The Left Turn Continues

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THE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS LIST OF elections held in Latin America during 2006 confirms the trend observed in the region over the last decade: Latin America is indeed turning left.[1] Of the nine elections that took place during 2006 in continental Latin America, only Colombia and Mexico elected governments from the right. In other words, for every election won by a party from the right, the left won three over the course of the year.

By January 2007, ten Latin American countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela—had governments from the left.[2] And it is unlikely that the presence of the left will be diminished anytime soon.[3] With the exception of Argentina, where presidential elections are held in April 2007, the governments from the left are scheduled to remain in power at least until 2010.[4] By the end of the decade, more than half of the countries in continental Latin America—and 60 percent of the population—will be governed by the left.[5]

The elections in 2006 revealed two important traits of the recent rise of the left in Latin America. First, except for Nicaragua, every party from the left increased its share of the votes, even when its candidate did not win the presidency. Second, the more moderate candidates from the left had an easier time winning elections. Voters throughout the region rejected leftist candidates with populist visions, with the notable exception of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

A plurality of voters in each country, aside from Colombia and Mexico, elected candidates from the left, and thus presidents will now have to cater to this electoral base in order to remain in power. Yet it is puzzling that the candidates from the left—the moderate left—do not seek more extreme policies. A plausible explanation can be found in the trend among Latin American voters in a majority of countries to shift their ideological identification to the center and the right. The data recently released by Latinobarómetro suggest that this is the case.[6] According to its 2006 surveys, in no

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country in the region does more than 35 percent of the population identify with the left, while in at least four of them, almost half of the population identifies with the right.

STAYING THE COURSE

Three countries reconfirmed their leftist presidents in 2006: Venezuela, Chile, and Brazil. The last two clearly belong to a more modern left, while Venezuela is ruled by the epitome of the populist/nationalist left—Hugo Chávez. But rhetoric and policy differences aside, these three countries have one thing in common: the left not only remained in power, but it was also able to secure a larger share of votes than in previous elections.

Venezuela: Hugo Chávez was reelected for the second time[7] on 1 December, defeating the Social Democratic candidate Manuel Rosales by a margin of over three million votes (about 25 percent of the vote).[8] The remarkable fact is that Chávez has increased his vote share in every election since he first took office. In his first electoral bid in 1998, he amassed 56 percent of the vote, which grew to 60 percent by 2000 and became nearly 63 percent in 2006.

Brazil: After an intense, two-way campaign against Gerardo Alckmin of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was reelected in the 29 October runoff, in which he generated a 20 percent margin of victory. Yet his 48 percent share of the vote in the first round was substantially higher than the 46 percent he obtained in the 2002 first round and much higher than those of his previous, unsuccessful electoral bids—32 percent in 1998, 27 percent in 1994, and 16 percent in 1989.[9]

Chile: For the fourth consecutive time since its creation, the *Concertación* coalition won the presidency in January 2006, with Michelle Bachelet obtaining a comfortable 7 percent margin of victory in a runoff election.[10] With this feat, Bachelet overcame the setback that the Chilean left suffered in 2000, when its candidate, Ricardo Lagos, was nearly defeated by the rightist Joaquín Lavín. Despite being forced into a runoff election, Bachelet managed to increase Lagos' share of the vote by 2 percent in the runoff.

THE LEFT SWERVE

Three new countries joined the ranks of the left as well: Nicaragua, Peru, and Ecuador. Notoriously, two of the candidates—Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Rafael Correa of Ecuador—are friends of Chávez, but the third—Alan García of Peru—is not, having defeated Chávez's champion, Ollanta Humala.[11] García and Ortega are the celebrated comebacks of the season, and both accomplished this feat by becoming moderate ver-

sions of their former selves: Ortega distanced himself from his Marxist-guerrilla past and García moved away from his populist past. In addition, Correa had to moderate his tone in order to win the runoff election that led him to become president-elect in Ecuador.

Nicaragua: Daniel Ortega, the renewed, leftist, ex-guerrilla leader of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), was elected again as president of Nicaragua on 5 November, with 38 percent of the vote.[12] After being out of power for 16 years and suffering defeats in three presidential bids, Ortega decided to reinvent himself and his campaign on a more moderate platform: he ceased his opposition to CAFTA, he expressed his willingness to maintain diplomatic relations with the United States, and he definitively shied away from the seizure of private property, which he had implemented in the 1980s. He also took a step to the right by openly declaring his opposition to abortion. Despite winning the election, Ortega suffered a notorious electoral setback and obtained nearly 4 percent less of the vote than in his 2001 bid.

