

# PRESIDENTS AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA



Edited by  
Manuel Alcántara, Jean Blondel and Jean-Louis Thiébault

# Presidents and Democracy in Latin America

This new textbook provides students with a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the presidents and presidential leadership in Latin America. Unlike other texts, *Presidents and Democracy in Latin America* integrates both political analysis and major theoretical perspectives with extensive country-specific material.

Part One examines the developments in recent years in Latin American presidentialism and identifies different characteristics of society and politics which have influenced Latin American governments. The personalization of political life and of presidential government help to illustrate the character of Latin American politics, specifically the type of political career of those who occupied the presidential office, the leadership style of these presidents and the type of government which they led.

Part Two studies two presidents in each of six countries in the region which reflect the broad trends in the political and electoral life: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. Each case study first provides the biographical background of the president; it outlines the political career of the president both inside and outside of a party, including at the local level; the popularity of the president at the time of the presidential election is given, as well as the mode of selection of the candidates (selection by party leaders only, by party members or by a primary). The relation of the president with the government or ministers, especially if there is a coalition government, is detailed.

This textbook will be essential reading for all students of Latin American politics and is highly recommended for those studying executive politics, political leadership and the state of democratic governance in Latin America.

**Manuel Alcántara** is a Full Professor at the University of Salamanca and Professor Emeritus of FLACSO Ecuador. His field research concerns parliament elites in Latin America, parliamentary performance in Latin America and democracy and elections in Latin America. His most recent books include *El oficio de político* (2012) and *Sistemas Políticos de América Latina* (2013, 4th edition) and, as editor, *Procesos políticos y electorales en América Latina (2010–2013)* (2013) and *Selección de candidatos y elaboración de programas en los partidos políticos latino-americanos* (2013).

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**Edited by  
Manuel Alcántara, Jean Blondel  
and Jean-Louis Thiébault**

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**To Chantal, Estelle, Aline, Lena and Camille**  
**Jean-Louis Thiébault**



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## Part I

# Presidentialism and Political Capital in Latin America

Latin American governments have been influenced by two main characteristics of society and politics. They are primarily the result of the important part played by individuals in social and political life. Latin American societies have been markedly affected by inter-personal relationships in the villages and rural communities where substantial practices of patronage and clientelism have long prevailed; with the extension of the right to vote, elections were deeply influenced by these practices. The impact of personalities on the political life of Latin American countries has continued to this day, and remains substantial despite increased urbanization. Latin American voters have continued to choose personalities over party programs. Political culture has been strongly influenced by this personalization of social and political life.

The second main characteristic of Latin American governments has been the adoption of the presidential system. Influenced by the work of the founding fathers of the American republic, Latin American countries set up institutions drawn largely from the US constitutional model. Nonetheless, Latin American presidents represent another type of executive. In the United States, there is a president, but there is no government. Latin America has a large number of presidential regimes characterized by a high degree of consistency and similarity. They constitute a type of intermediary regime comprising many elements of presidential regimes, but also few features of parliamentary systems with coalition government integrated by a sufficient number of parties to ensure a majority in congress. For almost twenty years, Brazil has been considered an extraordinary case of 'coalition presidentialism', and Bolivia's political regime between 1985 and 2005 was defined as 'parliamentarized presidentialism.' This explains why the president's leadership is important and has an impact on the nature of government. The key feature of the popular election of the president has been the inherent tendency of Latin American countries to emphasize the role of personalities in politics.

The analysis presented here takes into account the specific characteristics of Latin American polities from the early 1990s. These characteristics are in the first place economic. Latin America experienced a series of economic crises during that period, being one of the most 'volatile' parts of the world economically: regional indicators such as the gross domestic product, exchange rates

## 2 *Presidentialism and Political Capital in Latin America*

and budget deficits were roughly two or three times more 'volatile' than those of developed countries. On the other hand, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the region has experienced marked economic growth and substantial social progress: Asian demands for commodities and for agricultural products, which constitute the main part of Latin American exports, have grown strongly. The income from that trade has greatly stimulated regional economies and helped to strengthen monetary reserves. Economic growth has indeed benefited the poorest citizens of the region. There has been a reduction in poverty and a significant decline of economic and social inequalities. Governments spend more money than previously to help the poor and improve health, education and housing for low-income segments of the population and, as a result, the percentage of the population living above the poverty line has risen sharply: in 2010, a third of Latin Americans belonged to the middle class, compared with 17 percent in 1990. Yet these changes have not prevented Latin America from being markedly affected by violence. A long list of factors accounts for this violence, such as the persistence of inequalities, youth unemployment, organized crime, and weak institutions of justice and security.

