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## **Latin America Goes Centrist**

*Michael Shifter ■ Javier Corrales ■ Eduardo Posada-Carbó*

# Latin America

## A SURGE TO THE CENTER

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Latin America, long associated with sharp ideological swings and notably erratic politics, is increasingly settling into the middle of the left-right political continuum. This development is discernible in voter attitudes and major policy directions in many countries. At times, the rhetoric that political leaders employ and the ways in which they describe themselves can obscure this trend and give the impression that ideology is more salient than it actually is. Although ideology still dominates the political discourse and environment in some countries, a careful examination of most approaches to economic, social, and security challenges throughout the region reveals that the ideological range within which policy is made has considerably narrowed. There is today a greater measure of predictability and pragmatism.<sup>1</sup>

This trend is not irreversible; it hinges on continued progress in a variety of areas. Its implications for improving the quality of democracy are generally positive, however. There is a growing focus in Latin America on developing practical and realistic solutions to serious economic and social problems—an approach to politics that tends to go together with an embrace of the rules of the democratic game.

At the same time, however, democratic deficits remain considerable. Too many Latin American countries are troubled by weak political institutions, inadequate judicial systems, stubbornly high levels of inequality, and rampant organized crime and citizen insecurity.<sup>2</sup> There are also clear signs, especially among young people, of an undercurrent of discontent with “politics as usual”—meaning especially the widespread practice of cronyism—and a demand for serious efforts to tackle persistent corruption. These are warnings for the region’s political leaders: In addition to

embracing more centrist politics, they must meet higher standards and expectations for effective and responsive political leadership.

The findings of the *Latinobarómetro*, a respected comparative public-opinion survey that has tracked political attitudes throughout the region since 1995, shed light on the shift to the center in recent years. In 2002, for example, only 29 percent of Latin Americans identified themselves as centrists; by 2008, that number had jumped to 42 percent. A systematic review of left-right political identities from 1996 to 2009 (see the Table on page 109) clearly shows that most Latin Americans are clustered in the middle, which has remained relatively stable over time. A number of countries have moved slightly leftward, but overall the regionwide movement has been much more toward the center than to the left of the ideological spectrum. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being the farthest left, no country fell below 4.0 for any year during this period—only one point left of dead center.

Likewise, the *Americas Barometer*, a survey periodically carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) of Vanderbilt University and a consortium of some twenty partner institutions, concluded in 2006 that, while there had indeed been a “shift to the left” in many countries, “the magnitude of the shift is small and the center of gravity remains somewhat to the right.”<sup>3</sup> The study found that the gap between left and right varies sharply from country to country. Although the results reveal continuing ideological cleavages in Latin America, it is unclear whether the shift in attitudes is more toward a leftist or a centrist orientation.

Political scientists Andy Baker and Kenneth Greene have developed an indicator known as “vote-revealed leftism,” or VRL, to determine voters’ ideology. The VRL index places voters’ preferences for leftist candidates on a scale of 1 to 20, with 1 the farthest right and 20 the farthest left. Mirroring the *Latinobarómetro* data, between 1995 and 2008 Latin America’s VRL went from 7.89 (center-right) to 9.82 (close to the exact midpoint of 10.5)—indicative of the centrism that has become more prominent throughout the region in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

The move toward the pragmatic center is largely a product of fundamental changes along a number of critical dimensions. It is hardly surprising that political moderation has accompanied the region’s recent and growing prosperity. Between 2003 and 2008, Latin American countries registered economic-growth rates higher than those seen in any other comparable period in recent memory. Moreover, to the surprise of most economists, Latin America weathered the 2009 economic crisis reasonably well (the major exception was Mexico, whose economy is more closely tied to that of the United States). Brazil especially stood out in this respect, but other economies also endured global financial strains better than had been anticipated.

