

## INTRODUCTION

# Latin American Politics and Society

In this book, we analyze politics and the broader societies that shape and are affected by politics in Latin America. We will show how Latin America became what it is today and how it is confronting some of its main challenges.

Latin America is a region full of contrasts. It is currently the second most democratic region in the world, after Europe. It is a global leader in the political inclusion of women, transitional justice, and innovative social policies. However, it also is an endemically corrupt region and the most violent one of the planet. Added to this, the region has had the most unequal distribution of income in the world for over a century. Some of these contrasts are so big that it seems paradoxical that these features could coexist – yet they do.

In this book, we confront the region's core puzzles head on. Very centrally, we seek to convey in a vivid way why Latin America has achieved many things, but also has been unable to make the breakthroughs required to put an end to such obvious public bads as corruption, violence, and economic inequality. We will show that there are many reasons to be hopeful about Latin America, but that overall we should be measured and cautious about its prospects. The region's problems are deeply embedded in the way politics and society function. Thus, needed changes face many obstacles.

We organize the book in terms of subjects we study historically, over the long run, and topics we analyze in the contemporary period. We initially approach Latin America from a historical perspective, offering a sweeping overview of developments since pre-Columbian times and especially from the late nineteenth century until the present. We focus on the formation of modern states and four key tasks: strengthening the capacity of states, building inclusive nations, crafting democratic regimes, and selecting a model of development that generates socioeconomic welfare. We assess whether Latin American countries have made progress in these areas. We also consider whether some of the region's current problems are actually old problems that have endured over the decades.

Next, in the bulk of the book, we zoom in and study processes that have unfolded in the region from the 1990s to the present. In these parts of the book, we center our analysis on the power and promise of the democracies that emerged as a result of a regional wave of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s. We consider whether Latin America has been able to construct strong and durable democracies that channel the interests and values of citizens into the policy-making process. We also focus on the performance of democracies and examine whether they deliver a bundle of public goods that citizens demand – things as basic as security and the material means to live, but also others as central to a good life as a sense of justice. We assess whether democracy works well and works well for all, and we explain the achievements and failures of democracy.

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We cover all countries in the region where Spanish or Portuguese is the main language: Mexico, six countries from Central America, ten from South America, and two from the Caribbean (Cuba and the Dominican Republic). We use data on all these nineteen countries to shed light on long-term trends and contemporary patterns. We also use case studies, discussions of specific issues in one or more countries, to better understand the significance of different situations and why things happen as they do. We use all this information to reveal characteristics that Latin American countries hold in common, but also to single out features that make each country distinctive.

Here, we offer a preview of the book. We introduce our historical analysis by giving a sense of the subject matters and questions we will address, the general claims we will support, and the lessons from our historical analysis that inform our exploration of current Latin America. Then we turn to our study of contemporary times, and again discuss the topics and questions we engage with, and the broad arguments we make.