There are also aspects specific to Latin American politics. In the 1990s, democracy spread across the region, except in Cuba and Venezuela, while Colombia and Mexico experienced marked political violence, the state being unable to maintain order and public security. The militarization of these countries often led to abuses in terms of human rights without preventing the spread of violence. Democratic development also meant that the number of regularly held free and fair elections increased. The number of political parties and the growing ideological polarization were also a sign of strong political pluralism. Institutional mechanisms have also been used to resolve conflicts, while military coups have ceased to occur and the new democratic regimes have proven able to solve political crises as they occurred.

Yet Latin American democracy still faces problems. First, there persists some degree of 'illusion' about what elections can achieve: many countries remain in a hybrid zone, on the road to democratic consolidation, as if the electoral process was sufficient to establish democracy. Second, what has been called 'delegative democracy' has tended to spread. Moreover, personalization and concentration of political power have resulted in a degree of 'turbulence' in Latin American democracies. The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War also led to difficulties. Meanwhile, the period was marked by the implementation of a 'Washington Consensus,' which became central to economic policies in the region, despite some variations among the countries concerned.

Thus, two main characteristics (the personalization of political life and the adoption of presidential government) provide some explanation of the character of Latin American politics, specifically regarding the personality type of those who have occupied the presidential office, the leadership style of those presidents, and the type of government that they led.

Chapter 2 examines the conditions in which presidential leadership takes place in Latin America. That leadership is strongly influenced by the institutional

context resulting from the presidential form of government. Additionally, there are three other strong sources of influence over presidents: their personal skills, the social and political relations that they hold and their personal reputation.

Chapter 3 examines the nature of presidential government in Latin America. Its differences from presidential government in the United States are highlighted, where, instead of a cabinet, the ministers (the ‘secretaries’), are individually and separately dependent on the president. In Latin American presidential government, there is a range, from governments wholly dominated by the president to governments which are coalitions and are at least partly collegial.

Chapter 4 seeks to identify trends, patterns and differences in terms of profiles based on the levels of education and family backgrounds of Latin American presidents from 1978 to 2015, including those who were popularly elected and those who replaced popularly elected presidents who had died or resigned. The political careers of these presidents, both before they came to office and after leaving it, are also examined. During the period under consideration, only three women were elected presidents. Presidents tend to be drawn from an urban context, except in Brazil. In the case of most, family members had previously held political office. Presidents tend to have had a university education, mainly in law. They also had pursued a long political career before becoming president.



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# 1 **Politics in Latin America in the Past Third of a Century (1978–2015)**

*Manuel Alcántara*

Latin America's transition to democracy, a period that stretches from the 1978 elections in the Dominican Republic to those held in El Salvador in 1994, has been followed by the full consolidation of electoral democracy, with leaders elected competitively, freely and, for the most part, without corruption. This period is unprecedented in the region's history, not only due to its length but also because, despite the very different models of political development adopted by individual countries, its key features are common to the vast majority of Latin American nations (Alcántara, 2008 and 2013).

The advent of democracy and its subsequent development were a consequence of different causes: on the one hand, a clear effort to redesign institutions in order to guarantee new political regimes after transitions and, on the other hand, the existence of new leadership. The end of dictatorships and military governments allowed the emergence of new elites, and presidents became fundamental pieces of the political system. Presidentialism along with old phenomena like 'caudillismo' and populism reinforced the role of the presidency.

Although each country's transition was crucially influenced by its particular history, the Venezuelan presidential elections of 1998, from the perspective of hindsight and given the events that have since occurred, should probably be considered a key dividing point from the late 1970s to the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

From 1998 onwards, not only did Latin American countries gradually begin to form two blocs, with some espousing the form of political action referred to as 'Bolivarian,' but elements that, albeit not necessarily new, were important in defining the nature of the political struggle were also more explicitly incorporated into the Latin American political agenda. Understanding these processes and explaining the political struggle requires paying attention to who holds power. In that sense, Latin American politics offers wide heterogeneity of leaderships: professional politicians, outsiders and populists are just a sign.

