

## LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

### Unit 3 Focus Questions: Democracy in Latin America

**Last edited on 4/9/2026.** 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. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. How have Brazil's four most recently departed presidents—Cardoso, Lula, Rousseff, 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?
6. Lula and his first successor, Dilma Rousseff, 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 Rousseff 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?
7. You will be asked to watch the documentary, Brazil. After you have watched the full film and read the assignments that cover the same period and after, be prepared to summarize the film and its major events as well as the main parties, politicians, and corruption scandals it covers. Here are the items from the quiz you will take after watching the film:

(1) The film clearly favors one side's views. Give several examples of such bias in the documentary, and identify three big take-aways from the film about how Brazilian politics and democracy work that ring true to you based on your homework readings despite the pro-Petista (i.e., pro Workers' Party) bias.)

(2) The documentary presents conflicting interpretations of Operation Car Wash and Judge Sérgio Moro's role in it. On one hand, the investigation exposed a massive corruption network connecting Petrobras, construction companies, and political parties across the ideological spectrum. On the other,

selective editing and interview choices in the film argue that the operation was selectively used to target Lula and the Workers' Party. Using specific evidence from the documentary, evaluate both interpretations. How did the Car Wash scandal impact Brazilian democracy?

(3) The film raises serious doubts about whether Dilma Rousseff's impeachment was a legitimate constitutional process or a politically motivated removal. Drawing on what you saw in the documentary, how you would characterize the impeachment. What does this episode reveal about the vulnerabilities of Brazil's democratic institutions? What does it tell you about "institutional hardball" more generally, which is when political polarization causes political parties to exploit every legal and political option available to harm political opponents even to the point of causing most citizens to conclude that democracy no longer works in their country?

8. Who is Jair Bolsonaro, and how in the world did this controversial political outsider (the first since the impeached Fernando Collor 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?
9. 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?
10. 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  
Bolsonaro once banned from politics and jailed vs. Trump's campaign, re-election, pardoning of all involved with January 6, and subsequent actions
11. What is "development," and how should it be measured (Blake, for example, talks about "growth first," "basic needs" and "sustainable development" as different ways of thinking about development)? What indicators do social scientists typically use when measuring and comparing development across different regions and countries? How do we measure overall growth, inequality, and poverty?
12. Reviewing some of what you learned at the start of the term: What—roughly speaking—is the variation of development indicators across Latin America? Which countries are the poorest, which are the richest, which are the most unequal, which have large middle classes and the most poverty?
13. Looking back at the last several decades, how is development fairing in the region as a whole? How are things going when we compare it to how other developing country regions are adjusting to globalization? Is the region getting any better at dealing with poverty over time? Educating its children?
14. Considering measures of development and what we know about the macro differences between how different countries are trying to develop, are there any obvious relationships between political choices in the region and its economic development? Looking at the Heritage

Foundation's measures of economic freedom and different countries' per-capita GDP, how close of a causal connection is there between the two? Taking a look at the charts in Blake's (scanned) chapter, how close of a causal connection is there between countries' levels of democracy and overall growth measures? How about between democracy and inequality?

15. Be familiar with the major explanations that have been used to explain why Latin America's economies modernized relatively late: geographical location, legacies of imperialism, dependency on a single commodity, the inability to secure start-up capital, and cultural impediments (Blake and especially your textbook chapter on political economy are useful sources here)? Why did most Latin American economies initially focus on one or two exportable primary products, and what problems came from this? How and to what extent have countries in the regions overcome this practice (What is "important-substitutional industrialization," and how does it work?)?
16. Why did so many Latin American countries get into debt trouble in the 1980s as they attempted to diversify their domestic economies and specialize in profitable export sectors? What is "structural adjustment," how does "neo-liberal" economic theory account for underdevelopment in Latin America, and what is the track record of its "Washington Consensus" recommendations for development policy-makers? These concepts are explored in your textbook chapter on the political economy of Latin America; focus on the big picture rather than getting caught up in the details. These issues were also discussed in the material we covered on Mexico and the military-regime era documentary you watched on Brazil.
17. Which of the development strategies discussed in class (free-market capitalism, state-led capitalism, command economies, and populism/kleptocracies) best applies to the different historical periods of the case study countries we have examined closely this semester (including Brazil in the 1970 and Mexico under the PRI until the 1980s)? Which of these strategies best describes the current political economy of Cuba, Venezuela, and Chile? Per class and the scanned chapter from Charles Blake, what are the key differences between these types of political economies?
18. Thinking about your responses to the last two blocks of questions, what are the priorities, core assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of each approach to development and equity? Which approaches have had the most success in Latin America? Which models are being pursued in the region today? Which model is most reflected in the "Washington Consensus," and why is that consensus now under attack throughout Latin America?
19. Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, and Chile have very different reputations when it comes to development and dealing with poverty. What do the statistics highlighted by the economic data you have in your readings have to say about these countries' differences and similarities? Do any of these countries' economies stand out as being especially effective or weak in providing for their citizens? For data, see the short UNDP readings from 2019 that you were asked to read on Brazil (it includes comparisons with Mexico), Venezuela, and Chile. In each report, you are interested in sections two and three (about three pages in all for each report).