### The Historical Overview

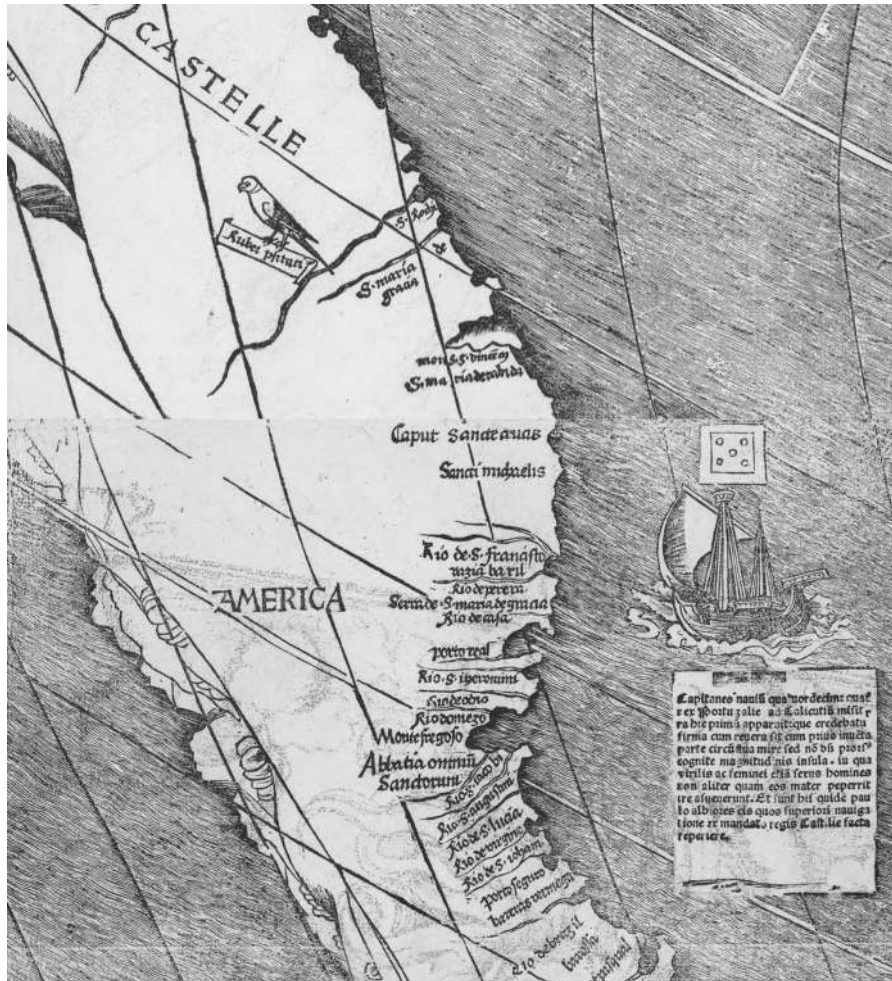
The very early history of the territories currently covered by Latin American countries can be divided into two distinct periods: the pre-Columbian and colonial eras. These lands were first populated by various indigenous peoples who developed multiple kinds of political organization – including some of the first states in the world. Subsequently, they were colonized and ruled by the Spanish and the Portuguese for roughly three centuries.

We will briefly discuss these two eras (in Chapters 1 and 2), in part due to their intrinsic interest and in part because they left several legacies that affected the social and political life of Latin American countries. However, we will focus on Latin America once a set of independent countries with central political authorities and well-defined territorial borders were formed. See Box 1 on the origin of the name Latin America.

#### Box 1 A Closer Look: How and When Latin America Got Its Name

The first recorded time that the Western hemisphere was called “America” was in the *Universalis Cosmographia*, the 1507 wall map of the entire world by cartographer Waldseemüller. The name America, drawn from the name of Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, was placed on this map on what we now call South America (see Map 1 for the part of the map corresponding to South America).

The term “Latin America” was coined considerably later. The initial idea was proposed by French author Michel Chevalier in the 1830s, and then adapted by Colombian writer José María Torres Caicedo and Chilean politician Francisco Bilbao in the mid-1850s. Subsequently, in the 1860s, the name was used by the French Emperor Napoleon III, who was trying to extend French imperial control over the region and sought to signal the cultural affinity between France and the region (Ardao 1980).



**Map 1** Close-up of the Martin Waldseemüller map showing South America and the word “AMERICA”

Source: *Universalis Cosmographia*, the Waldseemüller wall map, dated 1507. Martin Waldseemüller, 1507. Library of Congress (public domain).

Thus, the term Latin America is the result of a combination of a geographic term – America – and a cultural term – Latin, which refers to Romance languages (i.e., those derived from Latin) such as Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French.

### Modern States and Four Core Issues

There are many ways to tell the history of Latin American countries. Thus, we have made some choices about what to address and what not to discuss in the historical overview we provide in Part I. We take guidance from the classic themes in the social sciences and history disciplines.

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First, we analyze the birth of Latin American countries. We will use a distinct marker to identify the origin of countries: the formation of modern states, which we define as political organizations that have a monopoly of violence and that rule over a relatively large territory and a population that shares a common sense as nationals. (We will discuss this concept in more detail in Chapter 1.) We will show how a lengthy process of state formation led to the configuration of the countries that we currently recognize as collectively constituting Latin America (see Map 2 for the present-day map of the region). We'll treat the completion of the process of state formation as indicating the beginning of the history of Latin American countries, and we will start our account of Latin America proper at that point.