This chapter examines the different periods into which Latin American politics between 1978 and 2015 can be divided. It is based on matters of a political-institutional nature, and of political economy combined with different kinds of leadership. The chapter concludes that there are sufficient grounds for thinking



that 2016 may have marked the start of a new political cycle which, despite institutional consolidation, raises questions about the advance of democratic representation.

## **Recovery of Democracy and Neoliberal Victory in the 1990s**

### ***The Third Wave: Democratization Arrives in Latin America***

Latin America's processes of democratization in the 1980s were unprecedented both in their intensity and reach. They were intense in that, despite the constraints discussed below, countries that took the democratic road did not abandon it and, in an historic milestone, distanced themselves from a return to authoritarianism. Moreover, democratization affected the vast majority of the countries of the region, except Cuba: there was no precedent when almost the whole of Latin America had embraced democracy at the same time. Although democracy was restored in the Dominican Republic and Ecuador in the second half of the 1970s, it was not until the 1980s that it became generalized. In the 1990s, however, the optimism that had prevailed at the beginning of that decade began to be widely questioned. A bitter-sweet sensation predominated in analyses of a situation that permitted very divergent appraisals of the results, with a positive view (which was not groundless) pitted against a negative view backed by equally solid and verifiable results (Diamond et al., 1999).

The positive interpretation of democracy's performance drew on arguments of four kinds. The first cited a generally positive mood in the region, given the advances achieved by all countries, except Colombia,<sup>1</sup> Venezuela,<sup>2</sup> Peru<sup>3</sup> (at least in 1992–2000), and Guatemala.<sup>4</sup> The second argument points to the indisputable fact of the number of elections that took place, mostly in a clean manner, with respect for the rules and with a quite high level of competition.<sup>5</sup> Turnout was also more than acceptable, with a regional average of over 60 percent.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, it is important to note the existence of clear and free competition between the political parties that serve as the channels for political representation. Both the level of ideological polarization and the number of parties, with a regional average of around 3.6, clearly testify to pluralism, with an ideological spectrum including parties that had historically been excluded from the system (Alcántara, 2004). The fourth set of arguments points out that, throughout this period, institutional mechanisms (rather than force or discretionary decisions by a single group, as had historically been the case) were used to handle conflicts and to advance direct political participation. One key example of this was the way in which the region handled the economic crisis it suffered in the 1980s due to the exhaustion of the state-centric matrix and its replacement by a neoliberal model.<sup>7</sup> The new democratic regimes also demonstrated their ability to deal with different political crises correctly.<sup>8</sup> Further evidence to this effect is provided by the processes of political reform in very diverse spheres that took place within political regimes through standard mechanisms they themselves had established.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the most solid ‘authoritarian enclaves’<sup>10</sup> that had persisted in Latin American political regimes were gradually eliminated.<sup>11</sup> Finally, some countries increasingly introduced mechanisms of direct democracy such as plebiscites and referendums.<sup>12</sup>

The negative view of Latin American democracy’s performance was, in turn, based on four elements, which, it has been argued, reflected the region’s dysfunctionality. The first of these had to do with the so-called *electoral fallacy* (Karl, 1986) according to which elections are virtually the only expression of democracy in Latin America. Due to a complex history of frequent violations of electoral practice, and a legacy of discrediting the reviled *formal democracy*, the emphasis on election processes, necessary for any constituent process, was such that they completely filled the democratization agenda. As a result, the region left behind authoritarianism but only a small number of countries successfully consolidated their passage to democracy, whereas the vast majority remained in a hybrid zone ‘on the way to democratic consolidation’ (Alcántara, 1991 and 1992) and persisted in the electoral fallacy, with free elections coming to be seen as a sufficient (as well as necessary) condition for democracy. The Latin American countries ‘on the way to democratic consolidation’ established ‘democratic procedures yet have certain difficulties in passing the threshold of consolidated democratic systems [. . .] The legacy of the transition, institutional ineffectiveness and the fluctuating credibility of the system’s virtues’ (Alcántara, 1992: 220), as well as the traditional personalization patterns, are the key features of countries in this category.

