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(From left to right) Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, Bolivian President Evo Morales, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez attend the World Social Forum 29 January 2009 in Belem, Brazil, as participants on the Latin American panel.

The Rise of Leftist Populism—A Challenge to Democracy?

Maj. Jonathan Bissell, U.S. Army

Over the last seventeen years, the number of democracies that have turned to the “left” or “center-left” has increased significantly throughout Latin America. In the early 1990s, 64 percent of Latin American presidents were from a “right” or “right-center” political party. However, by the

beginning of 2009, 71 percent—fifteen out of twenty-one countries—had changed to a president from a left or center-left political party.¹ After more than thirty years of varying types of conservative leadership styles, this trend of political change has affected a large majority of the countries in North, Central, and South

America.² This has caused many scholars and international relations experts to wonder if Latin America is in danger of trending away from democracy and reverting to governments of authoritarian rule.

After reviewing the causal reasons, however, it appears the rise of “leftist” populism in Latin America does not present a serious challenge to democracy in Latin America with the exceptions of those states that substantially changed their constitutions such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Instead, the rise of democratically elected left-wing populist leaders can be attributed to several related issues that permeate Latin America including historical social inequality and class-based injustice, a desire for political reversal from previously failed conservative administrations, and widespread displeasure with national economic policies. This article will briefly analyze the impacts these factors had on recent elections and possible strategies for U.S. foreign policy adjustments.

Impacts of the Trend to the Left

The future impacts of democratically elected leftist governments in the region will place more focus on investment in domestic and social programs and less on military expenditures. Unlike the old regimes, the new governments will concentrate on solutions to the domestic issues highlighted by their campaign platforms. While this is happening, the United States will likely feel continued political backlash from newly elected governments because of the anti-imperialist rhetoric commonly used by leaders throughout the region to galvanize public support for their policies by exploiting pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment. Much of this anti-U.S. sentiment is predicated on the perceived intrusion into Latin American internal affairs by the United States throughout the twentieth century, especially during the Cold War. However, the United States can minimize the lasting impact of such backlash and adjust politically to the rise of new left populist governments by effectively using its foreign policy soft-power tools.³

Renowned international relations scholar Joseph Nye describes soft power as “carrots” in the form of payments and its opposite, hard power, as “sticks” in the form of threats.⁴ Nye postulates that soft power is essentially “a soft or indirect way to exercise power

... getting others to want what you want.”⁵ Soft power can be exercised through the following:

- ◆ practice of diplomacy
- ◆ effective use of international institutions
- ◆ adherence to international law and other binding and nonbinding agreements such as treaties and trade pacts
- ◆ promotion of American entrepreneurship and the American way of life
- ◆ espousal of democratic values and human rights
- ◆ contribution of foreign aid
- ◆ accentuation of the substantial remittances by U.S. immigrants back to their native countries
- ◆ proliferation of U.S. information and communication technology around the globe

However, foremost among the diplomatic tools at its disposal to ensure it maintains credibility and influence in the region is U.S. observance of policy that respects the democratic decisions of the voters and a true commitment to continue to work with their newly elected, left-of-center governments on areas of common interest.

The Rise of Populist Leaders

The beginning of the rise of populist leaders and the political left throughout Latin America began with the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.⁶ He was successfully elected by denouncing Venezuela’s institutions as corrupt instruments of a “rancid oligarchy.”⁷ Chávez’s success was followed by the election of several more leftist heads of state over the next fifteen years including Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2002, Néstor Carlos Kirchner in Argentina in 2003, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay in 2004, Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2005, Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2006, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua in 2006. Others, using similar populist campaigns, soon followed such as Ollanta Humala in Peru and Enrique Peña-Nieto in Mexico in 2011.⁸

It is important to consider that democracies in Latin America have historically been weak, with only a few being true “consolidated democracies” with full human rights, true freedom of the media, and effective law enforcement capabilities over time.⁹ With this in mind, though the United States



(AP Photo/Natasha Pisarenko)

A "bird's-eye" view of La Cava slum (above) and a gated suburban community (below) in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina, 12 April 2003. The photo underscores the glaring divide between rich and poor in Argentina today. La Cava's jumble of ramshackle plywood homes have grown swiftly during the five-year-old recession, outpacing the growth of middle-class suburbia.

recognized each of these new governments, bureaucrats and scholars within U.S. foreign policy circles became concerned for the future of democracy in the region.¹⁰ However, whether or not the U.S. government agreed with the policies of the new governments, it did not dispute the legitimacy of the democratic process that had placed these heads of state and new governments into power.

