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Latin America

Latin America: Patterns and Pendulum

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RECENT ELECTIONS ACROSS across Latin America appear to have placed the hard right firmly back in power. While the landscape may appear to be dim for the left, other factors signal glimmers of hope. [\[1\]](#)

Four interrelated developments define the current political panorama. First, and most important, is the January 3, 2026 U.S. invasion of Venezuela and kidnapping of president Nicolás Maduro (and Donald Trump anointing Marco Rubio as a ruling viceroy), along with sadistic strangulation and threatened military action against Cuba.

Second are rightwing governments joining the Trump administration in a so-called Shield of the Americas in a hybrid “war on terror and drugs” that violates international law and strategically targets the left.

Third are the very narrow June, 2026 wins of hard rightwing presidential candidates over their progressive opponents in Peru and Colombia.

And finally is the virtual collapse of popular support for recently elected rightwing governments in Argentina, Chile and particularly the recent Bolivian mass protests and blockades.

In addition to the embedded anti-leftist, pro-establishment perspective of mainstream media, pundits have alternatively explained recent political developments as either a common pendulum swing from right to left and back again, or an example of ingrained anti-incumbency sentiments among the electorate.

Both interpretations fall short and fail to explain the contradictions of the situation that we are now facing.

Patterns of a Century

Rather than a swing of the pendulum, over the past century broad patterns have defined Latin America's political landscape. The 1930s saw the rise of military socialists, influenced as much by Italian fascism as by Marxist notions of class struggle.

In the aftermath of World War Two, military dictatorships briefly gave way to the flourishing of civilian governance, as protests arose questioning why people were asked to fight for democracy in Europe while remaining subject to authoritarian governments at home.

Subsequently, with the onset of the Cold War, most of Latin America came under pro-U.S. military rule. Slowly, in the 1970s and 1980 much of the region returned to civilian governance.

In 1998 in Venezuela, Hugo Chávez won election on a populist platform that introduced a decade during which for the first time almost the entire region came under leftist rule in what was commonly referred to as the pink tide.

By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, that dominance unraveled as conservative forces reasserted themselves. A brief interlude returned some moderately progressive governments, but by 2026 Brazil under Luiz

Inácio Lula da Silva (“Lula”) and Mexico with president Claudia Sheinbaum were very much outliers.

While we can discern broad transnational trends in these developments, they just as often respond to local conditions and a wide variety of specific factors including the popularity of charismatic leadership and the organizing capacity of different social forces.

Those who campaign as political “outsiders” are often in reality members of the traditional ruling class, so that positioning becomes more of a question of rhetoric than lived material reality. More relevant than perceived anti-incumbency sentiments to explain dramatic electoral shifts are larger political factors.

A quarter century ago, the left thrived in Latin America as the George W. Bush administration was distracted with its war in Iraq. Under the Trump administration, that imperial gaze has been turned back on the hemisphere, creating a very different environment challenging the goals of economic equality, political democracy and social justice.

Depending on one’s perspective, these can either be seen as some of the darkest times for the Americas, or an example of the inherent contradictions of a capitalist mode of production as the limitations and failures of rightwing policies of the upward redistribution of wealth become readily apparent.

Donroe Doctrine Throwback

In the 2024 presidential election, the New York Post tabloid dubbed Donald Trump’s aggressively expansionistic policies as the “Donroe Doctrine,” a term Trump warmly embraced to signal his willingness to act unilaterally to secure U.S. strategic and economic interests in the Americas.

In a November 2025 national security strategy document, Trump proudly proclaimed his corollary as a revival and expansion of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

Demonstrating that this was much more than rhetoric, early on the morning of Saturday, January 3, 2026 and in blatant violation of international law, Trump ordered the U.S. military to attack Venezuela and kidnap Nicolás Maduro, along with his wife Cilia Flores.

This first military assault that the United States launched on the South American continent represented a return to the gunboat policies of more than a century earlier.