The second negative argument has to do with the spread of *delegative democracy* (O’Donnell, 1994). This is one of the most useful categorizations for analyzing the meaning of democracy in those Latin American countries that had completed their transition, but where consolidation remained a distant prospect. Delegative democracy existed in a good number of Latin American countries where weak political institutions were unable to constrain the unlimited power of executive governments elected by voters mobilized by clientelistic ties or by a candidate’s personal, rather than programmatic, appeal, all in a context of weak parties that were, moreover, rejected by citizens. The absence of mechanisms of control and horizontal accountability, together with government by decree (by a president determined to enshrine the will of the people) and an authority based on personal charisma and the support of some expression of popular mobilization, rather than the institutionalized organization of preferences, are the principal characteristics of delegative democracy. What was new in this very widespread expression of democracy in Latin America (Diamond, 1999: 38) was not so much its poor institutionalization and partly autocratic nature but rather its persistence over a decade or more, in an international and regional context obsessed with maintaining the facade of democracy at any cost, which generated enormous pressure against its replacement.

The third negative argument arises from the fact that, in Latin America as a whole, both the degree of delegation and its impact on democracy had changed (Diamond, 1999: 39). However, its principal effects, such as personalism,

concentration of power and weak political institutions, have been key causes of turbulence and of the poor quality of democracy, with resulting cynicism and political apathy by Latin Americans (Alcántara, 1998).

Finally, the fourth and theoretically more complex argument refers to obstacles to the success of democratic consolidation that were a result of the priority given during much of the 1990s to the shorter-term aim of *governability* (Alcántara, 1994). This is referred to in a special section below. In any case, these negative arguments represent a chiaroscuro vision in contrast to the positive aspects of Latin America's political development in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

### ***The International Context: The Fall of the Wall, the Washington Consensus and the Emergence of a New World Order***

Other factors of an exogenous nature also had equally important effects around the region in the last decade of the twentieth century. Firstly, the fall of the Berlin Wall, with its effects on the world of Soviet socialism and the disappearance of a symbolic reference point for sectors of the left. In Latin America, the events of the autumn of 1989 contributed decisively to the pacification of Central America. The 'Communist threat' disappeared from the national security agenda of the US Department of State to be gradually replaced by other issues, led by drug trafficking and subsequently terrorism but also including migratory flows, the environment and free trade. Events in Europe were followed in late 1992 by the election in the United States of President Bill Clinton, a Democrat. This marked the end of 12 years of Republican government during which, particularly during President Ronald Reagan's first administration, US policy towards Latin America had focused obsessively, and with an important symbolic component, on events like the Sandinista Revolution.

Secondly, this period brought the consolidation, albeit with nuances depending on the country, of the Washington Consensus (Williamson, 1994: 26–28) as the central pillar of the economic policies adopted in the face of the crisis of the so-called Popular National state model that had developed gradually over the previous half-century. With its focus on liberalization and balanced fiscal budgets, the Washington Consensus implied unrestricted implementation of a gradual but firm process of liberalization of the economy, emphasizing the free movement of capital, deregulation—with the inevitable trend towards large private monopolies in key sectors—and privatization. This process greatly eroded the public sector while its alleged lack of transparency represented an inexhaustible source of corruption and poverty, and inequality increased.

### ***The Nineties: Political Changes and Institutional Reforms***

After Alberto Fujimori's coup in Peru in 1992, an event that can be considered a watershed in this first post-transitional period, Latin America entered a new

age in which, having left behind the black-and-white world of military authoritarianism or sultanism that existed prior to the 1980s, it became engulfed in a complex process with many nuances and differences among countries.

In the 1990s, Latin American countries sought to rewrite their constitutions, for different purposes. These political reforms, sometimes implemented simultaneously in the same country, fall into six main groups. The first and most important group, designed to ensure the executive's predominance over the political system, included measures such as the introduction of presidential re-election in Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Venezuela,<sup>13</sup> marking a break with the policy of non-re-election that has existed in Mexico since the 1930s, as well as the lengthening of the president's term in Bolivia and Venezuela. This increased presidential powers over the legislative agenda and caused the paralysis of the legislature's most important forms of control (Morgenstern and Nacif, 2002), such as its ability to impeach presidents<sup>14</sup> or other top government officials.