**Map 2** A map of Latin America  
*Source:* Authors' elaboration.

Thereafter, we address four core issues that are related to modern states – they could be considered variable properties of modern states:

- *State capacity*: the ability of a state to impose its rule throughout the territory and over the population it claims to control.
- *Nation building*: the deliberate effort to connect the state and the nation, and to construct a sense of nationhood – of cultural belonging – in part by defining the role of different racial and ethnic groups in constructs of the nation.
- *Political regimes and democracy*: the rules concerning access to the government offices that are endowed with the authority to make the most important public decisions and, in particular, whether these rules allow most citizens to determine who will govern them by voting in free and fair elections – a distinctive feature of democracy.
- *Development models and socioeconomic welfare*: the set of policies that aim to foster economic growth – and that indirectly affect the material well-being of citizens – and the policies that seek to directly ensure the social welfare of citizens.

How countries tackle each of these four issues – which lie at the intersection of politics, culture, and the economy – shapes the basic contours of the country and has a great impact on the lives of citizens. Therefore, we will spend considerable time analyzing how Latin American countries have addressed these matters throughout their history.

After clarifying the key concepts we use, we will characterize Latin American countries in terms of these four issues (e.g., using categories such as the elite vision of the nation, a construct of the nation that draws on European notions of a civilized nation). We will consider whether countries changed or remained the same over time across these issue areas (e.g., whether authoritarian regimes turned into democratic ones or endured), and offer explanations both for major changes and significant continuity. We'll also bring a normative perspective to bear on our discussion, and assess whether Latin America has made progress, that is, whether over time its inhabitants have lived better, fuller lives.

Normative questions, questions about what is good and what is bad, about what should be positively and negatively valued, are difficult to answer. Relatedly, legitimate differences exist regarding what metrics should be used to assess progress. However, it is important to know whether Latin America has made progress. It is also possible to offer an assessment that steers clear of controversy and relies on widely shared evaluation criteria. Thus, building on recognized standards, we will hold that countries have made progress when they have changed in the direction of: (1) a capable state, able to enforce the law and implement collective projects; (2) an inclusive sense of nationhood that treats all groups as equally worthy parts of the nation; (3) a democratic political regime that recognizes the right of citizens to determine who governs them; and (4) a development model that generates a high, roughly evenly distributed, level of socioeconomic welfare (i.e., that reduces poverty and inequality).

In sum, we will tell the history of Latin America from its beginning – the birth of countries as marked by the formation of modern states. We will describe and explain the evolution of

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four fundamental issues: state capacity, the nation, the regime, and development. We'll also evaluate whether the region has made progress.

### Historical Origin and Evolution

To foreshadow our analysis, we present our broad claims about the origin of Latin America and how the region subsequently evolved.

A first claim we make is that Latin America was born in the mid-nineteenth century – and not in the 1810s and 1820s, as is commonly believed. The independence movements of the 1810s and 1820s ended colonial rule, but it was only later, in the middle of the nineteenth century, that modern states, with clearly demarked territorial borders and a monopoly of violence, were formed. Indeed, the process of state formation was only completed in a thorough way in the region around 1875.

A second argument is that, after the formation of modern states in Latin America, the broad contours of politics and society have changed, but rarely. One big turning point in the evolution of Latin American societies came roughly in the 1930s, the other in the 1980s. Thus, Latin American history can be divided into three broad periods (1880–1930, 1930–1980, 1980–), each with their characteristic features and distinct dynamic. Big structures are not immutable, but they are not easily altered. See Photo 1 on various changes that started in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s.

A third, more substantive, assertion is that, when major change has occurred, it has not been total – that is, affecting all four issue areas or producing a full transformation in one single issue area. Change has also not always been progressive.

- *State capacity.* The capacity of the state has not changed in a substantial way throughout Latin America's history. Further, what has persisted are states with weak capacity. Latin America began its history with weak states and has not carried out a needed reform.
- *Nation building.* In contrast, the construct of the nation has undergone significant changes, in the 1930s and the 1980s, and these modifications were progressive. Over time, steps were taken to build a sense of nationhood that linked citizens to the state, while treating all races and ethnicities as equal members of the nation and acknowledging and respecting racial and ethnic identities.
- *Political regimes and democracy.* Political regimes also changed throughout the region's history, with big shifts also in the 1930s and the 1980s, and these were also progressive developments over the long term – regimes became more democratic. Also worth mentioning is that the process of democratization in the twentieth century was even more transformative than the innovations in nation building. Indeed, this improvement ranks as the biggest advance in Latin America's history.
- *Development models and socioeconomic welfare.* Finally, development models and the socioeconomic structures they create have changed, undergoing real transformation in the 1930s and the 1980s. However, unlike the changes regarding the nation and the



