

LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

Unit 2 Focus Questions: Democracy in Latin America

*Last edited on 3/14/2025. Up until a week before the exam, this document will be a draft document based on study guides from previous classes (keep in mind that the readings and key events that are relevant for this course change somewhat every time I teach it). **Any items that have been added or edited after I first posted the guide have been noted with bold formatting.***

1. In *Our Brand is Crisis*, what arguments do the consultants (specifically, Jeremy Rosner) give for thinking it is appropriate for a US political advisory firm to be involved in Bolivian elections? Why did that presidential election (Goni's 2002 election) "fail" to resolve the deep ethnic and class divides in Bolivian society? In the documentary, you see three types of politicians—Goni running an issue-centric campaign, Manfred running a clearly populist campaign, and Evo running an ethnopolitist campaign (the film could do a better job of showing this for Evo)—what are the main differences in the three approaches (this will be an easier question to answer after you have read the assigned article on ethnopolitism)? Why couldn't Goni claim to speak for most Bolivians? Why didn't Goni try to listen harder to what most Bolivians wanted, and what does that tell us about the nature of building a representative democracy generally and in countries where poor, historically disadvantaged people make up the majority?
2. In the second unit, as we talk about how Latin American political systems differ from those of the US, we will be looking at three historically marginalized groups whose power in Latin America politics have changed recently: women, the poor, and indigenous people. Beginning with racial minorities (in terms of power, not necessarily numbers), what is "structural racism," how is it different from explicit, intentional racism, and what form has it taken in Latin America? Here, you can return to the first reading I asked you to read from Chasteen (*Colonial Crucible*).
3. Where do people's ethnic, racial, and national identities come from, and what makes these identities more or less salient (i.e., politically meaningful) in different political settings? For example, how do Brazilians and North Americans differ in how we conceptualize African-descendant individuals, and how is the social significance of being Mestizo in Mexico different than being non-white in many Andean countries? What is the difference between race and ethnicity? When do race and ethnicity overlap? (Hint: this is when disparate groups of people take on a previously imposed racial classification as their own and use it to empower and organize themselves, which is what indigenous groups are doing in the US many of the Andean countries).
4. Why have indigenous Latin Americans gained more power in recent decades, and why has the political mobilization of Afro-Latin-Americans lagged in comparison? What constitutional provisions and other aspects of a country's political and electoral system choices most encourage or discourage the mobilization of historically disadvantaged peoples (See the articles by Van Cott and Madrid on this point)? What distinguishes an ethnic party, a populist party, and an ethnopolitist party? Which of these types of parties has been most effective in both mobilizing indigenous voters and electing them to power?
5. Why do some political scientists see ethnic political parties as threatening to democracy? Why do other political scientists see these parties as a positive development? It might be helpful for you to think about the electoral success that Donald Trump has had in the US (use Madrid's checklist to investigate the extent to which President Trump campaigned and perhaps is now governing as an "ethnopolitist";

and you might consider the extent to which at least a wing of the Democratic Party acts and sounds like an ethnopolitics party).

6. What exactly is populism and why do many political scientists see it as a serious threat to democracy? Why do scholars like Kurt Weyland think that we should be less concerned about how popular a particular government is in Latin America and more focused on how democratic their use of power is? Why is he particularly worried about the populist left's long-term impact on the quality of democracy in Latin America rather than right-wing populism?
7. Lots of undemocratic governments claim to be democratic. What key features are required to truly make a country democratic? What aspects of the US version of democracy (e.g., separate branches of government that "check and balance" one another) are, in fact, optional?
8. How do we measure how democratic a country is? What major, distinct dimensions of democracy are considered in your various reading assignments and the data we covered in class? Do you see any specific problems or advantages to how different authors have operationalized democracy (which is to say how they have conceptualized democracy so that it can be measured and compared)? Why do some experts think that policy outcomes—poverty and crime, for example—should be used as measures of democracy instead of just being indicators of development?
9. According to most scholars, what set of basic procedures and civil protections (i.e., things government cannot do) must be in place for a Latin American country to be considered democratic? With respect to democratic "procedures" (e.g., clean, fair elections, and the like) and liberties, how democratic is Latin America as a whole when compared to the US or Europe? What differences are there across the region—what are some of the most democratic countries, what are some of the least?
10. What variables do Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán look at in their study of democratization in Latin America? Based on their research, what are the main lessons about good governance that can be learned from Latin America as a whole? What are the main factors in explaining why some Latin American countries have better governance than others (what causes good governance? Are there any countries in the region that are models of good governance?
11. In recent surveys, roughly what share (i.e., %) of Latin Americans say they would support an authoritarian government "under certain circumstances"? Roughly what share thinks that democracy is "always the best kind" of government? Where is support for democracy the highest and weakest? Looking at educational levels, gender, and other demographic differences, are there any factors that appear to make Latin Americans more or less supportive of democracy? (See data covered on a PPT from class)? How has popular support for democracy changed over time in the region? What about levels of support for important democratic institutions?
12. How do political scientists measure popular support for democracy among everyday Latin Americans? What does the typical Latin American think "democracy" constitutes? To what extent are Latin Americans satisfied with the quality of democracy in their own countries? To what extent do popular perceptions of how democracy is going in different types of countries match up with political scientists' assessments?
13. Why do most Latin American countries have US-style presidential systems with a congress that has at least one branch? What are some of the most important ways that many of these presidential systems differ from America's? What are some of the ways that the structure of the national legislature and congressional elections in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico differ from those of the US (e.g., term limits, gender quotas, different types of proportional representation, and provisions that guarantee partisans of smaller parties will have representation)?