Secondly, there were measures that sought to weaken the legislature, which lost its central role in the political game due to a trend towards single-chamber parliaments. Examples of such measures include the constitutional reforms implemented in Peru in 1993 and in Venezuela in 1999.

A third group of measures sought to improve operational aspects of elections and boost their legitimacy. These were basically of four types: improvement of electoral administration in order to ensure reliable results;<sup>15</sup> the introduction in more countries of a second round in presidential elections in order to enhance the winner's legitimacy (Molina, 2000); the incorporation into the constitution (or the relevant legislation on political parties) of mechanisms of internal democracy, both in their functioning and in the selection of candidates (Alcántara, 2001); and timid steps towards greater control of political spending, combined with a gradual increase in state funding.

The fourth group of measures, related to the introduction of the neoliberal model, redefined the state's role in the economy and in relation to property rights.<sup>16</sup> The fifth group, which marked a continuation of the trend towards political and administrative decentralization seen in the previous decade, sought to increase the efficiency of government and to bring it closer to citizens (Jordana, 2001) through the popular election of local authorities<sup>17</sup> and through an increase in the powers of existing local bodies.

Finally, the sixth group included constitutional reforms for purposes that ranged from the creation of bodies to organize, administer and oversee the judiciary, or the state legal defense service, to recognition of a country as multicultural and multiracial (as, for example, in Ecuador's constitutional reform in 1998).

### ***Economic Collapse and the Emergence of Populism***

Throughout the 1990s, the historical weakness of the Latin American state deepened. Its longstanding lack of a monopoly of legitimate violence, of control over its territory,<sup>18</sup> of efficient administrative apparatus, and of a citizenry

imbued with civic and republican values and subject to universal rights and fully capable of exercising them (Méndez et al., 1999) was compounded by the Washington Consensus. As indicated above, this implied fiscal austerity in the form of spending limits accompanied by privatization of public assets, liberalization of markets, and deregulation, all of which eroded the state's already limited operational capacity. In general terms, the state ceased to be able to implement public policies designed by the government in a bid to achieve certain programmatic objectives in line with the demands and needs of Latin American societies.

A new type of populism, which had been thought to be in decline and persisted only in a relatively small number of countries, emerged with the appearance of formulas that favored demobilization and anti-political behavior maintaining strong personalization patterns. The populism of Carlos S. Menem in Argentina, strongly strengthened by the political machine of the historic Justicialista Party, or that of Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador, supported by the Roldosista Party, were of a different nature to the populism of Alberto Fujimori in Peru. Fujimori sought to distance his government from politics, disdaining the social and/or political mobilization that could have been mounted through some movement or party. Instead, Fujimori expressly renounced such mobilizations, and depoliticized all the other political bodies. In this way, he undermined the role not only of Congress and the Supreme Court, reducing them to their minimum expression, but also of municipal governments whose role was reduced to the technical administration of projects. In between these two extremes, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela initially positioned himself as a populist critical of the previous political class; however, faced with the participacy of the time, he eventually created his own apparatus for mobilization and strengthened the institutional structure, to which he looked for support without abandoning his personalism or emotional rhetoric abounding in mythical references heavy with the symbolism that imbued his political actions.

During the 1990s, Latin America also lost weight internationally. Its heterogeneity, diverse interests and disperse leadership have always been a problem, preventing the region from speaking with a single voice and resulting in inconsistencies and even contradictions in its positions, thus giving an impression of weakness in international forums.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the fall of the Berlin Wall deprived important sectors of the left of a reference point and reduced the support received from this source to a minimum. At the same time, because Washington no longer feared that its 'backyard' could fall into enemy hands, the region lost weight in international organizations where its traditional alignment with the United States had given it some limited 'blackmail' leverage. In this context, attention shifted to Eastern Europe, with its political and economic transitions and the outbreak of the conflict in the Balkans. Moreover, Latin America continued to lose weight in the international economy, as a result of the collapse of the economic model it had established half a century earlier, along with the greater dynamism of the Southeast Asian economies and the attention required by sub-Saharan Africa, with its more dramatic need for aid. Although Latin