The region’s sound performance reflects improved macroeconomic

**TABLE—LEFT-RIGHT SCALE IN LATIN AMERICA, 1996–2009**

Country	1996	1999/2000*	2004	2007	Average (1996–2007)	2009	Shift to Left or Right**	
Argentina	5.7	5.7	5.5	5.6	5.58	5.5	-0.08	L
Bolivia	5.1	4.6	4.6	5.2	4.93	4.7	-0.23	L
Brazil	5.1	5.0	5.1	5.1	5.19	5.6	0.41	R
Chile	4.8	5.0	4.9	4.9	4.97	4.7	-0.27	L
Colombia	5.7	5.5	5.6	5.8	5.94	6.3	0.36	R
Costa Rica	6.0	6.4	5.2	6.1	6.11	6.3	0.19	R
Dominican Rep.***	-	-	5.9	6.2	6.25	5.6	-0.65	R
Ecuador	5.3	5.4	5.2	5.1	5.37	4.5	-0.87	L
El Salvador	5.4	5.3	5.9	5.2	5.73	4.4	-1.33	L
Guatemala	4.8	5.0	4.9	4.6	5.23	5.1	-0.13	L
Honduras	7.1	5.6	5.8	5.8	6.64	6.5	-0.14	L
Mexico	4.6	5.4	4.8	5.3	5.21	5.3	0.09	R
Nicaragua	5.3	4.5	5.3	5.1	5.35	4.9	-0.45	L
Panama	4.0	5.9	4.1	5.2	5.27	6.3	1.03	R
Paraguay	5.9	5.1	5.0	5.1	5.36	5.1	-0.26	L
Peru	5.6	5.4	4.8	5.1	5.32	5.1	-0.22	L
Uruguay	5.2	5.2	5.0	4.8	5.09	4.6	-0.49	L
Venezuela	5.2	5.0	4.8	5.3	5.12	4.8	-0.32	L
Latin America	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.42</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>-0.12</b>	<b>L</b>

*Source:* Latinobarómetro; responses to the survey question: “In politics, people normally speak of ‘left’ and ‘right.’ On a scale where 0 is left and 10 is right, where would you place yourself?”

\*A single survey was conducted for 1999–2000.

\*\*This column represents the difference between the 2009 figure and the average of the preceding years. If the 2009 figure is higher than the average of the preceding years, the country has shifted to the right; if lower, it has shifted to the left.

\*\*\*The Dominican Republic was included in the Latinobarómetro survey for the first time in 2004.

*Note:* Survey data are available for the years 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2006. For the full year-by-year chart, see [www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/ShifterGraphics-22-1.pdf](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/ShifterGraphics-22-1.pdf).

policy making as well as deepening economic ties with the rest of the world and especially China, whose intake of Latin American commodities has helped to fuel its own spectacular growth.<sup>5</sup> According to the UN Economic Commission on Latin America, the region is expected to grow, on average, at a rate of more than 5 percent in 2010. Negative growth will beset only Venezuela and—in the wake of its devastating earthquake and other unrelenting difficulties—Haiti.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the region’s poverty levels have declined measurably in recent years. In some countries, the drop has been particularly impressive. Brazil, for example, managed to lift 29 million people (close to a sixth of the country’s total population) out of poverty between 2003 and 2009. Furthermore, as Luis López-Calva and Nora Lustig have docu-

mented, levels of inequality—traditionally Latin America’s Achilles heel—have also decreased in some countries, thanks in part to effective social policies such as conditional cash-transfer (CCT) programs.<sup>7</sup> The standard indices of socioeconomic inequality remain higher in Latin America than in any other world region. Yet some countries have made notable progress in shrinking the enormous disparity between rich and poor that all too often has sown a harvest of discontent and instability in Latin American politics. These economic developments have resulted in swelling middle classes, particularly in a number of the larger Latin American countries. This is an important development because, as Seymour Martin Lipset wrote in 1967, a significant middle class has long been the missing ingredient for robust democratic development in the region.<sup>8</sup>

### **Key Players Move to the Middle**

Several key cases exemplify the regionwide trend toward centrism. In Brazil’s 2010 presidential election, the policy differences between the two leading candidates—Dilma Rousseff of the Workers’ Party (PT) and José Serra of the Social Democratic Party (PSDB)—were mostly negligible, with Serra espousing a more restrained foreign policy and assigning a somewhat less important role to the state in the management of economic affairs. Both candidates promised strikingly broad continuity with the successful policies pursued by outgoing president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, for whom Rousseff had served as chief of staff.