Support for Left-Wing Governments—Reaction to Social Injustice and Inequality

Polls among the citizens of Latin American nations that elected leftist leaders showed frustration with historical social injustices and inequalities in their countries. Historically, Latin America has been fraught with discrimination and biases based on ethnicity, race, and, above all, social standing. The recent elections throughout Latin America reportedly "sparked increased mobility of indigenous

populations" among those who voted for candidates promising to remedy past racial and ethnic repression.¹¹ This tendency was clearly manifested with Chávez in Venezuela, who claimed to provide an alternative to the Free Trade Area of the Americas in order to block American hegemony in the region.¹² With effective campaign rhetoric and mobilized indigenous voters, the "hard-left" was able to successfully win the majority of votes from the lower class.

Political Reversal from Failed Policies

Many of the previous administrations in the affected Latin American states were conservative and adhered to the fiscal and structural reforms dictated by the Washington Consensus.¹³ Among these administrations were autocratic and authoritarian governments, many indirectly or directly supported by the United States.¹⁴ The populations living under such previous regimes—many of which were democratically



(AP Photo/Juan Karita)

Voters line up at a voting station during presidential elections 18 December 2005 in El Alto on the outskirts of La Paz, Bolivia. Voters were deeply divided between leftist Evo Morales and conservative former President Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga.

elected—had given their capitalist-minded leaders several years to fix the traditional problems of Latin America, such as elitism, authoritarianism, hierarchicalism, corporatism, and patrimonialism, but with poor results.¹⁵ Irrespective, voters overwhelmingly continued to express a desire for democratic forms of government in lieu of autocratic ones, at rates as high as 80 percent.¹⁶ However, they also wanted comprehensive social changes and a leveling of the socio-economic playing field. Several years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the populace no longer felt that a vote for the left would trend their nation toward totalitarian communism.¹⁷ When leftist candidates advocating a populist form of democracy stepped in with alternative visions of a broadly representative popular government, voters elected them in droves.

Savvy politicians seized on the opportunity to reflect newly empowered voters' desires. They filled their campaigns with rhetoric that blamed the United States for the rigid economic policies of structural

reform, reminded their citizenry of repeated United States involvement in coups throughout the region, and blamed their nations' problems on their political opposition with close relationships with the United States. In states like Argentina, the poor fiscal situation was blamed on the Washington, D.C.-based International Monetary Fund, and thus on the United States.¹⁸

Similarly, although not blaming the United States directly for all their domestic problems, historically marginalized voters readily identified with the campaign rhetoric that blamed the political elite classes in large part due to their relationships with the United States. In concert, left-wing campaigns made promises to the large, historically disadvantaged populations that they would get a "fairer shake" in the days ahead because the "gringos" would not be permitted to interfere in their domestic politics through their schemes. Such reputed schemes included trade agreements, which sounded to many like the traditional dependency-theory prevalent in the region where profits flowed north

while the Latinos did all of the work but realized little or no benefit. Accordingly, voters who were promised a better system of wealth redistribution and equal opportunities to take part in the positive attributes of globalization voted for change.

