

Is Latin America Experiencing a Second Cycle of Leftist Politics?

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ABSTRACT. Recent electoral victories by left-leaning leaders and parties mark another turn in the oscillations of Latin American politics, but they also signal enduring changes. The electoral success of the left is a sign of both the durability of electoral democracy and the persistence of social pressures in highly unequal societies. In this article, we discuss how the electoral fates and governing strategies of leftist movements and parties reflect the conditions in which they emerged. We analyze the political and organizational legacies of Cold War repression as well as the ways in which global events such as 9/11, the commodity boom of the 2000s and its exhaustion, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the new global wave of progressive movements, have shaped the ebb-and-flow of left-wing politics. We conclude with reflections on the possibilities for the construction of social democracy as an alternative to radical populist and right-wing oligarchical politics.

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Introduction

Recent electoral victories by left-leaning leaders and parties mark another turn (in some cases return) in the oscillations of Latin American politics. The Peronists returned to power in Argentina under the leadership of Alberto Fernández in 2019 on a slate that included former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (no relation) as his Vice President. The dramatic return of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia under the leadership of President Luis Arce in 2020 followed a 2019 coup that deposed President Evo Morales (2006-2019). In Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, released from prison in 2019, narrowly won the presidency in October 2022 against the far-right sitting president Jair Bolsonaro, thereby earning an historic third term in office.

Even more dramatic than the return of the left has been the rise of the left in countries long seen as bastions of neoliberal orthodoxy. A belated left turn occurred in Mexico with the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in 2018. Pedro Castillo, running as candidate for the leftist party *Peru Libre* narrowly won a runoff in 2021. The remarkable victory of former student protest leader Gabriel Boric in Chile in 2021 followed the election of a constituent assembly in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to replace that nation's authoritarian constitution. The election of Xiomara Castro, the wife of deposed President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), turned the page on a dark episode in Honduran history. Perhaps most remarkable was the historic election of Gustavo Petro in Colombia in 2022—the first time a left-wing president has been elected in that country.

If we include non-democracies, there are three Sao Paulo Forum members in power: Cuba under Miguel Díaz-Canel, in office since 2019, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, who succeeded Hugo Chávez in 2013, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, in office since 2007. In the

remaining countries, there are several in which the left has governed before and continues to be a major political force, notably Ecuador and Uruguay. Indeed, had the left not divided in Ecuador in the election in 2021, it would certainly hold power today, and the Frente Amplio in Uruguay arguably remains the most successful left-wing party in the region.

What explains the repeated electoral successes of the left in Latin America? One answer is that the emergence and establishment of the left is simply a consequence of normal electoral alternation and anti-incumbent sentiment among voters in a period following the rise of the right. As Eric Hershberg (2021) put it, “the driving logic of Latin American politics since the advance of democracy in the 1980s has been to punish leaders who have presided over a decline in wellbeing, and to reward presidents who are perceived to have delivered material or symbolic rewards to large segments of the population.”

Another view is that left-wing electoral victories tend to follow cycles of social protest and mobilization. That was true of the first cycle (Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2010), and likewise the more recent cycle of leftist electoral victories has, in some cases, followed social tensions and street protests. In particular, major protests in Ecuador (2019), Chile (2019-2020), Peru (2020), Bolivia (2019-2020), and Colombia (2019 and 2021) reflected popular sector frustration and anger in response to economic stagnation after rapid growth. The expansion of the middle classes in the early 2010s, when the left was in power in many countries in the region, was followed by a contraction, exacerbated by Covid-19, which sent millions spiralling back into poverty (World Bank 2021). In short, the second cycle of leftist victories reflects both normal alternation in office and social protests in the wake of economic troubles.

While both of explanations provide partial accounts, we think that there is more at work than conjunctural factors. A recent study of the politics of inclusion in Latin America

(Kapiszewski, Levitsky & Yashar 2021) suggested that “the principal impetus behind the region’s inclusionary turn lies in the sustained interaction between two broader phenomena: inequality and enduring democracy.” We argue that the emergence and establishment of the political left as a major political force in the region—one that is not going away—is part and parcel of this inclusionary turn. That is, perhaps, the most important take-away from current trends. The left turns that began in the 2000s were a novelty, and for that reason they attracted attention, but they were part of broader historical processes, both global and specific to Latin America.

The durability of democracy in the region has meant that, for the most part, Latin American leftists no longer think of seizing power as an historic event that occurs once and for all. Rather than capturing the citadel of power and clinging to it—an attitude that reflected the left’s exclusion from access to power by democratic means—today’s lefts appear to be, in different ways according to different rhythms, reconciling themselves to alternation in office, the core principle of electoral democracy. These positive trends should not be overlooked as we focus on the very real challenges to democracy in the region. We do not deny the persistence of a militaristic left in some places. Indeed, today’s authoritarian regimes that tilt left find their military roots in the Cold War era and continue to view politics from such a political imaginary. Cuba’s revolutionary regime is the most obvious example, but Daniel Ortega also first came to power by revolutionary means in the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, while Chavez came from conspiratorial circles within the Venezuelan military that motivated his coup attempt of 1992 and informed his practices in office. However, these actors are less the norm than the exception of left-wing politics in the region today.

Fear of the radical left means that challenges to democracy often come from the right in the form of often ferocious right-wing backlashes against the left. This is exemplified by the coup against Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in 2009. Legislators deposed him for merely proposing a plebiscite on constitutional reforms with a potentially *chavista* bent. The impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil was a politically-motivated interruption of the constitutional order by members of Congress who feared investigations into their own corruption. Bolivia's Evo Morales was deposed by a coup in 2019 following unproven allegations of electoral irregularities—which nonetheless seemed plausible given Morales' desire to cling to power, as reflected in a decision to override a referendum on re-election—only to be replaced by a highly repressive interim government. The unwillingness of Keiko Fujimori to accept the results of the latest elections in Peru, the imprisonment of Lula prior to the Brazilian elections of 2018 on charges that were later dropped, and the insurrectionary violence against democratic institutions in Brazil in January 2023, offer further examples.