As Brazil’s first president from the PT, Lula had built on and extended the foundation of economic stability laid by his predecessor Fernando Henrique Cardoso of the PSDB, with special focus on enhancing social benefits through the Bolsa Família CCT program. The economic results speak for themselves: Since 2005, Brazil has averaged 4 percent growth, poverty is down, and so is inequality. Lula, whose policies were marked by fiscal discipline and expanded trade with China (which has surpassed the United States as Brazil’s largest trading partner), was regarded as a “leftist” leader. Yet he exercised enormous moderation and pragmatism in his economic policies. Brazilian voters, mostly pleased with their improved well-being, quite rationally elected Lula’s hand-picked successor, who will likely pursue a similarly pragmatic course.<sup>9</sup> Although Brazil still confronts immense challenges, including low levels of productivity, deficient infrastructure, and low-quality education, the country’s progress has been impressive.

In Colombia, whose population of 45 million makes it South America’s second-largest country after Brazil (190 million), there is also a notable trend toward centrism and consensus on key public policies among politicians of varying stripes. In the country’s May 2010 presidential contest, the differences among the early candidates vying to

replace popular incumbent Alvaro Uribe were modest. All six of them essentially endorsed Uribe's hard-line approach to dealing with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) insurgency. In economic affairs as well, there were no serious proposals to depart from current, predominantly pro-market policies. As Eduardo Posada-Carbó points out in his essay, the candidates differed mainly in terms of personal style, background, and perceived fitness for the job.

Juan Manuel Santos of the Social Party of National Unity (Party of the U) won overwhelmingly. Santos's victory can be attributed to his having served as Uribe's defense minister, his broad experience in security and foreign policy, the effectiveness of his campaign, and the perceived shortcomings of his rival, Green Party candidate and former Bogota mayor Antanas Mockus. Santos is a proponent of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair's "third way," a blend of market economics and socialist ideals. Already during the first several months of his presidency, Santos has demonstrated his pragmatism at home and abroad. He has, for example, accorded high priority to developing a *modus vivendi* with the notably unpredictable and problematic Hugo Chávez, president of neighboring Venezuela—a more diplomatic and institutional approach than the one that Uribe favored.

Chile, one of the region's few consolidated democracies, has also undergone a shift toward greater pragmatism in recent years. In the past, the country had seen different ideological experiments, from the left of the political spectrum (Salvador Allende, 1970–73) to the far right (Augusto Pinochet, 1973–90). In the last election, however, the two runoff candidates—Sebastián Piñera of the conservative Alliance for Chile and Eduardo Frei of the center-left coalition known as the Concertación—displayed relatively narrow policy differences on key economic, social, and foreign-policy questions.<sup>10</sup> But after twenty years, Chileans had grown tired of Concertación rule and were eager for a change, as best embodied by Piñera. As *Latinobarómetro* data reveal, however, there is no evidence of any ideological shift to the right among Chileans that accounts for this electoral outcome.

As president, Piñera has essentially continued to pursue the social programs that were carried out under his immediate predecessors, Michelle Bachelet and, before her, Ricardo Lagos—both Socialists. Indeed, analysts have characterized the Piñera government as resembling more a fifth Concertación administration than anything radically different. In the realm of foreign policy, Piñera has enjoyed a curiously practical working relationship with President Evo Morales of neighboring Bolivia. Although Piñera and Morales could hardly diverge more widely on major political and ideological questions, a set of shared interests has led them to manage the historically tense relationship between Chile and Bolivia quite effectively. The solidarity and personal connection between the two presidents was further strengthened when the eyes of

the world became fixed on Chile during the October 2010 rescue of the 33 long-trapped miners—one of whom was Bolivian.<sup>11</sup>

The case of Peru poses a particularly interesting and challenging puzzle. Not only has the country been experiencing an economic boom—thanks largely to trade and exports—but its levels of poverty and inequality have dropped considerably as well.<sup>12</sup> A country that has long been, and continues to be, sharply torn along ethnic, class, and geographic lines, Peru of late has witnessed a substantial growth of its middle class, a development that augurs well for its long-term democratic prospects.

At the same time, however, these impressive economic advances have yet to be joined by any high degree of political institutionalization and predictability. As highlighted by the country's October 2010 municipal and regional elections, political parties remain severely fractured and widely discredited. Alone among Latin American leaders presiding over dynamic economic growth, Peru's President Alan García, of the center-left Aprista party, has rarely exceeded approval ratings of 30 percent. Moreover, according to the *Latinobarómetro*, levels of citizen confidence in political leaders and institutions in Peru are among the lowest in the region.