Domestic Displeasure with Economic Policies

The rise of the left in Latin America is partly because conservative governments found themselves in the unfortunate situation of holding power during times of economic distress and global market fluctuations over which they had little influence or control.¹⁹ Displeasure with national fiscal policies is another prime reason Latin American democracies have recently voted for leftist policies that promised change. Voters appear to have punished incumbent presidents if they served during a period of high inflation or poor economic growth. Macroeconomic indicators such as past inflation and economic growth heavily influenced voter preference as well.²⁰

However, though faces changed in government, fewer changes may actually have resulted than one might expect with regard to the actual content of the policies adopted to solve economic issues. Although several of these new left-wing administrations were democratically elected after promising dramatic economic reform, their economic and financial policies aimed at improving growth and fiscal balance remain surprisingly centrist. This actually appears to reflect predominant voter preferences. Polling in one case study showed a “moderate policy mandate” in which voters were unhappy with some forms of capitalism, but did not support a total rejection of it.²¹ Thus, the principal cause of the “pink tide”—the emergence of leftist governments—in Latin America may be attributed to failed economic policies of previous governments as opposed to anti-Americanism. Consequently, the election of leftist chief executives does not of itself mean the end of democracy, but rather a general consensus of unhappiness with the conservative governments and the failed economic policies they replaced.

A Vulnerability of Concern

Under the current circumstances, it appears the only true danger to these functioning democracies may be the apparent temptation among some voters to give

leaders unprecedented presidential powers that eventually could be used to usurp what the United States traditionally considers true constitutionally based democratic ethos based on the adherence to the rule of law, strong institutions, transparency, and free speech. Nations where these are eroding include Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Though Cuba has been a communist state for several decades, the rise of Chávez was seen by many as dangerous to democracy because of the radical changes he enacted, which made Venezuela an increasingly illiberal democracy evolving toward the Cuban model.²²

Bolstered by immense oil revenues the country possesses as the fifth-largest producer of petroleum in the world, Chávez rewrote his nation's constitution, authorized his own reelection, and replaced the legislature with a constitutional congress dominated by his own handpicked supporters, principally from the military.²³ With this new level of support and empowered by his specially selected legislature, he extended his own term limits and enacted laws that eroded the traditional freedoms of democracy, politicized Venezuelan governmental institutions, and began to suppress freedom of the press with state-controlled media. In this way, he slowly chipped away at private enterprises and individual freedoms in exchange for entitlements to those he appointed and increased his personal power.²⁴ Subsequently, the rhetoric espoused by other leaders in Bolivia and Ecuador seemed to support their own nations following suit, exchanging social reforms for a more autocratic form of government.

Nevertheless, a closer look at the actual policies of some of these states reveals they are not nearly as radical as they profess to be. While leaders such as Correa in Ecuador have publicly announced support for Chávez's socialism, and regional organizations like his *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA), Ecuador only recently began to experience economic decline, and still appears to be economically viable. Though heavily influenced in his politics by his radical foreign affairs minister, Ricardo Patiño, it is important to bear in mind that Correa has a PhD in economics from the University of Illinois and understands the free market. He continues to receive high approval ratings from Ecuadorians despite the changes to their constitution and the increasing loss of the freedom of the press.

Bolivia is another example of a nation that has shifted to the hard left. The ethno-linguistic diversity (varieties of languages and ethnicities) is very high in Bolivia, and indigenous groups make up a large part of its population.²⁵ Researchers were able to directly link the election of Morales in Bolivia to his ability to tap into widespread discontent with the Bolivian elitist political groups among indigenous groups.²⁶ Many of the indigenous community were historically marginalized in the political arena and thus more likely to vote for a candidate with whom they ethnically identified who offered a break from the past.²⁷ However, concern for the future of democracy in Bolivia has emerged due to the radical reforms Morales has enacted since his original election in 2005, which have included rewriting the constitution.²⁸ Critics of the Morales government fear the politics of constitutional reform may take it down the same path as Venezuela, where the democratically elected officials and their political appointees have changed the constitution and institutions of their nation so dramatically it is no longer recognizable as a truly democratic nation.²⁹

By suppressing or regulating freedom of the press, enacting reforms that reward individuals over the welfare of the entire population, and assigning key positions in government to cronies and political allies, these countries become increasingly autocratic and illiberal in nature.