Our argument has important implications for how we think about progressive politics in Latin America. As the world's most unequal region, Latin America has always provided a *caldo de cultivo* for the left, but in previous decades the left was repressed or marginalized and rarely had the opportunity to win election and govern by democratic means. From Guatemala to the Dominican Republic to Chile, leftist governments were overthrown by coups or invasions. The end of the Cold War led some observers to erroneously believe that the left would either disappear or would have to meekly accept free markets and liberal democracy: it would either transform itself into a social democratic force or become irrelevant. Such expectations were ill-founded. On the contrary, the left emerged to contest neoliberalism and challenge the parameters of liberal democracy. To explain this apparent anomaly, another thesis was put forward: that

there were two lefts in the region (Castañeda 2006; Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter, eds. 2010). In this view, an anachronistic, populist and authoritarian left was contrasted with a modern, market-friendly social democratic left. The former was represented by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, the latter by Tabaré Vázquez and José "Pepe" Mujica in Uruguay, Michelle Bachelet and Ricardo Lagos in Chile, and, with qualifications, Brazil's Lula.

Such typologies of the political left have more heuristic than explanatory value. A more productive analysis, we argue, starts by acknowledging that the left reflects the conditions, not of its own making, from which it emerges (Cameron 2009). Such an approach allows us to better understand the differences and similarities within and between these two cycles of leftist politics. In particular, we focus on key global events that contributed to the electoral victories of the Latin American left in the past two decades and that interacted with domestic conditions to shape the governing strategies leftist regimes pursued once in power. Most countries in Latin America made the transition from nationalist and populist policies associated with the developmentalist model of import substitution industrialization (ISI) to neoliberalism in the 1980s. The current era of politics in the region is defined by globalized neoliberal capitalism which imposes constraints against which cycles of political changes can be seen as reactive sequences. These reactive sequences may involve the rejection of neoliberal globalization by the radical left or reactionary backlashes against the left by the right. The logics of these cycles play out according to the conjunction of specific conditions at particular moments.

The paper is organized chronologically. The first section outlines the role that US foreign policy played in excluding the left from the political arena during the Cold War. This had far-reaching consequences for the weak organizational foundations of the left at the time of

democratization. The second section discusses the initial emergence and establishment of the Latin American left as an electoral contender (1980-2015). We emphasize the importance of two external factors in that process. On the one hand, the events of September 11, 2001, shifted the focus of US foreign policy to the Middle East, opening space for left-wing movements to reorient popular pressures from social protest to make headways through electoral institutions. On the other hand, the unprecedented demand in international commodity markets in the 2000s offered a windfall of financial resources that enabled many of these actors to build political projects around the expansion of social policies funded by neo-extractivist economic models. By the mid-2010s, these leftist governments began to be voted out of power, as the commodity boom receded, corruption scandals swept the region, and a right-wing backlash spread around the continent: Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022), Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru (2016-2018), Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) in Argentina, Sebastián Piñera (2018-2022) in Chile, Lenín Moreno (2017-2021) and Guillermo Lasso (2021-present) in Ecuador, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (2019-present) and, in the United States, Donald Trump (2016-2020).

The third section focuses on the second cycle of leftist governments, starting toward the end of the last decade with the rise of new leftist actors and the reconfiguration of progressive coalitions around the region. We argue that the second cycle of leftist politics was shaped by several factors: (1) the mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic by many governments; (2) popular mobilization and social protests linked to a new global *zeitgeist* of progressive politics related to the environment, ethnicity, gender and LGBTQ+ inequalities, human rights, and decolonization; and (3) the further weakening of United States leadership and influence following the election of Donald Trump. These leftist actors are coming to power under a recessionary global economy, marred by international war and high inflation. This means that

they will not have access to the financial windfalls that made possible the construction of leftist projects through the expansion of social programs, but will instead need to pursue potentially more profound reforms to maintain the support of their coalitions or else face electoral defeat.

The Left in Latin America during the Cold War

From the end of World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the left was, in effect, excluded from power in Latin America.¹ “How,” asked Jorge Castaneda in 1993, “has a current of thought, action, and motivation that has in fact rarely and only briefly governed in Latin America, and that has been mostly subjected to repression, division, and enduring marginalization, generated as much intensity of feeling and as great a sense of peril in the United States, and so much interest and often sympathy elsewhere in the world?” We argue that the left was marginal precisely because it was excluded from power by a hegemon with an inordinate fear of Communism. During the twentieth century, the United States devoted overwhelming resources—sponsoring coups, assassination campaigns, dirty wars, and even ground invasions—to stop the left from taking power. By historian John H. Coatsworth’s count, the U.S. government “intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America a total of at least 41 times” between 1898 and 1994. “That amounts to once every 28 months for an entire century...” (Coatsworth 2005).

¹ For an historical overview, see Dawson 2022, pp. 206-260, especially “Letter from Major Ernesto Che Guevara to Carlos Quijano, Editor of the Montevideo Weekly Magazine, *Marcha*, 12 March 1965,” pp. 219-230.

A critical event in the exclusion of the Latin American left was the CIA-backed overthrow of the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 in Guatemala. Arbenz had come to office following the presidency of social democrat Juan José Arévalo, with a promise of continuing moderate reforms including an Agrarian Reform Law that expropriated the lands of the United Fruit Company, encouraged unionization, and allowed the participation of Communists in the Arbenz cabinet. The land reform, although it was designed by Communist Party policymakers, was no more radical than similar reforms sponsored and indeed designed by US policymakers in post-war Asian countries—except that it affected the interests of a well-connected US corporation—and its goal was to end an oppressive plantation system in order to enable capitalist development. And yet the United States undertook an illegal campaign to destabilize the government. It armed and organized a paramilitary force under Carlos Castillo Armas that invaded Guatemala and deposed Arbenz.

The overthrow of Arbenz persuaded many of a generation of political activists that the democratic path to socialism would be blocked by the United States. The Cuban revolution in 1959 was even more significant. It provided reason to believe that revolutionary change was possible elsewhere in the region. It also reinforced the view that the United States would never tolerate change when the administration of President John F. Kennedy responded to the Cuban revolution with the Bay of Pigs invasion, multiple efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders, and the imposition of an embargo. Further evidence of US willingness to halt leftist politics in the region came with the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, which overthrew democratically elected president Juan Bosch after he implemented what, again, can only be considered modest social reforms. But it was the active involvement and encouragement of the Nixon government in the overthrow of the democratically elected socialist government of

Allende, and its support for repression in other Southern Cone dictatorships, that perhaps most glaringly came to symbolize US blockage of the Latin American democratic left. As late as the 1980s the United States remained stubbornly opposed to the emergence of left-wing movements in the region, even if that meant arming and directly supporting military repression, as in Central America. Indeed, US President Ronald Reagan was prepared to bypass Congress to illegally support repression in Central America and fund it with proceeds from drug trafficking and an arms deal with Iran. The point hardly needs to be belaboured: if you were a left-wing activist in Latin America during the Cold War you had a target painted on your back.