Peru: Alan García became president of Peru for the second time in an unexpected comeback, defeating the populist Ollanta Humala by a mere 5 percent of the vote in a runoff election.[13] García left office in 1990 amidst severe hyperinflation, economic turbulence, and a surge in violence. A change in his discourse was necessary, and so he openly supported the U.S.–Peru Trade Promotion Agreement and advocated fiscal soundness. However, he also engaged in the inevitable populist promises, such as the death penalty for terrorists and cuts in the wages of ministers and members of Congress. Despite his 16 years out of office, he managed to increase his vote share by 4.8 percent relative to his last candidacy in 2001.

Ecuador: Rafael Correa became president-elect with 56.67 percent of the vote in a runoff against the rightist candidate, Álvaro Noboa.[14] After a close outcome in the general election, where he ran on a populist and pro-Chávez platform, political pragmatism prodded him to reinvent himself as a moderate candidate for the runoff election. Thus he distanced himself from Chávez, promised to keep the Ecuadorian economy dollarized, and played down Ecuador's debt default.

Keeping Right

Contrary to the trend in the rest of the Latin American elections, Mexico and Colombia not only avoided electing a leftist candidate, they also chose to reconfirm their conservative governments: Colombia reelected Álvaro Uribe and Mexico elected Felipe Calderón, the candidate of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN). Yet in both cases, the left did better than ever by a large margin.

Mexico: Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the populist candidate from the leftist *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), lost by a razor-thin margin of less than half a percentage point (roughly 240,000 votes) to the rightist PAN candidate, Felipe Calderón.[15] After months of leading in the polls, López Obrador became a victim of his own rhetoric, his implausible populist platform, and his reluctance to distance himself from Hugo Chávez. Still, by building a genuinely viable presidential bid, he managed to accomplish what no other candidate from the left could. López Obrador more than doubled the percentage of the vote obtained by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—the PRD's three-time presidential candidate—both in 1994 and 2000.[16]

Colombia: The rightist Álvaro Uribe was reelected with a surprising 62 percent of the vote.[17] The candidate from the leftist *Polo Democrático Alternativo*, Carlos Gaviria, came in second with a remarkable 22 percent of the vote. This represents almost a fourfold increase from the 6 percent that the previous leftist candidate, Luis Eduardo Garzón, had obtained in 2002, surpassing the Liberal Party—one of Colombia's two traditional parties—for the first time.[18]

MODERATION PAYS OFF

This brief summary confirms not only that Latin American voters prefer candidates running on leftist platforms, but also that the left seems to have developed the ability to select appealing candidates. This was the case in Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela. With the exception of Hugo Chávez, the extreme populist candidates could not win an election, as proven by the failed bids of López Obrador in Mexico and Ollanta Humala in Peru. Moderation does pay off. Former radical leaders who had been previously voted out of office were voted in again under a moderate façade, and the need to attract votes in a runoff election forced Rafael Correa to moderate his platform in order to win the presidency. Both Daniel Ortega and Alan García had to reinvent themselves in order to generate a sufficient electoral base, and in both cases their margins of victory were narrow. Ortega had to distance himself from his Marxist revolutionary rhetoric of the past by promising not to seize lands—as he had done right before losing the presidency in 1988—but also by advocating positions typical of the right, such as a pro-life viewpoint. García also had to rebuild his leftist credentials by moving his rhetoric closer to that of a social democrat and Humala's radicalism aided García's shift.

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Two main conclusions can be drawn from this year of elections. First, when compared to the previous round of elections, the parties from the left increased their vote

share throughout Latin America, even where they did not win the presidency. Second, except for the case of Venezuela, the moderate left—i.e., the modern, reformist, and internationalist version—fared better in the polls than the radical one.

Countries that Preferred the Left in 2006

It is necessary to look deeper into the countries that elected or reelected governments from the left to see if any data suggest that these countries deviate from the trends of Latin America on a broader scale. For descriptive purposes, we will momentarily use the denomination "cluster of the left" for those countries governed by the left or where the left won the presidency in 2006. If there is nothing different about these countries, we should not observe any radical differences when we compare the cluster with the rest of the countries in Latin America. Yet evidence strongly suggests that there is something peculiar about them.

During 2006, Latin America experienced an estimated 5 percent growth in GDP, mostly driven by Argentina and Venezuela, where growth remains strong—7.7 percent for Argentina and 8.5 percent for Venezuela.[19] If we exclude these two countries, estimated average GDP growth in Latin America is reduced to 4.4 percent for 2006. While no clear conclusion should be drawn from this, it is interesting to note that the estimated average growth for the cluster of the left in 2006—5.3 percent—is higher than the aggregate average for Latin America.