Trump followed this up with threats to “take Cuba,” although with the U.S. increasingly bogged down in its war with Iran and control over the Strait of Hormuz those statements have receded into the background.

Some commentators at first pondered whether an attack on Cuba would be an easy victory for Trump to distract from his policy failures elsewhere. Alternatively, with the Cuban government rolling back many of the revolution’s redistributive policies in the face of the intense pressure of the U.S. blockade that has destroyed its economy, that may no longer be necessary.

Reoccurring energy grid failures leading to complete power outages on the island occasionally trigger protests, but so far most Cubans appear either supportive of the government or resigned to their fate. In any case, for Trump the overt symbolism of projecting military power appears as important as any potential economic gains. As always, it is

hard to understand or predict what his motivations or endgame might be.

Nothing in recent memory has been as brazen as Trump's complete disregard for the niceties of international law. His actions take us back more than 100 years to the end of the 19th century when the United States acted unilaterally as a global police force in the Caribbean basin.

Aligning with Trump

During the Cold War, rightwing dictators were willing to play into anticommunist narratives in order to earn support from Washington. What is different and notable in the current political environment is how many of these rightwing governments openly align themselves with Trump's blatantly illegal policies.

These include the open extrajudicial killings of alleged drug traffickers, first in international waters in the Caribbean and Pacific and then on land in Ecuador and Venezuela with threats to engage in similar actions in Mexico.

All this stands in stark contrast to nationalist sentiments that had long held dominance in Latin America. During the Cold War, many politicians as well as the general public admired Fidel Castro for his ability to stand up to the United States even if they did not agree with his policies.

No more.

An international ruling class has always had shared economic interests, and aristocratic oligarchs move in the same social circles that largely remain invisible to the rest of us, not unlike how European monarchs were thoroughly inbred with each other.

A U.S. (preferably Ivy League) education and facility with English has long been a prerequisite for a serious run for the presidency of a Latin American country, and more than one has held U.S. citizenship. What seems to have shifted in the last couple years, though, is an open support and identification among this ruling class and their conservative supporters for a U.S. policy agenda as if it were their own.

Previously the blatant violation of a country's sovereignty, as with the invasion of Venezuela, would have faced almost universal diplomatic sanction and public condemnation rather than a warm embrace. This extends beyond ideology and policy concerns and reflects something even more disturbing.

One piece of evidence about this change is an annual resolution that Cuba brings to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) condemning the U.S. blockade of the island as a violation of the UN Charter.

In its first year in 1992, 59 countries voted in favor, three opposed, and the remainder abstained. Over time, opposition to U.S. policy became nearly universal. By 2015, 190 countries voted with Cuba, leaving only the United States and Israel in support of continued isolation.

In 2016 after Barack Obama and Cuban president Raúl Castro reestablished diplomatic relations, no country voted against the resolution and only the United States and Israel abstained.

That has changed with Trump back in the White House. In October 2025, Cuba's annual UN resolution condemning the U.S. blockade again passed, but with a lower level of support than during the Obama years. This time, 165 countries voted in favor, seven opposed, and 12 abstained.

Those voting against included the United States, Israel, Argentina, Hungary, Paraguay, North Macedonia, and Ukraine. Costa Rica, Ecuador and several Eastern European countries abstained.

On July 7, 2026 Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez called for an emergency session in the UNGA in response to Trump's escalating measures against the island. While Cuba still won the vote condemning the U.S. blockade, it received significantly less support than in recent years.

This time, only 136 countries voted with Cuba, nine voted against, 30 abstained, and some opted to skip the vote altogether. The nine countries voting against the resolution were the United States, Argentina, Israel, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Morocco, Czechia, North Macedonia and Ukraine. Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago abstained while Antigua & Barbuda, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras and Venezuela skipped the vote altogether.