The left had two options: reform or revolution. Either they would find refuge in more mainstream nationalist and populist movements, parties, or governments, or they would pursue change through armed struggle. In countries with massive redistributive pressures arising from poverty and inequality, which is true of virtually the entire region, the demand for change had to find some expression. Often that expression came in the form of some variant of national-populism. Throughout the region, populists like Juan Perón, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Getúlio Vargas articulated visions of social change that had progressive elements, including an approach to ISI designed to foster an expanding domestic market for a rising middle class, provide opportunities for the political incorporation of organized labor, peasants, and middle sectors, and end the power and privileges of traditional oligarchical sectors of society. However, these were emphatically non-socialist movements for change—indeed, they sought to forestall change for the sake of national unity and political stability. Although they at times challenged foreign investors (like Cárdenas' expropriation of oil in 1938, or Andrés Pérez's nationalization of oil in Venezuela in 1975), they did so within the constraints of nationalist programs of industrialization. Rather than building a social democracy based on strong and autonomous

popular organizations, these national-populist projects typically occurred, as in the case of Mexico, within authoritarian and corporatist systems, or at best in democracies bounded by pacts between elites.

As a result, to speak of the left in these cases is, at best, to speak of the “left-inside-populism,” that is: the left *of* the PRI, the left *of* Peronism, the left *of* the Peruvian military regime. In Argentina, Peronism displaced and absorbed the left, to the degree that, when urban guerrillas emerged in the 1970s, they were but a radicalized wing of Peronism—the Montoneros. In Peru, where oligarchic power was unbroken until the 1960s, the military imposed a veto on the country’s main populist party, the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA). When nationalist and populist policies were finally introduced by reformist military officers, many leftist activists were recruited to participate in the regime, while others organized resistance from below. The PRI governments in Mexico allowed the left to exist within the party—for example, by creating space for a nonaligned or *tercermundista* foreign policy under President Luis Echeverría—but they violently repressed those strands of the left that challenged PRI hegemony (Echeverría was Secretary of the Interior at the time of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre). It is therefore not surprising that the most significant leftist challenge to PRI rule came from someone like Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, son of populist President Lázaro Cárdenas, who ran against the PRI in 1988. That election, marred by gross fraud, tarnished the legitimacy of Carlos Salinas’s *sexenio*, and contributed to the sympathy felt by many in Mexico’s left for what was truly the last—and as we argue below, ill-timed—guerrilla movement to emerge in Latin America: the Zapatistas.

In short, a distinctive feature of Latin American politics in the twentieth century was the exclusion of the left from power. In a region of massive inequalities, and thus huge potential for

redistributive politics, such exclusion was highly consequential. It meant, among other things, that the left was either coopted by often-authoritarian national-populist movements, or went underground and initiated a period of revolutionary politics, from the Cuban revolution in 1959 to the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. If we want to date the end of this period of radical revolutionary politics, the early 1990s can serve our purpose. That is the year the Sandinistas lost power in Nicaragua. To the surprise of just about everyone, including the Sandinista leadership and US policymakers, the 1990 election was won by opposition UNO under Violeta Chamorro—a result the Sandinistas accepted, thereby consummating Nicaragua’s first democratic alternation in office. The peace negotiations in neighbouring El Salvador further accelerated the shift from militarism to democratic politics. The Salvadoran guerrillas decided to negotiate an end to the conflict, not because they lacked the military might to overthrow the government, but because they realized that the United States would never allow them to take and hold power. They knew they had enough popular support to win elections, however, and this they did after the peace accords, first at the municipal, then national-legislative and finally at the national-executive level. Finally, the capture of Abimael Guzmán in Peru in 1992 began a process of disarticulation of the region’s most bloodthirsty and cultish revolutionary movement. The demobilization of the M-19 in Colombia left only the FARC to continue armed struggle, but the struggle became increasingly sustained by massive infusions of drug cash rather than a realistic possibility of revolution. The 1991 Constitution in that country helped create conditions for a peaceful settlement that today finds its culmination in the election of a former M-19 guerrilla. In short, by 1990 the cycle of revolutionary politics had run its course.

Left Turns After the Cold War

If an inordinate fear of Communism fueled US opposition to progressive movements in Latin America, what effect did the end of the Cold War have on US-Latin American relations? The question concerns the ways in which narrative frames shape decisions and actions in politics by organizing meanings and meaning-making. The end of the Cold War may have had a greater effect on how US decision-makers framed their understanding and approach to Latin America, and on the narratives that the Latin American right would mobilize to steer the democratic transitions of the 1980s and 1990s, than it did on how the Latin American left saw itself. The end of the Cold War was understood as an epochal victory for the United States—and, in particular, the Reagan and Bush administrations. It reinforced the deep and long-standing myth of US exceptionalism. The West had won; capitalism and liberalism had triumphed. This new narrative frame underpinned a series of US initiatives toward the region, including the NAFTA negotiation, the proposed Enterprise for the Americas initiative, the initiation of the Summits of the Americas process, and a proliferation of bilateral and regional arrangements to foster investment, trade, security cooperation, and closer diplomatic ties.

The new US interest in Latin America was matched, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by centrist and right-wing leaders in the hemisphere. The debt crisis in the 1980s had compelled policymakers throughout the region to abandon strategies of protectionism and look toward export-oriented models of development, much as the East Asian “tigers” had done before them. In some cases, the shift toward a more market-friendly model was pragmatic and instrumental, while in other cases the technocratic elite were composed of true believers. Mexico under Salinas, and Chile under the *Concertación*, were among the first to respond to the siren song of

US-style free market development. Indeed, it was Salinas' initiative to negotiate a free trade agreement with the United States that connected the end of the Cold War narrative frame with the rise of a more pro-US, market-oriented region.

From the perspective of the post-Cold War narrative frame, the future of the Latin American left looked bleak at the time, but this merely reflected a blind spot in the narrative. A growing sense of frustration with the disappointing results of the new economic model and the unresponsiveness of governments that had pacted with elites during the democratic transitions created grievances that vocally demanded political representation. For most of the Latin American left, the pivot from opposition to capitalism to opposition to neoliberalism was not difficult, especially since this allowed the left to capitalize on frustration and protest without threatening to undo basic property rights or challenge the state's monopoly on coercion. This would later prove crucial to their electoral success, as was most obviously the case with Lula's "Letter to the Brazilian People" during his fourth electoral bid in 2003, as he reassured investors that property rights would be respected.