Rhetoric or True Political Change?

While liberal democracy may indeed be at risk in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and other states such as Nicaragua, the majority of Latin American states subscribe to the liberal democracy model prevalent in Western Europe. The key difference between the two models is that although European states distribute high levels of social entitlements, they do not routinely change their constitutions to appease individual politicians. The long-lasting branches of government in the judiciary, the head of state, and the legislature exceed the importance of any single person. The countries of Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, and several Central American states are modern, democratic, globalized, and market-friendly.³⁰ Moreover, never before in the history of Latin America has it been so generally well-off, as both sustained economic growth and representative democracies are reducing

poverty and inequality.³¹ Consequently, as Latin America looks forward to the future, it has good prospects of continuing its trend toward further development of social democracies.

Additionally, regional integration in the recently established intergovernmental institutions, such as ALBA, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), and the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), all championed by the left, promises to take the region further toward addressing social concerns and improving the quality of life for many Latin Americans than the former right-wing political systems. Moreover, the new economic policies in most of the countries afford them with a greater degree of autonomy to pursue their developmental goals than the previous economic models based on the rigidity of the Washington Consensus.³²

It is also important to observe that these policies, while more socialistic in practice, are still democratic in nature. In fact, public support for centralized party rule and politburo-style government espoused by Marxism and Leninism are both in decline in Latin America.³³ Most democracies in Latin America appear to be developing closer in style to European types of social democracies than the U.S. republic model. They normally have more centralized authority in the executive branch and relatively less authority exercised by their judicial and legislative branches in contrast to the broad distribution of power and authority in the United States.³⁴ However, they are still true democracies in the sense that the government officials are publicly elected in elections generally regarded as being free from corruption.

The Relationship of Leftist Governments with the United States

Having suggested that the rise of the left in Latin America does not represent a significant threat to democracy in the region, it is important for the United States to analyze how these changes will affect U.S. relations with nations in the Western Hemisphere. Primarily, economic reform and social program enhancement make it likely there will probably be less military expenditures by these new governments. For example, the reformist government in Peru capitalized on its economic growth to spend huge surpluses on

social improvement programs while maintaining low military budgets.³⁵ This has had the effect of reducing poverty to historic lows in that country. Additionally, the largest international dispute Peru had with Chile over fishing waters appears to have been settled by the International Court of Justice, giving a boost to Peru's economy while also promising more stable relations between the two countries; both countries are key members of a new trade bloc called the Pacific Alliance.

Additionally, many of the governments in Latin America have continued to work together in areas of economic integration such as MERCOSUR, CAN, and UNASUR.³⁶ The U.S. government at present views this integration and collaboration positively, especially with groups such as the Pacific Alliance, which supports free trade and globalization.³⁷ Over the long term, the positive impacts to the Latin America region from such developments appear to outweigh some relatively short-term negative impacts commonly posed by the initial policies of new left-wing governments that often begin by curtailing individual liberties and nationalizing property.

The United States' Tentative Path Forward

While the United States has felt a political backlash from the anti-imperialist rhetoric espoused by many of the new leaders of these emerging left-wing democracies, the overall negative impact on the United States in terms of political and economic links has been minimal. With a view to the future, by using its foreign policy instruments of persuasion instead of coercive power, whatever residual negative impact from such political changes in government should be negligible. This soft power, executed through free trade agreements, cooperation in areas of common interest, and diligent work by the United States to improve how it is perceived throughout the region can be much more effective than the application of hard power through military intrusions, arm twisting in intergovernmental forums such as the United Nations, and rumored support for coups that seems to proliferate the entire region.

Additionally, much of U.S. popular culture is still loved throughout Latin America and is psychologically very influential. Furthermore, the indigenous voters of Latin America yearn for something like the traditional "American Dream"—the ability to have upward mobility

and achieve a higher standard of living. This is often difficult to achieve in Latin America where a common frustration with corruption and political favoritism is summed up in the adage "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." With the recent advances and rapid spread of communication technology, populations of the entire hemisphere can now clearly see the lifestyles of the massive middle class in the United States, thanks to vastly improved information availability and the widespread use of social media and global communications.³⁸

Taking advantage of American soft power, along with other traditional tools of positive U.S. influence in the developing world, such as the Peace Corps, the United States can capitalize on the positive appeal of its popular culture while continuing to keep its hard-power presence in Latin America nearly invisible.