14. What kind of measures/indicators do political scientists use to measure how democratic specific Latin American countries are over time and compared to each other? Identify and use several of these measures to discuss strengths and weaknesses in Mexico's democracy. [You probably will have a takehome "quiz" assignment on this topic. It asked you to draw information from: (1) the Political Database of the Americas (see the "how Latin America's democracies vary" topic above), (2) tables from readings (or class PPTS), (3) Freedom House Rankings, and (4) your analyses of LatinoBarometer data.]
15. Be able to summarize the above-assignment's work for Brazil, too.
16. How are Mexico's and Brazil's constitutions different than that of the US? Specifically, be able to explain the circumstances under which they were written, how they are amended, and how expansive they are in liberties and rights when compared to the US.
17. What type of Latin American electoral systems (think about both presidential and legislative elections) and choices about the make-up of legislatures are more likely to lead to many smaller parties having a say, and what are the pluses and minuses of this kind of arrangement?
18. Why does Mexico have plurality (first-past-the-post) presidential elections? What, if any, advantages are there to Brazil's use of two-round presidential elections?
19. Be able to point to the specific ways that Brazil and Mexico have used elections to give more political parties and minority views a voice than is the case in the US. Also be able to explain the difference between open-list, proportional representation election systems (Brazil, for its lower legislative house and most subnational legislative elections) and closed-list proportional election systems (Mexico, for around half of its lower legislative house). How does Mexico make sure that each state's citizens aren't represented by only one political party? What are some of the pluses and minuses to having so many parties in the national legislature that it is difficult to form stable majorities, and how does this arrangement influence the power of presidents and the prevalence of crime and corruption in Brazil and Mexico?
20. Many Latin American systems allow their presidents to issue presidential decrees on important issues where Congress is deadlocked (versus the much more limited "executive orders" that US presidents have). What is a presidential decree?
21. What are some examples of direct democracy (e.g. national referenda and "participatory budgets" that are found in Latin America, and what are the pluses and minuses to these provisions?
22. Why didn't Mexico become democratic with its independence movement from Spain? Why not when real revolution finally came in 1910? How was the Mexican revolution supposedly institutionalized in the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party)? What specifically happened that allowed the violence to finally dissipate? What key role did Lazaro Cardenas play in creating a uniquely adaptive party, and how did it stay in power so long without resorting to heavy violence? How well did it incorporate the key elements of Mexican society?
23. What did political life look like under the PRI? The Mexican political system looked like a democracy on paper and the PRI wasn't brutal, so why do political scientists say Mexico didn't become a democracy until 2000? How well did the party govern compared to other Latin American regimes in the 20th century? Why did the PRI permit and even subsidize a competing party? Why did it hold elections that included full-scale mobilization of the voters (when authoritarian regimes normally try to tamp down political engagement)? To what extent did it succeed in representing Mexican interests of various types and in expanding prosperity over time?