The weight of the post-Cold War narratives and the organizational legacies of decades of repression and exclusion ensured left-wing projects remained electorally unviable in the 1990s. Instead, left-wing politics initially followed extra-institutional channels. Indeed, the emergence and establishment of new left movements, leaders, and parties begins with the Venezuelan *caracazo* and Zapatistas insurgency (Beasley-Murray 2010).

The news on January 1, 1994, that insurgency had broken out in the southern state of Chiapas in Mexico on the very day NAFTA entered into effect, created cognitive dissonance for those who had accepted the neoliberal case for negotiating NAFTA. A more jarring set of contrasting narratives is scarcely imaginable. Mexico had joined a free trade area encompassing

all of North America which—despite a bungled devaluation of the Peso—was intended to bring Mexico into the First World. And yet here was an uprising redolent of the Cuban and Mexican Revolutions. Some commentators noted that Chiapas was more like Central America than the rest of Mexico, but this was to ignore the highly connected and tech-savvy strategies of the Zapatistas, who quickly converted what looked at first like a military insurrection into a social movement, complete with global gatherings and national tours, and a strategy of negotiation with the government that led to the construction of autonomous self-governing zones. The Zapatistas represented a kind of transitional stage of the Latin American left, with one foot in the insurrectionary strategies outside democratic institutions inspired by the Cuban Revolution and one foot inside the new politics of progressive change in which the idea of capturing the state and bringing about revolution from above was abandoned. However laudable the aims of Zapatismo, it suffered from a fundamental incoherence. On the one hand, it embraced the ethos of “changing the world without taking power” (Holloway 2002) but, on the other hand, it failed to transform itself into a social movement capable of exploiting the spaces available to it as the Mexican system underwent a protracted process of democratization (Inclán 2018; Volpi 2004).

The *caracazo* was not merely a deadly and dramatic event telegraphing the dangers of the sudden and brutal unleashing of neoliberal reforms, but it was also the spark that ignited *chavismo*. It was the *caracazo* that pushed Chávez toward his failed coup attempt in 1992, after which he was imprisoned, pardoned, and finally elected president in 1998. Although Chávez came to be seen as the standard-bearer of the far left in Latin America, a leader who more aggressively than any other pursued socialism by more-or-less peaceful means, in fact Chávez was an anomaly: his anti-democratic temperament came not from populism and Marxism but

from militarism. He was the only left-wing leader in the first cycle of Latin America's left turns to emerge from within the armed forces.²

Chávez was initially persuaded that the only way that the left could seize power was by means of some variation on the theme of a military-backed popular insurrection. Had his 1992 coup been successful, he would have sought to exclude all politicians associated with the *Puntofijo* system, the pact that had generated Venezuela's four-decade old "partyarchy" (Cameron and Major 2001: 262). Having failed, however, he pursued the destruction of the *Puntofijo* pact by electoral means. Like the Zapatistas, there was a fundamental incoherence in this approach: he wanted revolution by democratic means. But revolutions are accomplished by violence, and democratic politics demands compromises, bargaining, forbearance, tolerance of opposition and other qualities that Chávez (and, more importantly, *chavismo* as a partisan culture) lacked. Chávez explicitly read the Chilean experience with Allende as proving the need to penetrate and control the armed forces. He retained the revolutionary left's view that power is to seize and hold.

The world was changing in ways that made Cold-War informed politics of friends versus enemies anachronistic in Latin America. The aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, favored the left for three reasons. First, 9/11 shifted US foreign policy to the Middle East with the fight against "radical Islamic terrorism," and US support for right-wing political actors in Latin America dwindled. Second, the scandals that quickly followed the "War on Terror" created new narrative spaces for left-wing movements worldwide to question the ideological

² Daniel Ortega was a former Sandinista combatant. Peru's Ollanta Humala was a military lieutenant but his left-wing orientation was abandoned within months of taking office.

triumphalism of the post-Cold War period. Finally, in a break with Cold War practice, the US made little attempt to prevent the left from governing.

Already in the 1990s, left-wing political actors in Latin America had begun to make headway through electoral channels, mostly at the local level. These local electoral trends percolated into national politics in 2003 with the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Néstor Kirchner's left-wards shift of the Peronist Party in Argentina. They were followed by the elections of Tabaré Vázquez (2004) in Uruguay, Evo Morales (2005) in Bolivia, Rafael Correa (2007) in Ecuador, and Fernando Lugo (2008) in Paraguay. These actors gave political representation to grievances against the economic and political models that followed the transitions to democracy and that had thus far only found expression through social protests and insurrectionary movements. In Bolivia, Morales's rise to power followed the Water Wars of 2000-2002 and the gas conflict of 2003, both of which were triggered by government initiatives to privatize natural resources, and it rested on a coalition of labor unions and indigenous social movements. In Argentina, Kirchner used the organizational structure of the Peronist Party to coopt segments of the *piquetero* movement, of primarily unemployed urban workers, that rattled Argentinean politics in the 1990s to bolster the left-wing faction within the party. In Brazil, Lula's successful 2003 electoral bid—the fourth attempt in his career— was backed by an alliance of working-class organizations mobilized by the Workers Party and social movements of landless peasants. In Ecuador, Correa received the support of indigenous organizations that had become influential political players in the previous years (although these organizations later distanced themselves from Correa's government).

Crucially, these new left leaders emerged from civil society and not the military or revolutionary groups. They came to power through elections, and once in power they governed

more or less democratically. Of the first cycle of progressive politics, two cases, Venezuela and Nicaragua, became dictatorships. Everywhere else in the region, the left was propelled not by revolutionary vanguards or conspiratorial military cabals, but as a result of popular protests, the politicization of ethnicity and indigeneity, nationalist struggles over resources, ecclesiastical communities, and working-class movements.

Yet, to suggest that the left simply embraced the democratic rules of the game would be simplistic. There was a pathway for the radical left to take power and remain in office with electoral legitimacy but nonetheless implement radical transformations of the political system. We refer, of course, to efforts to “re-found” republics by means of an appeal to the constituent power of the people to remake their political institutions in line with majoritarian conceptions of popular sovereignty. In this regard, *chavismo* pioneered a trend of constitution-making by means of constituent assemblies. While the idea of constituent assemblies is not only perfectly democratic but also profoundly liberal, in practice the process of constitutional change-making tended to be dominated by executive leaders and their parties, and thus represented in some respects a quite illiberal practice. Without minimizing the threat to democracy posed by Caesarist leaders like Morales and Correa who sought to perpetuate themselves in power by plebiscitary means, it is worth recalling that these processes released pressures for change that could have taken much less constructive forms (including political volatility in Ecuador and civil war in Bolivia).