As a result, the outcome of the April 2011 presidential election remains uncertain and hard to predict. To be sure, with major economic and social improvements, the risks of political instability in Peru have receded somewhat in recent years. Nonetheless, the possibility of an antisystem candidate such as Ollanta Humala of the Nationalist Union Party for Peru (who nearly won in 2006) reaching the presidency cannot be ruled out. It is striking, however—and a testament to the trend toward moderation—that in the current electoral climate, Humala has moved markedly to the center on economic and foreign policy. Despite this tack to the middle, however, polls suggest that other leading candidates are doing better than he is with voters. These contenders are former Lima mayor Luis Castañeda Lossio of the National Solidarity Party; congresswoman Keiko Fujimori (daughter of ex-president Alberto Fujimori) of the Strength 2011 party; and former president (2001–2006) Alejandro Toledo of the Peru Possible party. The campaign is likely to reveal that, in light of their recent economic success, Peruvians have come closer to a consensus about macroeconomic policy, though there is still deep discontent about corruption and public insecurity and frustration with the slow and sporadic strides on the equality issue.

### **What About the Supposed Left Turn?**

Just a few years ago, media and scholarly observers were emphasizing a widespread leftward shift in Latin American politics, as reflected in the electoral victories of Morales in Bolivia, Lula in Brazil, Bachelet

in Chile, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Chávez in Venezuela—in addition, of course, to the rule of the Castro brothers in Cuba.<sup>13</sup> Numerous studies and analyses focused on Latin America's increasingly radical orientation in the arenas of economic and social policy as well as in international affairs. Such a trend, if true, would tend to undercut the argument that most of the region is pursuing a more centrist, moderate course.

There is little question that, at least in the first part of the twenty-first century, candidates who could be described as left-leaning gained growing support and allegiance in parts of Latin America. The political center of gravity, as *Latinobarómetro* and other public-opinion surveys have shown, has moved slightly to the left. In general, countries in the region now place more emphasis on achieving greater socioeconomic equality, and they have become more distant and independent—at least politically, if not more broadly—from the United States than they were in the 1990s. These changes have been profound and are likely to endure.

Yet any mention of this leftward swing of the pendulum cries out for significant qualification. First, many analysts and scholars have properly called attention to the sharp differences that divide the region's "leftist" governments from one another. For example, the literature often distinguishes between a moderate and pragmatic left—Lula's Brazil, Bachelet's Chile, the Uruguay of Tabaré Vázquez and now José Mujica of the Broad Front, and the El Salvador of Mauricio Funes of the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)—and a more populist and authoritarian grouping made up of Chávez's Venezuela, Morales's Bolivia, Ortega's Nicaragua, and, many claim, Correa's Ecuador.<sup>14</sup> While such a broad distinction has some heuristic value, it obscures the sharp differences—which may well outnumber the similarities—that exist within these two large groupings. As Mitchell Seligson argues, the left-right divide lines up very differently across countries in the region.<sup>15</sup>

The next major qualification that must be brought to bear in assessing the "leftward-shift" thesis is the current—and too often overlooked—tendency toward a leftism strongly shaped by pragmatism. Uruguay's President Mujica, who was inaugurated in March 2010, exemplifies this trend. A former Marxist Tupamaro guerrilla, Mujica has shown a clear commitment to moderate and prudent economic policies. Vice-President Danilo Astori, who served as finance minister under Vázquez, adopted a range of economic policies aimed at controlling the debt, curbing inflation, and attracting foreign investment. The policies that Astori helped to put in place—under both Vázquez and Mujica—have contributed to Uruguay's ability to weather the recent economic crisis and, with increased foreign investment and sustained growth, even to prosper. It is worth noting that Mujica has demonstrated a less ideological approach on the foreign-policy front as well, as demonstrated by his public meeting (rare for Latin

American leaders) in Cuba with the dissident “women in white” (Damas de Blanco) who are protesting the Castro regime’s repressive policies.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the most moderate among the so-called leftist countries have proven to be the most successful. They blend economic progress, social-equity gains, and democratic governance. Brazil’s accomplishments stand out in this regard, especially given its history of economic disorder, authoritarianism, and stubbornly and unacceptably high levels of social inequality. To be sure, vast inequities persist in Brazil and will pose major challenges for the Rousseff administration. But the recent gains reflect a formula that is undeniably producing positive results. Moreover, it is a formula that rests on the effective macroeconomic policies (including fiscal discipline and expanded trade liberalization) begun under Cardoso’s presidency in the 1990s and carried on under Lula’s “leftist” government.