Latinobarómetro recently released the latest information on the attitudes of Latin Americans for 2006.[20] The numbers are interesting per se, but become even more revealing when we aggregate and compare them. For instance, while 41 percent of the population in Latin America thinks that the elections in their countries are not fraudulent, the number rises to 47 percent if we only consider the cluster of the left. Furthermore, if we consider only countries with a modern left—Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil—the number rises to 65 percent. The story is very similar when we look at the proportions of individuals who think their countries are very democratic. On average, only 36 percent of Latin Americans think of their country as democratic, but this number is a bit higher (39 percent) in the cluster of the left and even higher (43 percent) in the countries with a modern left. And when asked whether their governments act for the good of the people, only 26 percent agreed, but the number is higher (28 percent) among the cluster of the left and even higher (35 percent) among the countries governed by the modern left. Finally, and perhaps most relevantly, 38 percent of Latin Americans are satisfied with how democracy works in their own country. But among the cluster of the left, the number rises to 40 percent, and among the countries with a modern left, it rises to 48 percent. As a group, it seems clear that countries governed

by—or that elected governments from—the left have different attitudes from the rest of Latin America. Poll data measuring popular satisfaction with public institutions and the way these institutions work seems to crystallize these differences.

It is obviously hard to draw strong conclusions with aggregate data for a single point in time. But it would be naïve to deny that the data suggest differences in performance and attitudes in the countries that have preferred to be governed by the left. Their economies seem to grow more and their populations seem to be more content with their system and the results of their governments. Obviously, it is futile to derive any claim of causality from these numbers. We do not know if governments from the left made people more content with the system or if people were previously content and elected a government from the left for this reason. Yet these numbers do certainly suggest that we should not merely gloss over differences within the left.

HOW MANY LEFTS?

As witnesses to and students of the rise of the left, we have two related questions on our hands. First, why do we find significant differences among the leftists elected to power? And second, what can explain the recent surge of the left in Latin America? We suspect the answers are related.

The standard argument is that poverty and inequality in Latin America explain the electoral surge of the left. After all, if the left advocates redistribution and social equality, it is only natural that the poor—a majority in Latin America—would support the left.[21] Unfortunately, poverty and inequality are not new features in the continent, so we would need to explain why the left receives votes now, when it did not before. This simply means that there must be another factor—or most likely multiple factors—that, coupled with poverty and inequality, explains the surge of the left since the 1990s. And for the story to be plausible, at least one of these factors must also explain why the left gave up arms and embraced the polls. After all, there would be no "turn to the left" in Latin America if there were no viable candidates competing from the left.

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What we need to keep in mind is that for the left to be elected to power, it needs to present candidates that appeal to a substantial base of voters—either because of charisma, discourse, or effectiveness. Therefore, a surge toward the left can be due to the participation of more appealing candidates with better traits and discourse, a change in tastes in a sufficient proportion of voters, or a combination of both. Presented in

this way, the matter can only be resolved empirically.

Individuals in Latin America have consistently distanced themselves from the left. More and more Latin Americans declare that they identify with the center and the right. If anything, there seems to be a consistent pattern of shifts in Latin American public opinion toward the right. This trend is assessed with individual-level data from the *World Values Survey* and is also confirmed for 2006 by the latest results released in Latinobarómetro. The data show that the average placement of individuals in 13 of the 17 countries in Latin America is either on the center or the right, while only four have an average placement on the left.[22] Furthermore, at least nine countries—Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Colombia, El Salvador, Ecuador, Brazil, and Chile—showed shifts to the center or the right in the last ten years.

Thus, it seems to be the case that the successful candidates from the left are typically those who build large support coalitions that extend beyond the left and usually reach to the right as well.[23] This might also contribute to a more robust explanation of the middle path taken by most governments of the left in Latin America. In other words, fewer individuals agree with radical changes towards the left and consequently, the more moderate versions of leftists—whether they share this preference or not—are constrained by their constituencies.