Many of the new left governments relied on the dramatic expansion of social policy to remain in power. These policies were certainly necessary to alleviate the massive inequalities that characterized the region. However, they were also used in many cases as political instruments to maintain popular support. These strategies were made possible by highly

favorable economic conditions characterized by high commodity prices in international markets driven by heightened demand from the rise of China and India and low interest rates in the United States in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In such a macroeconomic environment, many of these leftist regimes pursued neo-extractivist projects in which the state played a major role in the extraction and commercialization of valuable primary goods and used those financial windfalls to fund the expansion of social programs.

In his first year in office, Morales increased taxes on oil and gas to finance social programs for poverty alleviation that significantly reduced inequality. Correa depended on revenues from extraction to sustain an aggressive expansion of social spending. Lula benefited from high commodity prices, and the downturn after 2013 undoubtedly hurt his successor Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), who was impeached after massive anti-government protests largely fueled by economic grievances.

Ultimately, the first cycle of leftist politics exhausted itself, and in one country after another the right emerged as an electoral alternative. As Santiago Anria and Kenneth Roberts (2019) put it: “In general, the right’s victories appear to be a routine alternation of power rather than a regional wave with common starting points and driving forces.” That said, the turn to the right also reflected the rise of strong right-wing social movements in Brazil, Peru, Colombia, and Central America, as well as the growing militancy of far-right parties and the adoption of repertoires of protest typically monopolized by the left.

The radicalization of the right expressed, above all, moral panic in the face of the advancement of progressive politics, intensified, no doubt, by anxiety about losing power and privileges associated with the status quo. Even though the first cycle of left-wing governments were not particularly socially progressive—despite significant improvements in pro-choice

policies in some cases, many were ambivalent about LGBTQ+ rights—moral rather than economic concerns are increasingly becoming the centerpiece of right-wing politics, following a broader global trend. For decades, the evangelical movement has gained ground in Latin America, especially Brazil and Central America, and this movement has become increasingly politically activated. Evangelical Christians and Catholics have found common ground in their opposition to what has been called “gender ideology,” by which they essentially mean feminism. The politicization of religion is a key factor, and we saw the role it played in bringing down the PT government in Brazil and elevating Bolsonaro to power. This religious right is internationally connected and networked, and it has ties with the Republican Party in the US which has weaponized religion, using issues like abortion and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights to mobilize its bases.

The anti-democratic character of some elements of the new right cannot be ignored. The post-truth and anti-democratic politics of Trump have spilled over into Latin America especially with Bolsonaro and Keiko Fujimori, and in a different way with José Antonio Kast and Rodolfo Hernández (of whom it may be said that while they did not win elections, they at least accepted election defeat). One feature of the radical right’s discourse is a return to the theme of anti-communism which seems out of place in the current post-Cold War context and seems intended to exacerbate polarization and divisiveness. The Latin American right cannot as easily use the threat of Communism to justify seeking international allies, as it once could, and seeking support for rolling back women’s rights and other key elements of the radical right’s agenda tends to appeal something more like a global right-wing hive mind than any institutionalized political project.

Another major weakness of the right is that, despite its commitment to growth, it often reflects the oligarchic tendencies in Latin American politics that limit economic development. In the absence of strong popular sector organizations linked to programmatic parties of the left, representative democracy tends to generate oligarchical governments that rule on behalf of narrow economic interests. Right-wing movements in Latin America have historically been less likely to mobilize around programmatic agendas and instead tend to revolve around the particularistic interests of entrenched elites to keep in place policies with regressive redistributive effects. As a result, the right has difficulty establishing durable governing coalitions because they are almost invariably based on a narrow social stratum and dependent on the relative demobilization of the popular sectors. The right can govern more democratically in social democracies because welfare programs are institutionalized and do not depend on the left holding office. In Latin America, on the other hand, the struggle between left and right tends to oscillate between periods of populist mobilization and oligarchic modes of rule.

Current Left-wing Leaders and Parties in Office

The recent cycle of electoral victories by the left may mean that alternation in public office has now become the norm, and in most countries in the region the left is included in these alternations. Several conjunctural factors have contributed to the (re)turn to the left in the late 2010s and early 2020s. The first was related to the Covid-19 pandemic and, in particular, the mismanagement of the public health emergency by many right-wing administrations. Covid-19 exposed the cost of neglecting public health infrastructure. More generally, the pandemic made evident the importance of having a robust state capable of providing important public goods. It made palpable how the retrenchment of the public sector had produced insufficient and highly

unequal healthcare systems and meagre welfare states incapable of providing the economic protections necessary to effectively implement emergency measures.

Second, like the left turns in the 2000s, the election of progressive governments has been preceded by major social protests. Protests weakened the conservative governments of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) in Mexico, Iván Duque (2018-2022) in Colombia, Sebastián Piñera (2018-2022) in Chile, Lenín Moreno (2017-2021) in Ecuador, Jeanine Añez (2019-2020) in Bolivia, and prevented a right-wing takeover in Peru. The political turbulence weakened the right and created a context in which new political leaders would emerge on the left.

Many of these protests echoed a new *zeitgeist* of progressive politics influenced by social movements from around the world, which tended to focus on human rights (especially in the context of abuses of state power and policy brutality), gender and LGBTQ+ equality, and Indigenous and environmental concerns, often wrapped in the mantle of decolonization. Indeed, once again, the left came to power in the aftermath of large-scale social protests, but whereas the protests of the early 2000s were primarily about economic grievances and opposition to the neoliberal economic model, the protests of the late 2010s were more likely to revolve around these post-materialist issues. In addition, the growing influence of decolonial thought in left-wing circles, although often limited to academia, has, in some cases, influenced the positioning of the left. This is most particularly notable in Bolivia, and more recently in Chile and Colombia.

A third conjunctural factor has been the diminished global stature of the United States following the Trump administration. Trump reversed certain key Obama policies, like the thawing of relations with Cuba, and appeared to support a tougher position on Venezuela—to the point of bringing back into government notorious hardliners from the Reagan and Bush years

like Elliott Abrams. However, Trump largely neglected Latin America, and his successor, President Joe Biden, has done little to reverse Trump's policies toward the region.

