

Latin American Politics

Unit 1 Focus Questions

(Last updated 2/4/2024)

Please note: This is currently a **draft** document from a previous semester in which the course was taught. Some of the readings for this course change each time it is taught, and there have been significant political changes in the region over the past two years. Edits, potentially substantial ones, will be made as the unit progresses. A final version of the guide will be available at least one week before our exam. **Any items added or significantly altered after this guide was first posted are noted with bold formatting.**

What are the defining qualities of “Latin America”? In other words, why talk about these particular countries as a single entity? And why is the region worth studying?

Like most textbooks and academics that specialize in the region, we won’t be closely looking at the dozens of countries in Latin America this semester. Why not, and why will we be mostly interested in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela? What is the logic behind most-similar and most-difference case comparisons, which is a strategy academics often use to learn about what factors are correlated with important outcomes?

Concerning its population size and economic output, how does Latin America size up to the United States, EU countries, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa? Why do political scientists care about the geographical size, GDP, and per-capita GDP when comparing countries? What are Latin America’s largest countries for these indicators? Have some general sense about the distribution of people in the region: What countries are most similar to one another? Which are most dissimilar? Which have very large indigenous and why? Which have large populations of African-decedent citizens and why?

Looking at class/textbook data for Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Cuba Mexico, and Venezuela, where are most folks supportive of democracy and are they not? Have some sense of the distribution of wealth and resources in the region. Which countries have the largest economies (GNPs)? What are the midsized economies? Which countries are the wealthiest per capita, and how has that changed in recent decades? Which countries (or groups of them) are the poorest and/or the least equal? Which countries are most and least likely to use their resources in ways that take care of their most vulnerable citizens as measured by indicators like access to primary education, infant mortality, and murder rates? To answer these questions, see the table from your book and the first PPT.

Thinking about the subset of countries indicated above, which we analyzed in class with the latest round of LatinoBarameter (LB) data, where are citizens most/least educated, religious, open to corruption, and most subjected to serious crime? To what extent does believing that democracy is the best form of government and works well, correspond to quality-of-life measures in different Latin American countries? [*Important: To answer future test questions related to your LB analyses, you do not need to memorize lots and lots of statistics; instead, calculate and be familiar with a handful of concrete statistical examples from your analytical work so that you accurately summarize general patterns for the region and for the six countries*]

What kind of social structures, political systems, and economies did the Europeans find when they arrived in the Americas? How many indigenous people lived in the Americas? What were the major types of indigenous settlement patterns found in Mexico, Central, and South America at the time of the Conquest? What role did force and tyranny, religion, tribute and slavery, and patriarchy play in the major societies? What were the main factors that led to the rapid defeat of the region’s major empires? Why did most (probably more than 95%) of the indigenous peoples in the Americas disappear completely? Why did some indigenous populations survive while others did not?

What were the core characteristics of the “hegemony” (to use John Chasteen’s term) established by the Conquistadores? How did the process of “transculturation” impact the nature and power of hegemony? In what major ways were the settlers of Latin America and the United States different from one another? How did the economic and political context as well as the period from which the Iberian Conquistadores hailed vary from those that produced North America’s early European settlers? Why and in what ways did hegemony and early political life in Brazil more resemble colonial life in the American South than it did in New Spain?

How did the “founders” of “modern” North and Latin America differ concerning ideas about the proper role of religion in social affairs? Why does it matter that Latin America was settled by Catholics whose worldview was profoundly shaped by centuries of struggle against Moorish occupation and the Inquisition whereas the early colonists who spread out across America’s Eastern seaboard were often Protestants seeking the freedom to practice their religion?

How and why did Latin American colonists differ from the North’s immigrants concerning their basic expectations for citizenship and political representation? How did early political life and governance in Latin America differ from that of the American colonies? Why and to what effect was New Spain ruled with an iron fist and the viceroyalty system, while the Americans experienced a considerable degree of self-governance? What central role did Latin America’s natural resources (and their consequence for European politics) play in the region’s “feudal” political development?

What were the main “casta” (lineage and racial) categories imposed by the Spanish/Portuguese (i.e., know the difference between *peninsulares*, *criollos*, *mestizos*, *mulattos*, and *zambos*)? Why did whites in the US instead impose and rigorously enforce a bi-racial definition of race in which being of African descent—no matter how distant—placed some persons and all of their descendants in a legal category that denied even the most basic of rights? How and why did Latin Americans accept a degree of racial integration (it is important to not overstate the limitations to this) during periods when the US rigorously enforced biracial division concerning African Americans (i.e., legally banning interracial marriage in all but a handful of US states at least until World War 2)? How did the legal framework of racism in the US better facilitate the fight against racial discrimination here when compared to Latin America (i.e., know that less rigid racial boundaries in Latin American countries did not improve the conditions for most indigenous and African-descendant people, and made it harder to organize movements for change like the US Civil Rights Movement)?