Yet the question lingers: are there one, two, or more lefts in Latin America? The last decade and a half saw an increase in the number of elected governments that subscribe to the tradition of the left, and we want to understand this phenomenon. Thus, it is necessary to determine whether our object of study is the same in all cases to avoid drawing incorrect conclusions. Indeed, many differences between these cases suggest that they do not belong in the same category, that there is more than one left. Their origins are divergent: some spring from a historical left that updated itself to accede to and remain in power, while others appeared with a flamboyant and appealing discourse.[24] Their means of rising to and maintaining power also conflict: some subscribe to the limits of the democratic game and the rule of law, while others tend to tramp over institutions that become inconvenient for their immediate needs.[25] Furthermore, the ultimate long-term goals of their policies are different: some look for immediate results that will cement their support and allow them to remain in power, while others undertake policies that will have longer-lasting

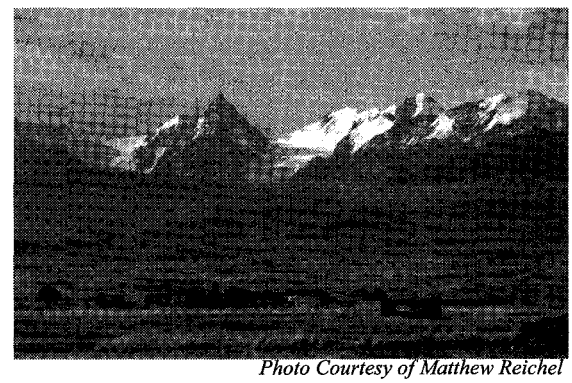

Photo Courtesy of Matthew Reichel

The Andes: different political lefts are not the only thing seperating Bolivia and Chile.

effects in the areas that they care about the most—poverty and inequality.

Striking—and convenient—is that overlaps between these distinctions strongly suggest the adequacy of a dichotomous classification for the Latin American left. The labels convey information about the distance between the two leftist poles. Thus, it is irrelevant whether the labels are "good" versus "bad," "right" versus "wrong," or "modern" versus "old"; the point is that the two extremes in this spectrum provide a robust frame for analysis. Are two categories enough, or do we need more?[26] Taxonomies are schematic by definition. They are supposed to capture certain commonalities in a given population. But if a taxonomy has as many classifications as there are cases, it simply will not help to improve our understanding of the phenomenon we observe.[27] A dichotomous classification could be subject to another subdivision in order to refine the contours of the differences between groups. Yet parsimony is better appreciated when new schemes fail to improve our understanding. So we will not discard refinements from the outset, but will simply point to the tradeoff involved when adding complexity to models and gaining little explanatory power in return.

Grouping Chávez with Néstor Kirchner of Argentina and Evo Morales of Bolivia as the polar opposites of Lula, Bachelet, and Tabaré Vázquez of Uruguay is not without challenge. The former do belong to a different category, it is argued, because they are delivering upon their promises[28] and responding to "long-ignored needs and building much-needed human capital."[29] Nevertheless, the core question is not whether poverty was reduced by a certain percentage, whether direct transfers to the poorest were implemented, or whether motives agree with discourse. The relevant question has to do with the sustainability of these policies. How long can poverty be reduced by direct transfers to the population *without* additional instruments to help people overcome poverty *and* remain out of poverty afterwards? If poverty-reducing policies are based on cash-availability, it is only natural that when the flow of these funds stops, so will the programs and, consequently, poverty might return to its previous levels.[30] Furthermore, it is necessary to ask if financing these direct cash transfers is the best use of resources to tackle poverty. After all, if there is a better use for these funds, elected leaders have—at the very least—a moral obligation to engage in them.

And making this distinction, as we exemplified above, clarifies—and does not obscure—the actual trend that we are seeing in the region: it is both types of left that have come to power, but the moderate versions of the left are more successful at winning elections.[31] Were Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales anomalies? It is hard to say without better-defined counterfactuals, and that is beyond the scope of this text. However, the evidence mentioned earlier suggests that the rise of the left is a result of appealing to the critical mass of voters. If voters have shifted to the right, then gaining office might just require more moderate policies.

Following the same line of reasoning, we also subscribe to an explanation in which it is not institutions, so much as voters, that determine the winner in an election.[32] A country might have somewhat stable democratic institutions—such as Mexico in 2006—but if the candidate from the left cannot appeal to a sufficient amount of voters due to a radicalized discourse, then it is highly unlikely that this candidate can win the election.[33] Was it a stable institutional framework or his ability to alienate more centrist voters that kept López Obrador out of office? We tend to think it was the latter.

Analysts might choose to question the basis for a distinction between lefts or, jeopardizing their credibility, impose some value-charged "ulterior motives" in the taxonomy.[34] The latter adds nothing to our understanding of the rise of the left; the former opens a venue for potentially profitable discussion. By claiming that there is only one left and, therefore, only one surge to be explained, we would necessarily have to assume that the same factors affect all countries in the same manner. And somehow it does not make sense to impose this assumption when explaining the rise of Chávez, Morales, Bachelet, and Lula. Nonetheless, if distinguishing between cases shows beyond all reasonable doubt that the factors explaining the political success of some cases are equally applicable to the rest, then we might confidently conclude that distinguishing between cases with certain common features was but an exercise that strengthened our confidence in a single "left wave" in Latin America. For the time being, however, we would not advise throwing out the baby along with the bathwater.