More importantly, the democratic backsliding in the United States since 2016 has meant that US foreign policy is no longer a source of bipartisan consensus, which makes it an unreliable pillar of international order. As a result, not only does the United States offer the Latin American region little in terms of diplomatic leadership, it has also lost much of the soft power associated with the view, justified or not, that the United States, because of its commitment to international institutions, is a reliable defender of liberal democracy around the world. The weakness of the US position was highlighted by the difficulty the US had in rallying the region within either the Biden Democracy Summits or the Summit of the Americas, held in Los Angeles in June 2022. The refusal of the US to invite Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, was sharply rebuked by Mexico's Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, among others, and resulted no-shows by several leaders.

Although the diminished stature of the United States is not unwelcome for Latin American progressive governments, it also hinders multilateralism, particularly the heavily US-funded and influenced Organization of American States (OAS), and puts to the test whether Latin American progressive governments can act collectively. In this sense, the "second left turn" is less of a regional phenomenon. This is not a singular left turn, not even the rise of two distinct lefts, but a proliferation of quite different flavors of the left as diverse as the domestic circumstances of each country.

The case of Bolivia illustrates this confluence of factors. Interim President Añez was, from the start, a polarizing figure, even though she sought to cast herself as a caretaker who would return the country to democracy and stability. Yet for many Bolivians, her actions were

provocative. She assumed office brandishing a Bible and appointed a cabinet without Indigenous members. Her timing was also unlucky. Covid-19 hit Bolivia in the middle of the crisis, and the polarization occasioned by the 2019 election politicized the policy response and hindered its effectiveness (Velasco-Guachalla, Hummel, Nelson-Nuñez, and Boulding 2021: 528-529). Despite repressive measures, or perhaps in part because of them, massive protests occurred in 2020, including general and wildcat strikes, in opposition to the interim government and in support of the MAS. Protesters were irate about the use of Covid-19 as an excuse to delay new elections. To further inflame matters, the unfortunate role of the OAS electoral observation mission allowed the MAS to turn the crisis into a struggle against US intervention.

In Argentina, economic voting played a key role in 2019, with two members of the left-wing establishment, Alberto Fernández and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, running on a ticket that sought to project a more pragmatic image than the previous administrations of Cristina Fernández. Having said that, women's and LGBTQ+ rights were a central part of that campaign, following the *marea verde* protests of 2018, when feminist movements launched the largest demonstrations in the history of the country on abortion rights. Indeed, this might be the policy area where Fernández's government has been able to contribute the most to important progressive reforms, pushing forward the legalization of abortion in 2020.

In Chile, Gabriel Boric's political career began with the student protests of 2011-2013 and rose to prominence during the *estallido social* of 2019, which started as a series of demonstrations against proposed increases in public transportation in Santiago but turned into a national wave of social protests in response to the government's excessive use of force to repress demonstrators. Criticizing the government's response, calling for the impeachment of Sebastián

Piñera, and supporting the call for a constitutional process, Boric positioned himself at the center of a new coalition of progressive movements in the country.

In Colombia, protests began in April 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to proposed tax increases and healthcare reforms by the government of Iván Duque. The intense crackdowns by the police led to escalation of the protests. As right-wing politicians such as the former president Álvaro Uribe called on the people to support the police, politicians like Gustavo Petro supported the demonstrations. What started as a series of demonstrations against specific policies then became a broader movement for political change that expressed a profound discontent with the right-wing political establishment, demanding the resignation of President Duque, the trial of Uribe for crimes against humanity during his fight against the FARC, police reform, and a return to the agreements of the Colombian peace process of 2020.

Even in Peru and Mexico, where, as we argue below, the recent electoral victories of the left are less clearly driven by progressive policy agendas, their success followed intense social protests against elite corruption. In Mexico, AMLO's victory in 2018, in his third presidential campaign, benefitted from the widespread discontent against the previous administrations of the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the PRI. In particular, demonstrations against corruption, gender violence, and the bloody security strategy of the government marked Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012-2018).

In Peru, Castillo's election followed a period of dramatic protests triggered by allegations of corruption in the context of the Lava Jato investigations, and the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted the insufficiency of the healthcare systems and the vulnerability of large segments of the population. As the unexpected front-runner in the first-round of the 2022 presidential elections, Castillo narrowly defeated the right-wing Keiko

Fujimori in the second round. Fujimori was virtually the only candidate against which Castillo could win given her high disapproval in public opinion.

Different constellations of factors have shaped the first and second cycles of left-wing politics. Crucially, left-wing governments today face dire economic circumstances. Instead of financial windfalls from booming international demand for primary resources, these governments will need to operate in a recessionary global economy reeling from the Covid-19 pandemic, and with inflationary tendencies caused by supply chain problems and the war in Ukraine. This means that left-wing administrations will not have easy access to external resources to roll-out costly social programs. This, added to the type of demands raised by their progressive coalitions, will require different governing strategies to maintain popular support, which may involve complicated structural reforms to address inequality, human rights protections, and environmental policy.

Since social democracy—that is, the pursuit, by democratic means, of some form of mixed economy to curb socioeconomic inequalities—is often framed as the progressive democratic alternative to radical populism, a key issue is whether social and political conditions in Latin America are propitious for it to grow in the region. We would be skeptical of any facile claim that conditions for the emergence and establishment of a social democratic left are finally present in the region. For something like social democracy to emerge, Latin American nations would need to manage the challenges posed by neoliberal globalization while preserving democratic politics in an increasingly polarized political landscape. Moreover, they would need a democratic left with the organizational capacity to defend the provision of public goods, advance more egalitarian fiscal systems, reinforce environmental protection, and expand fundamental

rights and freedoms into new areas (including race, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity and expression).

To what extent is such a scenario likely to occur in the countries of the region? We see the clear possibility of the left becoming a regular competitive contender for public office in Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. A strong indication of the degree to which the left in these cases has reconciled itself to alternation in office is the apparent lack of interest in any kind of fundamental constitutional reform or desire to remain in office beyond the constitutionally prescribed limit of these countries' current left-wing leaders. This is also the case in Uruguay and Costa Rica, where progressive policies have long been accepted by mainstream politicians and where constitutionalism is better established.

It is notable that both in Brazil and Bolivia, the rise of this democratic left radicalized right-wing reactions that put democracy at the brink of breakdown. In both cases, extremely polarized environments have tied the survival of democracy to the success and democratic commitments of the MAS and the PT. Thus far, at least in the Brazilian case, the PT has managed to broaden its coalition to include a vast majority of the political spectrum, including strong business interests and center-right political parties, which evokes the broad social-democratic coalitions of Interwar Europe. Yet, the PT still barely managed to secure a victory in the second-round of the presidential election in 2022 and will face a strong opposition in the legislature from Bolsonaro's far-right allies. The coalition behind the MAS in Bolivia has not significantly broadened beyond its core bases of support amongst labor unions and indigenous groups. A major challenge for the upcoming years will be the construction of workable compromises with other parts of Bolivian society to scale down the extreme levels of political polarization without giving up on its core programmatic agenda.