**Photo 1 The 1980s and 1990s as decades of change**

The 1980s and 1990s was a time of considerable political change and social mobilization in Latin America. Triggered in part by Mexico's default on its foreign debt in 1982, the region entered an economic crisis that led to profound and sudden free market reforms and a wave of protests against the new policies. At the same time, the region underwent a widespread process of democratization. By the early 1990s, the challenge to the old construct of the nation by indigenous movements had also erupted into public view. The picture on the top left shows soldiers deployed to respond to rioters protesting the government's new economic policies in Caracas, Venezuela, 1989. The picture on the top right shows Chileans celebrating the defeat of dictator Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite and the initiation of Chile's transition to democracy. The picture at the bottom shows women sympathizers of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which was made up mainly of rural indigenous people, in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994. *Sources:* (top left) © Eric Vandeville/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images; (top right) © Cindy Karp/The Chronicle Collection/Getty Images; (bottom) © Oriana Elicabe/AFP/Getty Images.

political regime, the evolution of development models and socioeconomic structures cannot be characterized as progressive. The region has oscillated between more and less market-oriented policies. And the current market-oriented model, adopted in the 1980s, has not produced satisfactory outcomes in terms of socioeconomic welfare – in particular, levels of inequality are high and persistent. As a result, the region is still searching for a development model that enjoys widespread legitimacy.

Finally, a fourth point we make concerns categories of people. The availability of data limits how fully and precisely we can estimate whether certain groups of people are disadvantaged. Nonetheless, our overview of Latin America's evolution shows that certain populations have been historically disadvantaged – we demonstrate that this is the case of women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and ordinary people.

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In brief, we will show that, after the birth of countries, Latin America had two periods of major change that have yielded an uneven overall situation regarding state capacity, the nation, the regime, and the development model. Contemporary Latin America has work to do on all four matters. However, the political regime and the construct of the nation can be assessed in relatively positive terms, and state capacity and the development model in relatively negative terms. Additionally, the region has a debt with several historically disadvantaged populations.

### Historical Novelties and Legacies

Learning about Latin American history is interesting in itself. Knowing the region's history is also important to better understand its present.

An understanding of Latin America's long-term trends is needed to recognize which features in the contemporary period are historical novelties and which are legacies of the past. These insights escape a short-term view, yet are key to an analysis of short-term developments in the contemporary period. In fact, we build on three lessons from our historical overview when we turn to the study of contemporary Latin America.

A first lesson is that the improvement in the state of democracy in the 1980s and 1990s was *the* key breakthrough Latin America made in its entire history. At no time in its prior history had democracy been dominant, as it currently is. No other feature of Latin American politics and society has been as positively valued throughout most of the region. No other development seemed to open up so many possibilities for progress in the region in the contemporary period.

Therefore, we will put democracy – its power and promise – at the center of our analysis of the contemporary period in Latin America. Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, Latin America faced a historic opportunity: to use the democracy it had conquered to achieve other goals. And nothing was more important for the region than to make the most of the prospects afforded by democracy. Indeed, to understand contemporary Latin America is, in some ways, to make sense of what the region has done with this opportunity, to apprehend whether democracies have performed as hoped or expected.

A second lesson pertains to two negative historical legacies: the persistent nature of state weakness and of economic inequality. There is something about Latin American societies that has entrenched these two features. Moreover, both features have a potentially big corrosive impact on contemporary democracies. State weakness affects whether countries are able to hold free and fair elections (e.g., if the state is not able to prevent drug lords from killing candidates, the electoral process is evidently tarnished) and whether elected leaders can implement policies and fulfill campaign promises. High economic inequality tends to go hand in hand with great political influence by the economically powerful, which undercuts the democratic principle of political equality.

In our analysis of the contemporary period we will thus pay keen attention to the relationships between democracy and state capacity, and between democracy and economic inequality. The history of Latin America suggests that it is important to consider whether



democracies in the contemporary period are able to revert these historical legacies or, on the contrary, whether these two enduring problems with deep roots in the region's past are allowed to distort the working of democracy and limit its possible benefits. This is a lesson of history we will revisit at various points in our discussion.