Many of Latin America’s more successful left-leaning governments have supplemented the tenets of the Washington Consensus—ten market-oriented policies promoting fiscal discipline, privatization, deregulation, and trade liberalization—with targeted social policies.<sup>17</sup> While some of the prescriptions first advanced by the Washington Consensus in 1989 are no doubt valid (fiscal discipline, for example), the list was incomplete, as is widely recognized today, and it overlooked the persistent problems of poverty and inequality in Latin America.

By contrast, leftist governments that have based themselves not on democratic give-and-take, as in Brazil, but on the autocratic concentration of vast power into the hands of a single person, have demonstrably failed in Latin America—if not in terms of longevity, then at least in terms of effectiveness. This is particularly the case in Venezuela, as Javier Corrales notes in his essay. After nearly a dozen years in power, Chávez retains the support of nearly half of Venezuela’s electorate. Yet the setback that his ruling party suffered in the September 2010 legislative elections reveals a growing dissatisfaction with the government’s performance in tackling a deteriorating economic and security situation that particularly plagues the poorest sectors, Chavez’s main constituency. In 2010, Venezuela’s GDP was projected to shrink by 3 percent, while the region’s economy as a whole (apart from natural disaster-afflicted Haiti) was expected grow by more than 5 percent.

In this regard, however, it is important to resist the temptation to lump together all the governments commonly deemed to belong to the populist-authoritarian left. There are relevant distinctions among them, and each has particular features that merit careful attention. Chávez’s grandiose ambitions and oil wealth, for example, make him a unique phenomenon in today’s Latin America. He cannot be easily compared with other leaders, even those who form part of the coalition that he heads, the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA). In Bolivia, for example, despite the concentration of power in the presiden-

cy and the erosion of constraints, Morales's government has exhibited admirable fiscal discipline and earned praise from international financial institutions. Moreover, although profound political and economic problems remain, Bolivia under Morales has witnessed higher levels of political participation from the country's majority (and traditionally marginalized) indigenous population.

Finally, it is unclear whether this set of leaders was elected in the first place because of an ideological shift or because the traditional political institutions had collapsed, discrediting the incumbents. As former Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo has suggested,

In the absence of concrete and positive economic results, people lose trust in a political system that prides itself on lofty values which it seemingly cannot live up to. Citizens come to feel that the protections promised by this system do not apply to them, they lose faith in themselves, and they grow dangerously ready to forfeit their human rights and their country's liberal-democratic safeguards to a strongman who promises immediate results to a marginalized majority.<sup>18</sup>

The available polling data, from Latinobarómetro and elsewhere, do not suggest any underlying ideological transformation among voters. As Baker and Greene argue, there was a growing demand in a number of countries to moderate radical reforms in the area of privatization, for example. It remains to be seen, however, whether the resistance and discontent stemmed from the practice of privatization per se, or whether it derived from the rampant corruption that often accompanied it. According to the Pew Research Center, the overall attitude toward free trade and globalization has been consistently more favorable in Latin America—even among the “leftist” countries—than in the United States.<sup>19</sup> In sum, there is little evidence to suggest that there has been a wholesale repudiation of the key ideas of the Washington Consensus, as is often claimed. Rather, there has been a modification, refinement, and expansion of these ideas, which have been put into practice with considerable success by recent “leftist” governments in Chile and Brazil.

Although some recent and important elections in South America have received the lion's share of attention from commentators, it is also instructive to examine developments in Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico. Analysts rightly point to the increasingly sharp differentiation that sets South America apart from the rest of Latin America in critical respects. South American countries are becoming more and more independent of the United States and cultivating important ties with China, which has become an avid consumer of the region's commodities. Central American and Caribbean countries and Mexico, however, are increasing their economic integration with the United States through a series of important trade agreements, while simultaneously competing with China in the area of light manufacturing. In addition, the

role and importance of immigration and remittance flows are considerably more prominent in the northern, as distinguished from the southern, part of Latin America.

Nonetheless, in the realm of politics there are some striking similarities. In examining a number of recent elections in Central America,

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***Pervasive criminality highlights the most serious threat to more centrist politics and more effective democratic governance throughout Latin America.***

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for example, it is hard to discern a pronounced ideological bent. The cases of El Salvador and Panama illustrate this point. In 2009, Mauricio Funes became El Salvador's first elected president from the FMLN, the party of the demobilized guerrilla movement that fought in the country's bloody civil conflict (1979–92), after nearly twenty years of rule by the rightist Arena party. Funes's election carries enormous symbolic significance for a region seeking to transcend longstanding ideological chasms.

