

THE RETURN OF THE LATIN AMERICAN LEFT

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Latin America watchers decry the rise of the political left in the region, citing its animosity towards both the United States and globalization. According to this point of view, the left is rising and its influence will be detrimental to hemispheric economic and political development.

The current improvement of the political fortunes of the Latin American left is not its rise but its return. Almost wiped out during the ideological struggles of the 1960s-80s, the left has been able to rebuild itself and is now a full participant in politics, not as Marxist vanguards dedicated to the armed struggle, but as social democratic parties dedicated to democracy. This is inherently good. The political scene is returning to a balance which it has not seen since the post-World War II time frame.

With its triumph in the late 1980s, the right strode the stage of politics unchallenged. As the left was decimated, the neoliberal reforms of the Washington Consensus were implemented, and democracy became ascendant; the right dominated the Latin American political scene. The right, however, was unable to address the underlying causes of underdevelopment. Raging poverty, some of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, world class corruption in some countries, insecurity in the streets, a “winner take all” political system without a sense of a “loyal opposition,” and a lack of elite sense of obligation to take care of the little people combined once again to prevent the right from addressing the problems suffered by the marginalized, who are the 43 percent of the population living in poverty.

The people were told in the 1990s that neoliberal reforms and democracy would be the solution that would address all of the societal shortcomings. When this did not occur, “democracy fatigue” settled in. The polling firm *Latinobarometro* in Santiago, Chile, records a consistent slide in support for democracy throughout the region over the past decade. When people lose faith in democracy and free market policies, they will look elsewhere for leadership, often to populist promises.

With the failure of the right to address shortcomings, the people, newly empowered through the “Third Wave” of democracy, are exercising their opportunity to vote out leaders whom they see as nonresponsive. This trend happens to be coinciding with the return of the left. The left, ranging in outlook from the mildly socialist to the populist, offers solutions that differ from the neoliberal model. They denounce the Washington Consensus of the 1990s and prescribe solutions from the left side of the ideological spectrum. Some of these solutions will work, but others will not. Anti-U.S. rhetoric will be used, as it has been for the last century. Some Latin American leaders will use the United States as a scapegoat for their own shortcomings.

The effects will differ from country to country. Milder forms of leftist rule, such as those of Lula in Brazil, will be moderately successful. More outrageous forms of populism, such as those of Chavez in Venezuela, eventually will fail, brought low by

their own internal contradictions, notably corruption and inefficiency. Those leaders that succeed will be reelected. Those that fail will be voted out, if democracy continues to be their political system.

This is how a democratic system is supposed to work. The people elect representatives. These representatives are then rated by how well they have done. Their future depends on their success. If they fail, they are replaced by someone different who might be able to do the job.

Unfortunately, some populist leaders such as Chavez and others tolerate violence in the streets. This violence is at times orchestrated against their opponents and sometimes tolerated because these leaders are unwilling to defend the rule of law. This lack of respect for opponents and willingness to use violence continue to cause problems, delegitimizing democratic authority and governance.

As long as Latin America remains democratic and some leaders fail to address the underlying causes of underdevelopment, the right and the left will rotate while each country seeks a solution. We should be cautiously optimistic that the Latin Americans are seeking solutions through the ballot box and that the left has returned and is willing to compete responsibly through elections rather than violence.