Lastly, we take to heart the importance of another negative legacy: the existence of historically disadvantaged populations. Our analysis identifies four such groups: women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and ordinary people. And this observation informs our analysis of the contemporary period. Understanding that certain groups have been historically disadvantaged serves as a corrective to ahistorical analyses that assume that all people have the same chances in life, something that is not true. Hence, we will explore with particular interest whether contemporary democracies have done something to acknowledge and counter the disadvantages experienced by these categories of people.

To recapitulate, our historical analysis yields three lessons regarding how to approach the study of the contemporary period. Most critically, it justifies a focus on democracy and the possibility of making progress through democracy. Also importantly, it reminds us that the study of contemporary democracy should be mindful of the weight of some legacies: state weakness and economic inequality, and the existence of historically disadvantaged populations.

## The Contemporary Period

Studying democracy and its performance in contemporary Latin America, while taking into consideration several historical legacies, is a complex task. Hence, in Parts II, III, and IV, we proceed step by step, exploring the state of democracy in Latin America and the results it is associated with, or produces, in different spheres of social life.

### Problems *of* and *for* Democracy

We divide our analysis of the contemporary period into three parts.

We first focus (in Part II) on democracy itself. The most pressing political question in the region, after the dictators who had dominated politics in the Cold War were removed from power, was: What can be done to protect and strengthen democracy? Thus, we start by addressing what we call problems *of* democracy – problems linked to the attainment and maintenance of democracy, but also problems related to the quality of democracy in established democracies.

The most basic question about democracy is always whether a political regime is democratic or not. Simply attaining democracy was the central political goal in Latin America from the 1940s through the 1980s. Furthermore, countries such as Cuba and Venezuela under Maduro show that this objective is still relevant. However, a concern for more countries in Latin America in recent times is how good their democracies are or, as this issue has been commonly framed, what is the quality of their democracies? (This relatively new concept

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of quality of democracy is discussed in Chapter 5.) Other significant problems relate to the political inclusion of women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and ordinary people. A related matter is whether political parties act as true agents of representation of citizens. Thus, we first consider the state of democracy in Latin America since the 1980s.

We also address other questions regarding democracy that have been relevant in the contemporary period. Citizens have used democratic rights – to vote, to run for office – to determine who occupies key offices of the government. These rights were an important conquest, and citizens have valued and used them. Still, they have also wanted their democratic governments to deliver public goods, such as safe neighborhoods, better schools, clear water, and access to health care. Moreover, they have frequently framed demands regarding these goods as a matter of rights.

We consider these issues regarding the performance of democracy under the heading of problems *for* democracy – problems regarding the development and strengthening of civil and social rights that citizens expect or hope democracies will address and solve. And we provide a full analysis of them. We evaluate the state of civil rights and how democracies have performed in protecting civil rights in Part III. We discuss how democracies have dealt with past human rights abuses, what democracies have done to fight high-level corruption, and how democracies have performed in protecting the right to life and reducing violence. We also assess the state of social rights and how well democracies have done in advancing social rights in Part IV. Here, we concentrate on whether democracies have succeeded in fostering sustainable development and have addressed the environmental consequences of economic activities, and what steps democracies have taken to reduce poverty and inequality.

Our examination of the contemporary period is infused with normative considerations and uses many normative concepts. At the same time, the main aim of our discussion is to understand what is happening with regard to democracy, civil rights, and social rights in contemporary Latin America. To that end, we describe the record of Latin America, using extensive documentation, and ascertain whether progress has been made. We also explain the region's record and draw on the experience of different countries to better account for success and failure.

That is, we offer an extensive analysis of contemporary Latin America, which focuses on problems of and for democracy, describes the evolution of the region and assesses whether it is making progress, and provides explanations for accomplishments and shortfalls.

### Poor-Quality Democracies and Few Public Goods

We provide what might be considered a qualified view of the prospects of Latin American democracies.

*A Record of Some Progress and Many Failures.* We will show that the state of affairs in contemporary Latin America is mixed, although more negative than positive on balance.

On the positive side, democracies have endured, giving credence to the view that the region has entered a democratic age, in which democracy is the norm throughout most of