Venezuela Trapped

Venezuela's lack of support for Cuba, even though the country continues to suffer under the same crushing sanctions that have destroyed Cuba's economy, either represented interim president Delcy Rodríguez's move firmly into the imperialist camp or a desperate geopolitical attempt to ward off even more of Trump's wrath. Many observers remain divided over how to read and interpret her actions, and whether remnants of the Bolivarian Revolution can reasonably be said to hold power.

For some, Rodríguez faces an impossible choice: either cooperate with the Trump administration or face military attacks. In the meantime, Secretary of State Marco Rubio effectively rules the country as a viceroy, controlling its finances, natural resources, and government decisions.

It would appear that the intention is to extend a similar model to Cuba, not with the goal of changing its economic and political system but to rule it directly as a colony.

The UN vote reflected not only a resurgence of U.S. opposition to Cuba but also a rightward shift in global politics, and in particular one that was willingly and openly allied with Trump in a way that extends well beyond an embrace of shared economic and political interests that has always tied an international ruling class together.

As one example of this, in the Latin American past when presidents held dual citizenship, they either gave that up or faced pressure to do so to underscore that their primary allegiance was to the country that they currently governed.

No more.

Ecuador's president Daniel Noboa was born in Miami, continues to hold U.S. citizenship, and allegedly returned to Miami in November 2025 for the birth of his child so as not to leave any doubt as to the legitimacy of his offspring's citizenship.

Recently inaugurated Colombian president Abelardo de la Espriella does Noboa one better, holding Italian citizenship in addition to that of both Colombia and the United States.

A question in many critics' minds is in whose interests will these leaders serve, when their policies are already so subservient to Donald Trump.

And how does Trump manage to continue to project such levels of power when his policies, both domestically and internationally, remain so deeply unpopular?

Recent Elections

While the rest of the hemisphere shifted left at the beginning of the 21st century, Colombia remained the outlier in continuing to elect rightwing governments that were closely allied with U.S. imperial concerns. That ended in 2022 with the election of Gustavo Petro.

Petro came out of the ranks of the M-19 guerrillas, but eschewed armed struggle in favor of electoral politics. With a famously abrasive personality, his terms in office as mayor of the capital city of Bogotá and then president of the country were tumultuous as best.

In the 2026 elections, Petro's supporters hoped that he would be followed in office by the human rights activist Iván Cepeda. Instead, Cepeda lost narrowly to the rightwing lawyer Abelardo de la Espriella who had defended drug dealers and paramilitary groups — the same people who in a different context conservatives would denounce as narco-terrorists.

Given Colombia's history and the polling in advance of the election, what is notable is not that Cepeda lost, but that he lost by such a small margin of 49.66 to 48.70 percent, or about 251,000 votes out of 26 million cast. In a social media post, Trump proclaimed that de la Espriella had won by a large margin but he did not even win a majority of the vote.

Almost simultaneously, a similar scenario played out in Peru. In her fourth run for office, Keiko Fujimori, daughter of the disgraced former president, the authoritarian Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000), similarly narrowly defeated Roberto Sánchez.

That race had echoes of the previous contest of 2021, which she narrowly lost to Pedro Castillo who came from the same leftwing party as Sánchez. In 2026, the vote was 50.12 to 49.88, or an even narrower margin than in Colombia of only about around 37,000 votes of almost 20 million.

The margin that gave Fujimori her victory came from Peruvians residing outside the country — particularly those in Miami, long a conservative stronghold. The irony is that she will be president even though the majority of people living in Peru voted against her.

In both cases the losers claimed fraud and initially refused to accept defeat. With some notable exceptions (blatantly stolen elections in Mexico in 1988, Honduras in 2017), under modern electoral systems the posted results accurately reflect the number votes cast in the ballot box. (Other factors, of course, are at play, such as the advantages of incumbency and particularly gerrymandering and voter suppression in the United States, but that is not what sore

losers have in mind when they cry fraud.)