What were the main factors that precipitated Latin American independence after three centuries of colonial rule? Why did independence come to Latin America when it did and why did it unfold so quickly? Why is it most accurate to refer to these movements as “counter”-revolutionary in most cases? Why does it matter that everyday people in the region were mobilized to fight for separation on the grounds of “nationalism” or “nativism” (i.e., the idea that *Americanos*, should separate from the *peninsulares*) rather than because of liberal ideals (especially “liberty” and “taxation only with representation”) that were so central to the independence for the US?

Why did independence in Latin America mostly lead to chaos and *caudillos* instead of democratic or economic development as was the case in the North? Why were the wars for independence and their aftermath so much more violent in Latin America? Why did the region break up into numerous small countries rather than consolidate into larger, heterogeneous countries of the type that quickly emerged in the North? Why was Brazil excluded from much of this violence and chaos?

How were Latin America’s post-independence leaders different from America’s Constitutional founders and the generations that followed them? How similar were Latin America’s post-independence constitutions to the North American document that many Latin American constitutions claimed to emulate? Why did these liberal constitutions with their presidential systems work a lot better in the US? Specifically, what small differences—e.g., executive decree power for Latin American presidents, highly restrictive voting qualifications, and the treatment of the military as a separate branch of government—undermined the ability of Latin American constitutions and presidential government systems to evolve into democracy as happened in the US?

What were the primary differences between “Conservative” and “Liberal” forces after governments finally began to consolidate in Latin America (the 1840s or so to the 1880s)? How did the role of military leaders in society change during this period (e.g. how did the role of the government change as *caudillos* gave way to a more professionalized military role? (See Vanden and Prevost as well as your reading on the military in Latin America).

What main models of governance were dominant during the era of progress (i.e. the 1870s to the 1900’s) when Latin America again began to be integrated into the international economy and to attract large amounts of foreign investment)? (Hint, per Wiarda, there were three basic models: Strong-man, modernizing—i.e., pro-growth, capitalist-orientated dictatorships in a few countries, including Mexico; closed oligarchies in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile; and US occupation in much of Central America and the Caribbean). Why weren’t everyday people involved in politics during this period despite the formal presence of elections and what seemed to be democratic constitutions? What were the differences and similarities among those societies that were governed by modernizing authoritarians (e.g., Mexico) when compared to oligarchies in which a few groups controlled and rotated power among themselves, or those that were largely under the influence of the United States?

As Latin America’s economies took off with foreign investment and the Industrial Revolution, its urban middle classes grew to the point where everyday citizens began to organize for labor and political rights, especially after the start of the 20th C. What strategies did Latin American governments—including military regimes—use to bring the public into politics while controlling the process? How did foreign trade, immigration, and urbanization in this period reshape the region’s politics and ideas about what role the middle class should play in governance? What was *corporatism* (see Wiarda’s reading on political organizations for the first two decades of the century), and how did the proponents of corporatism think that political participation by everyday people should be organized (versus the North American approach of pluralism in which groups and individuals compete for political voice, access to the political process, and access to public goods).

What went wrong with the first wave of democracies in Latin America that appeared after WW2? How did populism (promising voters everything they wanted without thinking about the long-term costs of doing so or even the ability to deliver on those promises) and clientelism (buying political support) harm the region’s first attempt to bring the masses into political life without formally controlling and limiting their participation? Why did the US, elites throughout the region, and eventually the military, support ending these democratic experiments, replacing them with military regimes?

Who was Óscar Romero? What can the film on his life tell us about how and why the role of the Catholic Church in Latin American life changed in recent decades? Why did many military officials see religious activists (including some priests and religious orders), human rights workers, and peasant leaders as communists and existential threats? To what extent was the Church divided on whether or not it should help to combat military repression? Before watching the film, you should take a look at the questions below on the military and the Catholic Church. The reason why I assign outtakes from *Romero* is to help you draw out big ideas from the readings on both institutions.

Why did the military get involved in Latin American politics so heavily at the beginning of the 20th century and then again at the mid-century? Historically, how has the role of the military in Latin American politics differed from what we find in the US? What formal/constitutional role have Latin American militaries historically held? Why has much of the military establishment in the region believed that it is sometimes acceptable or even obligatory for the military to govern outright or at least to make its preferences loudly known?

How successful was the military rule during the Cold War period and afterward, and at what cost? Why did the military finally leave power in the 1980s? What triggered a region-wide shift to democratic rule? Why does democracy finally seem to have taken hold for good in most countries? Are there legacies or any new roles for military leaders that make us wonder whether they will ever come back into power across the region?

What LA countries have been most prone to military-supported (i.e., successful) coups? Looking at the empirical data on where and when coups happen, is there any evidence to suggest that coups may be less likely going forward than they were in the past? Does public opinion data suggest that coups would still find support in Latin American countries in a way that is different from the case with the advanced industrial democracies? What evidence is there to suggest that the military still holds considerable political resources even if they aren't currently inclined to use them?