There is another group of countries in which the left has recently come to power for the first time in the post-1980s era. In this category are AMLO in Mexico, Castillo in Peru, Boric in Chile, and Petro in Colombia. These cases are especially notable because they are among the countries that have been most resistant to progressive politics. Although the left participated in government in Chile under the *Concertación*, it was limited by the neoliberal straight-jacket imposed by an authoritarian constitution, the binomial electoral system which guaranteed over-representation of the right, and a powerful societal consensus on the economic model, which has only recently come apart. In Mexico and Peru, the left in power is both socially conservative and lacking in well-institutionalized and autonomous channels for popular participation.

The *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional* (Morena), led by AMLO, has become a major populist political machine but, leftist rhetoric notwithstanding, AMLO's administration has been characterized by the implementation of a mix of progressive and conservative policies. Assuming that Mexico, after decades of rule by the PRI and PAN, needs a programmatic left to curb economic inequality through progressive redistributive policies, the expansion of social rights for marginalized groups, and strong environmental protections, the AMLO government falls short. It has had a deeply troubled relationship with the feminist movement, which was also true of many first-wave leftist governments (Beer 2021). It has given priority to traditionally right-wing policy issues, particularly a policy agenda of "republican austerity." In practice, this has meant major cuts to public services, the fight against corruption, and high-profile infrastructure projects, while continuing with a militarized strategy of national security. AMLO has governed much as if he represented the left of the PRI. His government has characteristics of the "left-in-populism," as in Argentina, rather than the kind of programmatic left represented by, say, the Workers Party under Lula, the Frente Amplio in Uruguay, or the MAS in Bolivia. While

Morena will reshape the party system around it in the coming years, it is less obvious that this will entail a meaningful consolidation of left-wing policies or more inclusive forms of political participation. The future of the Mexican left—particularly whether it institutionalizes popular participation through democratic institutions or seeks to perpetuate itself in power by stifling political competition—will hinge on Morena’s internal processes of candidate selection and campaign strategy in the coming presidential elections in 2024. To date, Morena has struggled to strengthen party organization, build strong linkages with society, and restrain AMLO’s tendencies for personalism and concentration of power (Bruhn 2021).

Pedro Castillo’s brief period in office between July 2021 and December 2022 highlights the distinctiveness of the Peruvian case: the left had neither established itself as a major political force, nor were all its various tendencies unequivocally committed to respecting democratic processes. Many leftist party organizations struggled to recover from the stigma of association with the extremism of the 1980s when Shining Path revolutionaries initiated a “prolonged peoples’ war” against the Peruvian state that culminated in authoritarian rule in the 1990s and the collapse of the party system. In a highly inegalitarian society, however, especially one in which racial, class, and regional cleavages often reinforce each other, preferences for progressive political change tend to find expression in politics, if only to be frustrated.

There is a precedent for the election of a leftist candidate, and for such a candidate to be unable to govern from the left. Ollanta Humala was elected in 2011 promising a “great transformation.” He was palatable to the electorate once he moderated his image in part because, as a former member of the armed forces involved in combat against the Shining Path, he could hardly be accused of being a subversive. In the face of implacable opposition, his progressive

policy agenda was largely abandoned and his left-leaning cabinet, led by Prime Minister Salomon Lerner Ghitis, lasted less than six months after being sworn on July 2011.

Disenchanted with Humala, many progressive voters turned to Verónica Mendoza who performed well in the 2016 presidential election, finishing in third place. She was well-prepared, pragmatic, experienced and yet youthful, but her moderation—undoubtedly motivated by a desire to appeal to urban progressives and avoid the stigma of extremism, an association made all the more repugnant to her by the socially conservative views commonplace in the left outside the *limeño* intelligentsia—prevented her from tapping into the frustrations of the electorate in 2021. Yet, in the traumatic aftermath of COVID-19 and the ensuing economic crisis, a significant minority of Peruvian voters were willing to embrace radical change—enough to make Castillo the front-runner in the 2021 election.

Castillo's unexpectedly strong performance in the first round and victory against Keiko Fujimori in the second round catapulted him into the presidential palace. He initially tried to govern with the backing of Vladimir Cerrón, the former regional governor from the Department of Junín whose party, *Peru Libre*, had adopted Castillo as its candidate. Cerrón did not hide his admiration for *chavista* Venezuela and spoke openly about the need to take power in order to remain in power. Castillo was open to convening a constituent assembly to re-write Peru's neoliberal Constitution of 1993, but he agreed to respect the established constitutional order. As relations between the President and *Peru Libre* grew strained to the point of rupture, the government became increasingly incoherent and shambolic. There were over 60 changes in cabinet appointments in Castillo's 18 months in office and little headway in governing let alone implementing a progressive policy agenda. His focus was the struggle for survival without a

party and against a political establishment that was highly mobilized and extremely angry about losing the election.

Having failed to overturn the election result, right-wing politicians in Congress sought to remove Castillo by declaring the presidency “vacant.” Two attempts failed, but a third attempt appeared to have alarmed the President, who responded pre-emptively by announcing his intent to dissolve congress. Without the backing of the armed forces, however, and lacking broad popular support, the effort fizzled within hours. Castillo was detained attempting to flee to the Mexican Embassy, and removed from office by Congress. As Vice President Dina Boluarte entered into dialogue with the opposition in Congress in a bid to serve out the remainder of Castillo’s term in office, the countryside, especially in southern highlands, irrupted in indignant protests demanding her resignation, the return of Castillo, and a constituent assembly to re-write the nation’s constitution. The government responded with repression leading to the loss of life of over 20 people. Once again, the inability of the left to establish itself as a legitimate political force—both because of its stigmatization by conservative elites and because of its own lack of commitment to the democratic process—contributed to the nation’s instability.