At present, the Department of Defense's footprint is relatively small in Latin America, mostly relegated to security cooperation operations and shared areas of mutual interest such as disaster assistance and humanitarian relief exercises, and it should remain so. The United States can also continue to reduce its hard-power presence by working with traditional allies such as Colombia to establish trilateral agreements with other nations such as Mexico and Peru. These nations have developed increasingly close defense ties with the United States based primarily on partner-nation capacity-building goals, especially when dealing with controversial issues in other Latin American states such as security cooperation.³⁹ By taking advantage of a favorable collaborative environment, the United States can continue to capitalize on advancing its own interests without causing undue anxiety to the citizens and governments of Latin America.

Prudent Measures to Cultivate U.S. Influence

To ensure it maintains influence in the region, the United States should continue to respect the decisions of the voters in countries who have elected left-wing governments to represent them, and to work with these new governments on areas of common interests. These include areas such as institutional stability in government agencies such as ministries or departments (e.g., the ministry of interior, the ministry of defense, and the ministry of foreign affairs), and initiatives relating to the enforcement of the rule of law and the reduction

of corruption—arguably the two most important issues that negatively affect all of Latin America.⁴⁰ This includes dramatically improving the transparency of judicial and law enforcement organizations.

An example of how this is already happening is the work the United States is currently doing with Mexico. Under the Merida Initiative in Mexico, a bilateral security cooperation agreement between Mexico and the United States to combat transnational crime, the United States is working on improving Mexico's law enforcement capacity through programs based on enhancing the rule of law and improving crime prevention measures, with programs such as the Commission for Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies.⁴¹

In this way, not only does the United States use its soft power to enhance its goals of improved institutional stability in a fellow democracy, but it also uses multilateral agreements with a partner nation, in this case Mexico, to export this knowledge to Central American countries, such as Guatemala.⁴² Mexican law enforcement authorities work with U.S. Department of Justice authorities for training to make institutional improvements. At the execution level, Mexican police forces leave Mexico to train with police in partner cities such as Nogales, Arizona, which reduces U.S. visibility in Mexico, always a sensitive issue amongst Mexican nationals.⁴³ With the added benefit of Mexico raising its own stature by being an exporter of training and knowledge, it is a win-win-win for all participants. It is exactly the kind of model the United States needs to continue to use in its relations with the new governments of Latin America.

Patience is the Key Virtue

Given time, relationships with leftist governments that have chosen to estrange themselves from the United States can mend, while relationships with those that have sustained their relationships with the United States may well continue to flourish.

For example, at present, many voters in states with hard-left agendas, such as Venezuela and Argentina, are seeing the damage their protectionist economic policies that have excluded relationships with the United States have caused. Against this background, the neglected relationships with the United States these governments have imposed on themselves have certainly not improved their financial prosperity, as their economies

have run into hard times due to falling global prices in raw commodities and the advent of new technologies, such as fracking, which has flooded the global markets with new sources of oil. The Latin American governments that have taken on socialist policies supported by extractable resources may conclude that U.S. economic consumption power would be helpful to them in the future if they choose to diversify their internal economies.

The tentative normalization, or at least thawing, of diplomatic relations with Cuba announced recently by the Obama administration should also do much to lower regional anti-American rhetoric, and take a proverbial arrow out of the would-be anti-U.S. politician's quiver throughout the region. Although this diplomatic change could be viewed as a victory for the Castro regime, it has become a political thorn in the side of several U.S. administrations over the past two decades as populist leaders in Latin America point out the hypocrisy in U.S. foreign policy between China and Cuba, both autocratic powers. By removing this controversial point of friction from the agenda in hemispheric intergovernmental organizations such as the Organization of American States, the United States takes this straw man out of the bag of perceived injustices that Latin American politicians have traditionally used to criticize the United States. Additionally, states that continue to have close security relationships with the United States, such as Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, help dispel the Cold War mentality that the United States will still patronizingly intervene in Latin American domestic affairs to enhance its own interests.