Indeed, Funes has governed as a consummate pragmatist and has modeled his government after Lula's and others associated with Latin America's more moderate left. Operating within significant economic constraints, Funes has pursued free-market policies that are distinguished from those of his predecessors by a greater emphasis on poverty-alleviation strategies. The Funes administration's foreign policies have been centrist as well, as reflected in El Salvador's accommodating posture toward the United States and its stand in the Honduran controversy. Funes has strongly urged other Latin American leaders, including Lula, to recognize the government of Porfirio Lobo, who was elected president of Honduras in November 2009 under a provisional administration that followed the June 2009 military coup.

In 2009, Panamanians also displayed considerable fatigue with their ruling party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), and instead elected Ricardo Martinelli of the more conservative Democratic Change party. Martinelli, whom the *Economist* depicted as a "centrist independent,"<sup>20</sup> had skillfully portrayed himself as an "outsider" and successfully tapped into the public desire for a change. Although there have been some concerns about democracy and the rule of law under the current administration, Martinelli has in great measure continued the economic path pursued by his predecessor, Martín Torrijos of the PRD. Panama has enjoyed an impressive economic boom and feels little incentive to change course. It would be a stretch to argue that either Funes's or Martinelli's electoral victory was a product of an ideological shift in one direction or the other in Central America.

Ideological fervor appears to be on the wane in other countries as well. Despite some occasionally heated rhetoric from Nicaragua's President

Daniel Ortega (leader of the Sandinista National Liberation Front since 1979 and president of Nicaragua from 1985 until his defeat at the polls in 1990), a close examination of his key decisions reveals less ideology and more pragmatism. Ortega's main aim is to stay in power, and he has shown himself ready to pursue it by any means necessary—including electoral fraud, cynical dealmaking, manipulations of the political system, and even amassing troops on a disputed border with Costa Rica to arouse nationalist sentiment. At the same time, he has honored the Central America Free Trade Agreement with the United States, forged under his predecessor, and he has been accommodating with the international financial community. Under the current Ortega regime (he was elected president again in 2006 after numerous failed runs), ideology has taken a back seat to sheer power politics. Thus in the case of Nicaragua, the implications for democratic progress of waning ideological fervor are far less heartening than has been the case elsewhere.

The Dominican Republic and Mexico also offer examples of electorates that are pressing for moderate-leaning governments with a problem-solving bent. Leonel Fernández, who is currently serving his second consecutive term (and third term overall) as president of the Dominican Republic, is regarded as a reformer who has presided over sustained economic growth and implemented a number of social programs aimed at reducing poverty. Fernández has further burnished his centrist credentials by serving as a mediator in various regional disputes, including the conflict between Colombia and Venezuela in 2008.

Meanwhile, it is almost certain that the outcome of Mexico's important July 2012 presidential election will be determined less by ideological swings in one direction or another and more by the electorate's confidence in a candidate's ability to tackle the grave problems of drug-related violence and organized crime, along with profound economic challenges and corruption. Although many analysts pointed to a severe ideological cleavage during the country's closely contested and disputed 2006 presidential election between Felipe Calderón of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Jorge Domínguez has argued that Mexico's voters, more so than its political parties, were located in the political center of the left-right continuum.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had ruled the country for some seven decades before the PAN came to power in 2000 and had evolved from its original revolutionary roots to become a nonideological, establishment party, made significant gains in the July 2009 legislative elections. The PRI's strength in those contests and its reasonably good prospects for regaining control of the presidency in 2012 suggest that citizens may be moving away from the more ideological parties. Instead, voters are concerned foremost with practical matters—primarily the country's rapidly deteriorating security situation.