Looking at your LatinoBarometro (LB) analyses for Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela, where do citizens presently have the most and least *confidence in the armed forces*? How about support for ever being ruled by the military? Based on comparisons of public opinion from the mid-1990s to more recent years, where has confidence in the armed forces changed substantially over time, and in which direction? [Remember: To answer study guide future test questions related to your LB work, you do not need to memorize lots and lots of statistics; instead, record and be familiar with a handful of concrete statistical examples from your analytical work so that you accurately summarize general patterns for the region and for the six countries].

Looking LB analyses of the same six countries, roughly what share of the citizens in the region say are open to the idea of *military rule* under some circumstances? Where in the region is support for military rule the lowest and the highest? Over the last two decades, how much has support for military rule changed over time within these countries and in the region as a whole?

Considering LB data for the same six countries, how accurate is it to describe Latin America as a Catholic region? Which countries are especially Catholic? Which have the most Protestants (in Latin America, almost all Protestants identify as “Evangelicals” rather than “Protestants”)? Which countries have the highest share of non-religious people? Based on your time-series analyses, how has the population share of these three groups changed over the last three decades (e.g., from the mid-1990s to the most recent surveys)? Looking at different religious traditions (i.e., denominations), how devout are most Catholics compared to Protestants?

Traditionally, what political role has the Catholic Church played in Latin American politics? What specific features of colonial rule gave it so much power? Why, for the most part, did the church remain linked to the interests of wealthy landed elites and the military for so long? Is there any history of progressive politics within the Latin American Catholic church before Vatican II??

Why and when did the Catholic Church become more “progressive” from the 1960s forward? What is “liberation theology” (you might think about the film outtake from Romero), and how did it, together with the larger changes emerging out of Vatican II, transform Catholicism's approach to politics and the poor in the region? How did the church's historic ties to the military and conservative elements help it to become a powerful aid to pro-democracy forces in the 1980s? Why, how, and to what degree have conservative factions of the Vatican decreased the political role of the church? To what extent does Pope Francis perhaps mean a new, more progressive turn has started?

Looking at public opinion data, how Catholic is Latin America today? Where is this denomination less influential? Who appears to be more religious in their day-to-day lives: Catholics or Protestants? Which group is more socially conservative, and which is more progressive on economic issues and taking steps to reduce the impacts of poverty? Looking at inter-denominational attitudes on these types of issues, which type of gap is bigger, between country populations or between Catholics and Protestants? To what extent do Latin Americans think that church and state should be separate, and how does that belief vary across the region?

The article by Setzler on religiosity and attitudes toward women political leaders in Latin America examines three questions: Do more religious Latin Americans hold attitudes that make them resistant to female leadership and other progressive views related to gender? Are there differences in these views between Catholics and Protestants? And, does the amount of religious competition in a given Latin American country—both from Protestantism and secularism—make Catholics more or less progressive on gender issues? What answers to these three questions are provided in the study?

Going back to the Chasteen reading (Colonial Crucible) at the beginning of the term, how did a person's gender shape their role in politics and social life throughout much of Latin American history? According to Chasteen, what does the concept of hegemony mean when applied to gender relations and roles?

Your reading by Peter Winn focuses on the changing role of women in Chilean politics and society over time. Why did women take so long to become involved in Chilean politics? Why did so many initially support military governments (one reason women were "given" the right to vote in Chile was because they were typically conservative)? How did gender impact opposition strategies during the military regimes—how did women protest and how were they treated by military governments? Why in the world did Chile's dictator—Augusto Pinochet—think women would back him in a plebiscite to stay in power for 8 more years?

As Latin America democratized in the 1980s and 1990s, many of the region's new constitutions and democratic governments took steps to increase the presence of women in government—what are some of those steps? What is a gender quota, and how effective are they in electing more women? When do they not work as well?

The article by Setzler on gender stereotypes in Latin America examines attitudes about the leadership ability of male and female political leaders. The study's main research questions ask how preferences for a male or female leader change when people are experiencing different kinds of hardship, and whether there are positive or negative legacy effects among Latin Americans who have experienced an especially competent or ineffective female president. What are some of the areas where women's engagement and representation in politics lag behind their male peers (pp. 192-93)? To what extent is the lack of gender equality in holding office in Latin America due to public resistance to the idea we should have more women in politics? Are there important areas of leadership where women are seen as more competent than men? To what extent are voters holding female political leaders as a whole accountable in countries that have seen high-profile failures by female presidents?

If we cover these issues in class ahead of the test, be able to answer these questions: What differences are there in the types of executive and legislative appointments (i.e., cabinet and legislative committee posts) women typically hold when compared to their male peers? Do women leaders "own" any particular political issues in the sense that most voters see them as being better suited to lead in this area than male leaders? Is there any evidence that women in Latin American political office are using their power specifically to pursue "women's issues"? What are those issues?