of these and other actions, the development of political and governmental institutions has been regularly interrupted and in many cases retarded and when they are restored there is often no consensus on their importance or role.

Third, the political cultural attributes of authoritarianism, corporatism, populism, militarism and corruption and, until recently, the belief that the ballot box was not the only way to political power, has tended to undermine the primacy and inviolability of political institutions (as they are viewed in liberal democracies). Thus, political institutions are seen as malleable in Latin America and not as the indispensable, guiding structures for framing and resolving the political and policy debate that they are in liberal democracies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Obviously, with twenty different Latin American countries these six factors are general points and may not apply equally to all countries.

However, bearing them in mind is a useful first step in understanding Latin American politics and how it differs historically and currently from that in liberal democracies. This leads to a final point—a caution—in studying Latin American politics (one that is applicable to studying all societies in transition to liberal democracy). This is as follows.

Even if the so-called “third wave” of democracy in Latin America is sustained and consolidated as many observers think (and hope) it might be even if it is far from certain as yet, we should not assume that the form of liberal democracy in Latin American countries will follow the same path or take the same form as that in the United States or other liberal democracies. History, the political cultural tradition and past political practices all bear heavily on all societies and these factors will shape the transition to democracy. In this regard, a better comparison for understanding the possible paths to democracy and the likely forms it might take in Latin American countries is to study an elitist democracy like Costa Rica or the transitional political systems of Eastern Europe and Africa.

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