Indeed, pervasive criminality represents the most serious threat to more centrist politics and more effective democratic governance throughout Latin America (including much of Central America and particularly Guatemala, where organized crime risks producing more old-fashioned authoritarian reactions). In Mexico, since Calderón took office in 2006 and tasked the armed forces with fighting the drug cartels, there have been more than 30,000 deaths. Although security specialists are quick to point out that the overall level of violence in Mexico is comparable to that of other countries in the region, the savagery of the killings—and their concentration in such cities as Ciudad Juárez along the U.S. border—make the situation particularly alarming. In addition, the widespread public perception of unchecked violence raging between ruthless cartels makes it extremely difficult for elected officials to practice moderate politics. Nonetheless, despite the huge differences between Mexico and Brazil, for example, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean for the most part appear to share South America's growing penchant for pragmatic centrism.

### Signs of Unease

Some recent political developments in Latin America suggest that, while there is broad consensus on major economic and social policies in much of the region, there is also some measure of dissatisfaction with politics as usual. Young voters in particular, many from the region's expanding middle classes, have been sending strong messages to the political establishment that they want cleaner and more open government, including an end to cronyism. Worries over corruption have figured strongly in a number of key elections in Latin America over the past year. These results should be interpreted as a warning against complacency about a region that in general still appears to be moving, however slowly, in the direction of greater progress on a number of political and economic fronts.

The biggest surprise coming out of Chile's last presidential election, for example, was the emergence of Marco Enríquez-Ominami, formerly of the Socialist Party, who was neither with the center-left Concertación nor the center-right Alliance. In a country with arguably the region's most highly structured and predictable party system—one that consistently offers voters a pair of clear options—it was striking that in the first round of balloting Enríquez-Ominami won more than a fifth of the vote. He fared particularly well among younger, middle-class voters who had grown weary of the center-left coalition yet did not feel drawn to the center-right. Even in Chile, the region's best economic and political performer in recent years, there is a growing constituency that is pressing for institutional renewal and more open and competitive politics.

In Colombia as well, the most unexpected feature of the last election was the surge of the Green Party's Mockus. To be sure, the Mockus phe-

nomenon eventually fizzled and he lost badly to Uribe's successor in the runoff. But Mockus's dramatic jump in credible polls months before the election can be construed as a rejection of the corrupt politics associated with the country's traditional political system. Mockus polled extremely well in major cities, particularly among young Colombians belonging to the middle classes. His supporters, disillusioned with the mounting scandals that came to light toward the end of Uribe's second term, pressed for greater government accountability and transparency. Mockus's support also derived to a large extent from his conciliatory style, which contrasted sharply with the confrontational politics that Colombians had grown accustomed to under Uribe in recent years. In a well-organized and structured political system such as Colombia's, the Mockus phenomenon, however fleeting, was significant. It reflects a growing sensibility in Latin America—one that, in the Colombian case, President Santos has wisely heeded and incorporated into his own governing style.

Finally, what was most remarkable in Brazil's 2010 election was not Rousseff's victory so much as the surprisingly strong first-round showing made by Green Party candidate and former environmental minister Marina Silva. No one predicted that she would be able to muster 19 percent, forcing a runoff. Silva ran as an outsider, challenging the two conventional candidates. Like Enríquez-Ominami in Chile and Mockus in Colombia, Silva drew the bulk of her support from the younger, middle-class voters concentrated in Brazil's major cities. Although most Brazilians are highly optimistic and favor continuity with the economic and social policies put in place by Lula, they wanted to send a message to the political establishment that they are troubled by some of the recent corruption scandals, including one that had implicated Rousseff's successor as Lula's chief of staff.

To be sure, the sizeable votes for Enríquez-Ominami, Mockus, and Silva express somewhat different phenomena and reflect specific national characteristics. For example, despite its name, Colombia's Green Party has no particular allegiance to environmental concerns. This is not the case, of course, with the Green Party in Brazil, where such concerns are especially pronounced in certain sectors of society. Nonetheless, there are some commonalities in these and other situations in Latin America that indicate a strong and widespread desire for clean government and a demand for more open politics.

At the start of 2011, there is reason for considerable optimism about the general direction of economic and political affairs in Latin America. Given the vagaries of global circumstances, continued economic reliance on commodities, resistance to institutional reforms, and substantial democratic deficits in a number of countries, however, it is unclear whether the current situation will last. Many observers are also worried about a certain complacency toward the status quo, which would render the region less competitive economically and less robust politically than it can and should be.<sup>22</sup>

Still, though it is risky to extrapolate from today's realities, current tendencies suggest that, despite a few exceptions and sharp differences among the countries, the region as a whole will continue to move toward more pragmatic, centrist politics. Latin America's links to the rest of the world will only grow in number and strength, and its middle classes will probably continue to expand in coming years. Economic growth may be too modest and equity gains too slow and meager, but it is reasonable to expect continued progress, particularly in countries such as Brazil, whose size and significance make it a bellwether for the rest of the region.