Notes

1. Jorge G. Castaneda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2006): 28–43.

2. This number rises to eleven if we consider Costa Rica's Oscar Arias to also be on the center-left, due to PLN's social democratic credentials.

3. Over the next couple of years, eight countries are scheduled to hold presidential elections: Argentina (2007), Guatemala (2007), Paraguay (2008), El Salvador (2009), Panama (2009), Honduras (2009), Chile (2009), and Uruguay (2009). If the left loses the presidency in Argentina, Chile, Panama, or Uruguay—none of which is likely—the left ratio is likely to be altered.

4. Uruguay will have presidential elections in October 2009, but whichever government is elected will not take office until March 2010. As for the rest of these countries, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Brazil will hold elections in 2010, Nicaragua and Peru in 2011, and Chile and Venezuela in 2012.

5. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Statistical Yearbook for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2005* (Santiago: United Nations, 2006).

6. Latinobarómetro, *Informe Latinobarómetro 2006*, (Santiago: Latinobarómtero, 2006).

7. It would actually be his second full term since the new constitution entered into force in 2000. But he had served for two years as president after being elected in 1998 for the first time.

8. Preliminary results from Venezuela's *Consejo Nacional Electoral.*

9. Official results from Brazil's *Tribunal Superior Electoral.*

10. Official results from Chile's *Servicio Electoral.*

11. That was, until they met last December in Bolivia and reconciled their differences at the South American Community of Nations Summit.

12. Official results from Nicaragua's *Consejo Supremo Electoral.*

13. Official results from Peru's *Officina Nacional de Procesos Electorales.*

14. Official results from Ecuador's *Tribunal Supremo Electoral.*

15. Official results from Mexico's *Instituto Federal Electoral.*

16. While it may never be known for certain how many votes Cárdenas did get in 1988, he obtained around 16 percent of the vote both in 1994 and in 2000.

17. Official results from Colombia's *Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil.*

18. For a detailed recount of the state of the parties from the left in Colombia, see César Rodríguez Garavito, "La nueva izquierda colombiana: orígenes, características y perspectiva," in *La nueva izquierda en América Latina,* eds. Patrick Barret and others (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2004).

19. World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects 2007* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007).

20. Latinobarómetro, *Informe Latinobarómetro 2006.*

21. Michael Cleary, "Explaining the Left's Resurgence," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 4 (2006): 34–49.

22. In a strict sense, to confirm these tendencies we would need to perform statistical tests on the *Latinobarómetro* data to confirm that the shifts are not due to measurement error. But that is an exercise that we leave for another occasion. Yet when these tests were performed on individual-level data for various points in time during 1990–2001, the hypothesis of a shift to the right was confirmed.

23. Marco A. Morales, "Have Latin Americans Turned Left?" (master's thesis, New York University, 2006).

24. Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn."

25. Ibid.

26. Hector E. Schamis, "Populism, Socialism and Democratic Institutions," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 4 (2006): 20–34.

27. One of the clearest examples of this preference can be found in Javier Corrales, "The Many Lefts of Latin America," *Foreign Policy* 157 (2006): 44–45.

28. Mark Weisbrot, "Left Hook," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2006): 200.

29. Bernardo Álvarez Herrera, "A Benign Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2006): 195.

30. This is not a very popular perspective on this debate, where most accounts seem to care only about immediate results. For alternative formulations, see Joseph Stiglitz, "Is Populism Really So Bad for Latin America?" *New Perspectives Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2006): 61–62, or Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "Populism and Globalization Don't Mix," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2006): 63.

31. Cleary, "Explaining the Left's Resurgence."

32. For the opposite view, see Maílson Da Nóbrega, "Latin America, Two Lefts of Two Tendencies?" *Tendencias Weekly,* 20 June 2006.

33. It could also be argued that López Obrador nearly won the election, but this is more a function of the effective number of candidates in the election. Had there been a runoff between Calderón and López Obrador, we could have seen a reshuffling of votes from the excluded candidates to those in the runoff. However, we need to point out that there were three-party contests as well in 1994 and 2000, yet Cárdenas was never as close as López Obrador to winning an election.

34. Atilio Borón, "Vargas Llosa y la democracia: breve historia de una relación infeliz," *Pensamiento Crítico,* 7 November 2006.