Chile and, to a lesser extent, Colombia offer more favourable prospects for the emergence and establishment of the left as a social democratic political force. These cases have inspired interest and enthusiasm in recent days, not only among progressive movements within Chile and Colombia, but also globally, given the humanitarian necessity of bringing about a lasting peace in Colombia and the significance of the Chilean effort to supersede an authoritarian constitution rooted in the Pinochet era. On the positive side, both Boric and Petro are evidently leaders who have proven to be equally committed to democracy and social justice. They are neither intolerant firebrands, nor equivocating moderates, and this perhaps helps explain why

their conservative opponents—hardline right-winger Kast in Chile, and right-wing populist Hernández in Colombia (and perhaps even more significantly Álvaro Uribe who remains a powerful figure in Colombian politics)—immediately accepted the outcome of the elections. While Petro is rarely mentioned in the global press without noting his background as a former left-wing guerrilla (he was a member of the Movimiento-19 in the 1980s), he has served in elective office for decades, first as member of congress and senator, then mayor of Bogotá.

The symbolism of Boric's victory in Chile is equally important: he emerged as a student leader and at age 36 is the youngest leader in Latin America at the time of his election. The power of this symbolism is only exceeded by Petro's choice of vice-presidential running mate, Francia Márquez, an Afro-Colombian human rights and environmental activist who has been vitally important in helping Petro to connect with the protest movements that contributed to sweep him into power. Both Petro and Boric won executive office in countries in which the state not only functions at a high level of capacity but also (with significant exceptions) upholds robust legal and constitutional traditions. In this sense, they represent contexts in which the emergence of something like social democracy seems possible.

At the same time, however, Boric and Petro face daunting challenges, which include weak or precarious governing coalitions and highly mobilized societies capable of venting pent-up demands for meaningful change. As noted above, even though Chile has at times been grouped among the countries that joined the first cycle of leftist politics under the *Concertación* governments of Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet, those leaders governed whilst wearing the straight jacket of the 1980 Constitution and were unable to fundamentally challenge the neoliberal economic model. In the face of massive protests, the Chilean political establishment reached an agreement to begin a process of constitutional change. This process was deliberately

designed to avoid the pitfalls of the Bolivarian constituent assemblies. The members of the constituent assembly were largely independent, gender parity was achieved, and Indigenous representatives were given a substantial voice. Their remit was to re-write the constitution, not to govern or usurp the functioning of existing institutions.

The members of the constituent assembly wrote a constitutional draft which recognized Chile as a free, egalitarian, inclusive, and plurinational society and called for the state to promote living well in harmony with nature (*buen vivir*). The draft was submitted to referendum on September 4, 2022. However, Boric's coattails proved insufficient—indeed, disappointment with his government may have contributed to the rejection of the draft. This was a blow to the government and a reminder of the challenges that the Latin American left faces as it seeks to give expression to the desire for change whilst not moving so fast as to threaten aspects of the status quo that relatively conservative societies still desire to retain. Constitutional change takes time, and one referendum loss should not be a source of excessive discouragement, especially since the draft is likely to remain a signpost for what future progressive change might look like in Chile and elsewhere.

The challenge facing Petro in Colombia is no less daunting. Colombia has been in a state of latent or manifest warfare for most of its republican history, and the failure of the referendum on the peace accord negotiated by President Santos revealed how deeply divided Colombian society remains. However, the victory of a left-wing candidate, which seemed very difficult to even imagine a few short years ago, suggests that change is not only possible but indeed is rooted in the past: the 1991 constitution, by breaking the monopoly of Colombia's traditional parties, may have opened the door to a transformation from a formerly-pacted democracy to a more genuinely pluralistic one. Petro, like Boric, appears to be a strong environmentalist, which makes

him a model quite distinct from the “rentier left” model embodied by Morales, Correa, and even Lula’s past administrations. Francia Márquez’s role and position in cabinet may herald important cultural changes, changes that can seem imperceptible at the time they are introduced but the fruits of which are reaped in the future.

Under current conditions we are not optimistic about the prospects for broad hemispheric alliances among leftist governments in the region. In contrast to the Bolivarian Alliance (or ALBA) which attempted to create a bloc of countries around the leadership of Venezuela, in particular, today the leftist governments of the region are more heterogeneous. In particular, a major cleavage within and across leftist governments is their orientation to environmental issues like extractivism and conservation, issues closely associated with the agenda of decolonization and the advancement of the rights to self-determination of Indigenous peoples (Riofrancos 2020).

Conclusion

Durable democracy in the context of persistent inequalities has created conditions for the full and institutionalized political inclusion of left-wing parties, movements, and leaders in most of Latin America. The left has emerged and established itself as a relevant political actor, and most citizens have become habituated to its presence. This process has also led, in most cases, to the democratization of the left. During the Cold War, many radical activists imagined that seizing power was a one-off event—one that demanded exceptional sacrifice and heroism. Moreover, without electoral pathways to power in the region’s authoritarian systems—systems that were backed and, in some cases, installed with the support of the United States—the revolutionary left sought not just to seize power by violence but to retain it by any means necessary. The rhetoric

of the radical left evoked a world in which justice could only be achieved through violence; while the reformist left struggled to find ways of working within often authoritarian national-populist projects.

After decades of electoral democracy, militaristic conceptions of politics have gradually given way to a more widespread acceptance of the need for alternation between government and opposition. However, populism, always an available strategy of mobilization wherever oligarchy persists, is a typical expression of democratic politics—it is “a quintessentially electoral phenomenon” (Foweraker 2018: 111). Yet given populism’s tendency to by-pass mechanisms of representation and intermediation, however, we argue that a programmatic left tied to robust popular sector organizations offers a better vehicle for the construction of the welfare policies and programs critical to a high-quality democracy. Indeed, it would not be unfair to say that a measure of the strength and quality of democracy in the region is the manner and extent to which the left as a programmatic alternative to the status quo is a major factor.

From our analytical vantage point, social democracy does not appear to be immediately around the corner. In all but a small number of cases, conditions are far more propitious to populism, which is always a mixed blessing for democratic institutions. Moreover, the possibility that left-wing actors will face intractable constraints once in power is today as likely as ever in the past three decades. Despite the bursts of social protest that have propelled many of these actors to power, they still need to govern societies with large segments of the population deeply committed to conservative values, as the defeat of the Chilean constitutional referendum and the close results of the Brazilian presidential election remind us. Furthermore, the current cycle leftist politics will face a hostile international environment, fractured by the climate crisis, the radicalization of right-wing political forces, and a global economic recession.

And yet, it was precisely in a similar context of political polarization and economic crisis that social democracy first emerged at the start of the twentieth century. The increasingly democratic character of progressive politics in many parts of Latin America, if combined with robust organizational vehicles for popular participation and political reforms that reinforce the democratic rule of law, has the potential to create the conditions for social democracy once again. Our goal has been to offer a sober and realistic mapping of these possibilities and the obstacles along the way.

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