Conclusion

The changes that have given rise to widespread support for leftist governments can be attributed to several historical issues in Latin America, including a history of deeply entrenched social and economic stratification that resulted in persistent class injustice, and social and economic inequality over centuries. This history has led to broad and deeply seated popular resentment against conservative administrations that often supported the status quo for their own benefit, and a desire to reverse previously failed conservative social and economic policies that favored the privileged classes. Not surprisingly, the regional security impact will probably be fewer military expenditures in deference to more social spending.⁴⁴ However, the larger threat to democracy would come not from spending less on Latin American militaries, but from failing to address



(Presidencia de la Nación Argentina)

Argentina's President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner meets with Chinese President Hu Jintao 12 July 2010 in Beijing, China. Kirchner was elected to the presidency in October 2007 on a platform of continued efforts to provide social welfare programs to the poor.

the greatest issues of public concern by spending less on rectifying historic social and economic inequities.⁴⁵ Left unaddressed, the instability caused by festering public bitterness over economic and social inequities together with large-scale real poverty in an age of globalization would pose a significant threat to U.S. interests.

It is imperative to remember that styles of democracies vary around the globe based on the experiences and history of each state. Hence, although the democracies of Latin America have become more socialistic with the rise of leftist populism in

Latin America, they do not present a grave challenge to democracy itself. Their new style can instead be seen rather as a boon to the spread of democracy, as the greater participation by the previously disenfranchised populations continues to grow. As each nation tailors the development of its internal democratic institutions according to its own history, culture, and needs there will be continuous changes to the style of governance. There are indeed a few exceptions among Latin American nations with regard to the direction of government development

that may be placing democracy at risk, but generally this is not happening.

To provide visible support and encouragement for the development of indigenous democracy in Latin America, U.S. leaders can counter anti-American rhetoric by using foreign policy instruments of soft power such as increased use of international trade agreements, worker-visa programs, the Peace Corps, mutual peacekeeping operations, judicial reform enhancement, combating corruption, educational exchanges, effectively targeted foreign aid, and trilateral and multilateral agreements where possible, especially in the security cooperation arena. However, above all, U.S. leaders should continue to respect the decisions of the Latin American voters and work with the new governments that represent those voters on areas of common interest.

Deeper and sustained engagement enhancing the use of soft power and reducing hard power will serve best in this time of change in the Western Hemisphere. The rise of the left presents new challenges and opportunities to the United States but does not necessarily constitute a challenge or threat to democracy.

Secretary of State John Kerry summarized this strategy in a speech in November 2013, when he challenged the leaders of the Western Hemisphere to continue the use of democratic governments to deliver development, overcome poverty, and improve social inclusion. He went on to assert that the United States recognized the democracies of Latin America and declared that the era in which the United States would readily impose its interests on Latin American nations through military power to be over.⁴⁶ ■

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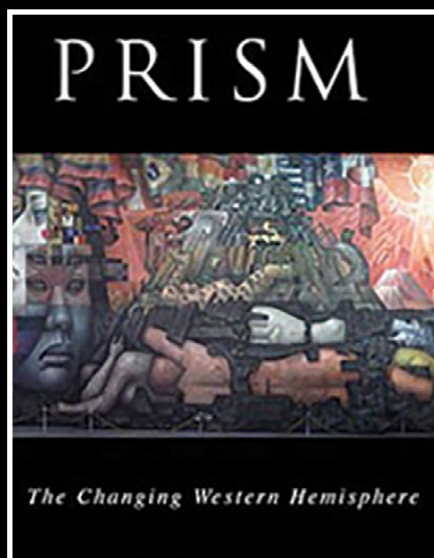
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