24. Why did Mexico finally become democratic, and why did its transition to democracy look a lot different and less transformational than most other Latin American transitions? When and why did the PRI finally start lose its dominance, and why did that downfall accelerate in the 1990s? To what extent was this the PRI's fault, and why might some Mexicans blame US economics and politics instead? Why did much of the Mexican left split with the PRI in 1988 (forming the PRD)? Why did the PRI let a reformer like Ernesto Zedillo become president? What major reforms did he institute to facilitate Mexico's transition to a democracy? What other key factors pushed everyday Mexicans to finally vote against the PRI?
25. The first post-PRI president, Vicente Fox, did not radically change politics other than working closely with other parties to pass laws with multiparty coalitions. Why, then, is he seen as such a pivotal figure in Mexican politics? Why didn't Mexico celebrate the exit of the PRI by writing a new constitution or making many significant changes to the political system right after it became a democracy? What price, if any, has it paid for not doing so? How has the political system evolved in recent years, and what has changed in the way that the political system works?
26. What are the main features of the current Mexican political system today? Why does Mexico only allow one term for its presidents (it just started to allow the reelection of mayors and members of Congress)? What are the main problems with the way Mexico picks presidents and the level of support s/he typically has when he comes into office?
27. Why was AMLO been able to accomplish so much more than the three presidents who came before him? Is it his populism? The way he treated adversaries? Was there any reason to believe that Mexico might well struggle to operate again when he left power in 2024). Why did many analysts think that the election of AMLO could swing the country's politics to the hard left? What about his history suggested that he might well be a left-wing populist like Evo Morales or Hugo Chavez? Why did he govern as a left-leaning centrist? In what ways is the political support and legitimacy enjoyed by AMLO higher than those for the democratic PRI and PAN presidents who came before him?
28. To date, how is Mexico's transition to a fully consolidated democracy doing? To what extent have open, free, and competitive elections become the norm in Mexico? What challenges, if any, continue to stand in the way of a fully democratic Mexico? How well have its recent presidents performed and followed the law?
29. How is drug trafficking impacting Mexican democracy, and how have US drug and gun policies perhaps undermined the country's democratic consolidation? How and why has the power of cartels exploded since the mid-2000's, and how is the increase in lawlessness in some ways attributable to the opening of the Mexican political system? What is the relationship between Mexico's the proliferation of drug gangs and the structure of Mexico's political system (e.g., the resources and independence it gives to states, features that make government not work well when governors and presidents don't have a clear Congressional majority)? Why did AMLO think that "hugs" not more aggressive policing is the best way to deal with cartel violence? Why are the cartels targeting politicians, the press, and non-governmental leaders?
30. New readings will be assigned covering Claudia Sheinbaum, the current President of Mexico. She is an environmental scientist, former mayor of Mexico City, and the first female President of Mexico. She is López Obrador's political protégé, so the main thing you will want to think about is whether she is breaking from his approach to Mexican politics, economics, the cartels, or relations with the US under Pres. Trump's leadership. You also should be aware of the new judicial arrangements (less independent and much more populist due to end-of-term changes by AMLO) she has been working with.

31. Brazil's colonial and independence periods were much less traumatic than in the rest of the region, so why did its first serious attempt at democracy (the Second Republic, 1945-64) fail? What did Brazil's military government set out to do when they overthrew democracy and instituted a "bureaucratic-authoritarian" government that ruled for 21 years? How successful was the military in modernizing the Brazil's economy and society? Recognizing that the military regime was repressive, why is it inaccurate to say that they were self-serving tyrants?
32. How and why did the military leave power in Brazil? Did that gradual exit help or hinder democracy in Brazil? What process did Brazil use to write its 1988 Constitution as part of the democratic transition?
33. How well is the Brazilian political system now working to restrain presidential power, build the predictable party coalitions that allow presidential system to govern well, to represent different ideological groups, and to allow everyday people to get involved in politics? What policies, if any, have been developed in recent years to better address the needs poor Brazilians as empowered citizens rather than as voters whose support is purchased by governmental handouts?
34. What are the main features of the current political system in Brazil? How are presidents elected? What powers make Brazil's president stronger (relative to those of the Congress) than is the case in the US, and why does he possess those powers? What is the difference between how Brazil's senators and its national deputies are elected, and how does the use of open-list proportional representation elections in the latter case impact the number of political parties in Brazil? What is the relationship between electoral system choices and how well democracy works in Brazil?
35. How have Brazil's four most recently departed presidents—Cardoso, Lula, Rouseff, and Bolsonaro—fared in resolving the most serious issues to the country becoming a global political and economic leader? How have their approaches to addressing growth, poverty, and Brazil's global position differed?
36. Lula and his first successor, Dilma Rouseff, were both from the Workers Party. To what extent did this leftist party turn out to be different from and similar to other Brazilian political parties? Did the Workers Party turned out to radically leftist in power as people assumed it would be (Why not?)? Why did Lula end up in jail and Rouseff find herself impeached? Are these outcomes all about politics or a sign that Brazil's democracy may be finally beginning to deal well with high-level corruption?
37. Who is Jair Bosonsaro, and how in the world did this controversial political outsider (the first since the impeached Fernando Collar de Mello, Brazil's first post-military regime, democratically elected president) manage to get elected? Was he elected because a majority (Brazil has mandatory voting and two-round elections) of people share his homophobia, sexism, militarism, and anti-democratic views or because he was the beneficiary of political polarization and Brazilians' great desire for political change? How popular/divisive was he? To what extent did he effectively deal with political corruption in Brazil?
38. How was Brazil's current president, Lula, able to run and win again despite having been previously jailed for corruption? Based on what we have seen so far and the extreme polarization in Brazilian politics, is there any chance that this well-seasoned political veteran can get Brazilian politics headed in the right direction again?
39. How good of a set of comparisons is this:
 Bolsonaro = Trump;
 January 8, 2023 = January 6, 2020;
 Lula = Biden;
 Brazilian institutional response = US response while Trump out of office and not running
 Bolonaro once banned from politics and jailed vs. Trump's campaign, re-election, pardoning of all involved with January 6, and subsequent actions