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Order from Chaos

Next wave of elections in Latin America will test democratic resilience

Ted Piccone Monday, October 30, 2017

Editor's Note:

On September 29, the Brookings Institution and International IDEA co-hosted a full-day workshop convening high-level experts from Latin American embassies, the U.S. government, academia, and civil society to discuss current trends in Latin American democracy. The moderators of each session have authored blog pieces highlighting the main points of consensus, as well as ongoing challenges, related to their session theme. Read Daniel Zovatto's blog post [here](#).

Latin America is about to embark on an extended series of critical electoral contests that will tell us a lot about the state of democracy in the region. Most signs point to a wave of change, as we've seen in other big elections recently in Europe and the United States. But that change is likely to be heterodox ideologically, with fault lines more closely falling along old and new, rather than left and right.

That was the assessment of a group of experts from the region that the Brookings Latin America Initiative and International IDEA convened in late September to examine political trends in several countries heading toward national elections in the next 18 months, including Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Honduras and Venezuela. Several structural factors are driving this latest prediction—an anemic economic recovery from the end of the China commodities boom, frustrated expectations of new and traditional middle class sectors, and endemic crime and corruption, to name a few. Beyond these indicators, we also see a steady erosion of support for representative democracy in most of the region, which pushes the electoral field wide open for newcomers of various persuasions, good and bad. Colombia, for example, currently has a field of 30 candidates for president, 25 of whom are independent of any established political party; Mexico potentially has 85 independents vying for the top job.

To understand why this next cycle is likely to be especially tumultuous and unpredictable, we need to examine underlying trends regarding the quality of the region's political systems. A number of alarming indicators suggest the democratic

wave that swept across Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s is receding at a worrisome pace. Nearly every component of democratic governance—voter participation, political financing, independent media, checks and balances, rule of law, and civil liberties—is under stress. The traditional business model of democratic politics—everything from campaign finance to patronage to media—is failing and no clear substitute is yet in place to fix the problem.

This is particularly true in Brazil, where presidents elected by majorities cannot get their programs through a fractured congress made up of 28 political parties without resorting to old-style closed-door payoffs. While political donations from corporations are now barred as a result of the unveiling of an entrenched pay-to-play system, more systemic issues, like the proliferation of small parties, require major legislative and constitutional reform. Conversely, in Mexico, the problem of political corruption is sparking calls for an end to public financing of political parties, which many experts believe could reverse the last two decades of reforms to Mexico’s one-party “perfect democracy” past.

Growing public frustration with the quality of representative democracy is evident in a number of recent surveys. More worrisome is that it is leading to deep cynicism and loss of faith in the basic elements of liberal democracy. According to the latest AmericasBarometer survey of 29 countries in the region, publics are highly dissatisfied, not only with the quality of their democratic political system, but also with the delivery of basic public services that underpin citizen satisfaction with liberal versus authoritarian rule. Support for electoral democracy has declined from 69 percent in 2012 to 57.8 percent in 2016/2017, while those that believe high levels of crime and/or corruption would justify a military coup average around 37 percent. Similarly, support for executive coups in which presidents shut down legislatures has risen from 13.8 percent in 2012 to 20.5 percent in 2016/2017. Given the high perception and prevalence of crime and gross corruption in certain countries in the region, this is yet another indicator of the public’s tolerance for strong-man rule to tackle illegality. Moreover, trust in electoral systems and in political parties is at or near historic lows, leaving ample room for both reformers and populists to win votes through populist campaigns, personality contests and demagoguery.

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Can Latin America's young democracies withstand these headwinds? Here the evidence is more mixed. There are some signs that the region's notoriously weak rule of law is improving. Thanks in part to the release of the Panama Papers in 2015 and the Odebrecht scandal in Brazil, high-level political and business figures from Peru to Ecuador and Brazil are under indictment or in jail, breaking a decades-long track record of impunity for misdeeds. Even before these latest events, Latin American governments, with external assistance, began introducing higher standards to improve transparency in the public sector, modernizing audit systems, and expanding competition for public contracts.

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More importantly, the pressure points for change—empowered judiciaries and independent prosecutors, investigative journalists, active civil society, and mobilized citizenry—are having a real effect in fighting corruption throughout the region, notably in Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. New tools like social media combined with more traditional modes of public protests are also having an impact on democratic discourse. These forces are also bolstering democratic mechanisms at national and local levels, pushing for human rights, and channeling other citizen demands.

Another silver lining, compared to the ethno-nationalist and xenophobic tendencies in the global North, is the relative homogeneity of Latin America's population. Migration and terrorism, two key factors stoking far-right movements in Europe and the United

States, are not major issues in the region. The politics of identity instead reflect Latin America's longstanding class-based struggle for greater equality, so evident in the traditional political parties formed in earlier waves of democracy in the region. This version of class-based identity, however, is taking on new and unpredictable features given the disruptions to emerging and established middle classes, labor unions and youth caused by globalization, digitalization, and automation. Democratization has given more organized minorities, on the left and the right, a louder political voice in some countries, including religious and indigenous groups. Entrenched discrimination and high rates of poverty and abstention, however, remain major hurdles for most underprivileged communities.

One wedge factor that remains important in some of Latin America's political contests is the United States and, to a lesser degree, other external actors seen as interfering in internal affairs (Cuba, Russia, China, Europe). Geopolitically, the region remains highly divided, with Venezuela serving as the main test for the region's commitment to liberal democracy as the only legitimate form of government. President Trump's offensive attacks on Mexico, and his short-sighted retreat from NAFTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and rapprochement with Cuba, are likely to put some wind in the sails of traditional anti-American voices throughout the region, and open the door further to meddling by anti-democratic forces from Russia and China. His embrace of authoritarian and illiberal leaders, from Duterte in the Philippines to El-Sissi in Egypt, doesn't help matters either.

In sum, don't be surprised if the upcoming series of elections in the region yield the return of some form of strong-man populism, more heterodox ideologies, weaker checks and balances, and more dysfunctional governance. The atmosphere is volatile as political leaders wrestle with the forces of globalization and technology while trying to plan for an uncertain future. In the words of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "Of the world of yesterday we only see the ruins. Of the emerging world only the shadows."

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