Although significant problems remain, Latin America's recent success at reducing poverty and generating a growing middle class bodes well for future democratic gains. Electoral choices and outcomes are likely to reflect government performance, especially the ability to solve such pressing problems as crime and unemployment. Ideological groups will remain on the scene and in some cases will define politics, but their numbers and strength will probably dwindle. Globalization, no doubt, has a dark side—particularly as regards the spread of organized crime, which has had devastating consequences for the rule of law in Latin America. In general, however, the deepening ties between the region and the rest of the world have had salutary economic and political effects.

The waning of unstable ideological politics and the move toward greater pragmatism and moderation mean that the old ways of seeing and talking about Latin America need an overhaul. Increasingly, the region is behaving politically much like other parts of the world, where standards of performance and effectiveness are decisive in determining electoral choices and outcomes. The trend that is now underway in this highly differentiated region is far from irreversible and is bound to suffer setbacks. Yet in the context of new global realities—and Latin America's deepening connections to them—the move toward centrist politics may well become ingrained.

## NOTES

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1. A shorter version of this essay appeared in *Foreign Policy*; see Michael Shifter, "Latin America's Shift to the Center," *Foreign Policy*, 6 August 2010; available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/06/latin\\_americas\\_shift\\_to\\_the\\_center?page=0,1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/06/latin_americas_shift_to_the_center?page=0,1).

2. UN Development Programme and OAS, *Nuestra Democracia*, 2010; available at [www.nuestrademocracia.org/pdf/nuestra\\_democracia.pdf](http://www.nuestrademocracia.org/pdf/nuestra_democracia.pdf).

3. See Mitchell A. Seligson, "The Rise of Populism and the Left in Latin America," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007): 88–95.

4. Andy Baker and Kenneth F. Greene, "The Latin American Left's Mandate: Free-Market Policies and Issue Voting in New Democracies," *World Politics* 63 (January 2011).

5. See “Special Report on Latin America,” *Economist*, 9 September 2010.
6. “Comunicado de Prensa: América Latina y el Caribe crecerá 5.2% en 2010,” *CEPAL* (21 July 2010); available at [www.eclac.org/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/prensa/noticias/comunicados/2/40262/P40262.xml&xsl=/prensa/tpl/p6f.xsl&base=/prensa/tpl/top-bottom.xs](http://www.eclac.org/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/prensa/noticias/comunicados/2/40262/P40262.xml&xsl=/prensa/tpl/p6f.xsl&base=/prensa/tpl/top-bottom.xs).
7. Luis López-Calva and Nora Lustig, eds., *Declining Inequality in Latin America: A Decade of Progress?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2010); former Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo champions the effectiveness of conditional cash transfers as a means of improving human capital in “Latin America: Democracy Without Development,” *Journal of Democracy* 21 (October 2010): 5–11.
8. Seymour Martin Lipset and Aldo Solari, eds., *Elites in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
9. Ian Bremmer and Chris Garman, “Embracing Lula’s Pragmatic Legacy,” *New York Times*, 4 November 2010.
10. Juan Forero, “Chile Race Reflects Latin America’s Growing Preference for Free-Market Centrists,” *Washington Post*, 17 January 2010.
11. Michael Shifter, “Rescued Relations,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2010, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/14/rescued\\_relations](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/14/rescued_relations).
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13. See the cluster of articles entitled “‘A Left Turn’ in Latin America?” in the October 2006 issue of *Journal of Democracy*.
14. See Jorge G. Castañeda, “Latin America’s Left Turn,” *Foreign Affairs* 85 (May–June 2006): 28–43.
15. Seligson, “The Rise of Populism and the Left in Latin America,” 91.
16. “José Mujica y Astori sin compromisos ante cubanos,” *El País* (Montevideo), 8 September 2010.
17. Nancy Birdsall and Augusto de la Torre, “Washington Contentious: Economic Policies for Social Equity in Latin America,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Inter-American Dialogue*, 2001.
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22. Harinder Kohli, Claudio Loser, and Anil Sood, *Latin America 2040: Breaking Away from Complacency: An Agenda for Resurgence* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2010).