Grasping for Power

While the right effectively leverages the rhetoric of democracy to its advantage, recent events demonstrate that the left is more likely to respect institutions. Trump has yet to recognize his loss in the 2020 U.S. election, and Jair Bolsonaro followed a similar course in Brazil two years later.

Many different factors affect electoral outcomes, but the left has always faced the need for serious introspection as to why policies that favor the vast majority of the population fail to gain traction in the face of support for rightwing politicians who stand openly against their own class interest.

Sectors of the hard right are anything but democratic, and that becomes a broader problem. When George W. Bush lost the popular vote to Al Gore in the United States in 2000, and probably the electoral college as well until the Supreme Court overturned the Florida vote count, he initially pledged to recognize his small margin of victory and to administer collaboratively with the Democrats. As his subsequent policies immediately made clear, he did anything but that.

In Ecuador, the rightwing Noboa moved up the 2027 municipal elections and then barred his strongest opposition, former leftwing president Rafael Correa's Citizen's Revolution, from competing, thereby cementing his hold on power.

In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele has implemented even more extreme measures to tighten his grasp. Similar to military dictatorships from half a century ago, leftists are considered cockroaches to be eradicated, not a legitimate opposition.

This stands in marked contrast to a dramatic expansion of electoral democracy and secure voting systems under the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela after Hugo Chávez's win in 1998.

In the cases of Venezuela or Nicaragua, the removal of a nominally leftwing government, with whatever limitations and complications, would not mean the flourishing of democracy, much less the implementation of a more humane government attuned to the needs and desires of the populace.

Assisted by the heavy hand of U.S. imperialism, the right would jump at the chance to undo the remnants of whatever redistributive policies might remain, and implement their aggressive program of the upward redistribution of wealth that plays only to the interests of an oligarchical ruling class.

The Right's Inability to Govern

Given the built-in advantages that the owners of the means of production enjoy, what can be surprising is how difficult it has been for the current crop of conservative governments to implement their agendas. On the other hand, for readers of Capital this may come as no surprise as it reflects the inherent flaws of their economic system, particularly in its vicious neoliberal form.

In Argentina, the anarcho-capitalist economist, Javier Milei, campaigned with a chainsaw, promising to slash governing structures. As with Elon Musk, to whom Milei gave a chainsaw, and Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), in practice those policies have not turned out so well.

Milei played into Argentina's longstanding anti-incumbency sentiments of *que se vayan todos* (throw all of the bums out), but when his policies of privatization and austerity began to hurt people's bottom lines, they turned against him.

In neighboring Chile, José Antonio Kast (who literally comes from a family of Nazis) campaigned on a Tumpist anti-immigrant platform (this time blaming Peruvians and Venezuelans for the country's problems) found his popularity ratings plummet once in office.

Most recently, in Bolivia a runoff race saw two rightwing candidates face off. While the pundit class cheered the end of two decades of socialist rule under Evo Morales and Luis Arce that saw poverty and inequality rates plummet to their lowest levels in South America's poorest country, once in power the eventual winner Rodrigo Paz similarly proved unable to rule.

His neoliberal policies of austerity and privatization have faced massive backlash with roadblocks and calls for his resignation or impeachment.

A quarter century ago, similar dynamics led to the rise of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) as an electoral force. Bolivia has long had a highly politicized and aware population, yet the country continued to elect officials that implemented policies that undermined popular interests.

First the privatization of water in Cochabamba in 1999, and then battles over the exploitation, industrialization, and nationalization of the country's vast natural gas reserves in 2003 and 2005, led to Morales' rise to power.

Infighting and other problems with the MAS led to Paz's win in 2025, but underlying conditions of inequality remain unaddressed which triggered the recent protests.

Left Dilemmas

Part of what we are witnessing is a common phenomenon of a social movement left that is more powerful than its electoral counterpart. While events in Latin America demonstrate that street protests and general strikes can be useful to pull down opposing governments, they are less effective at building positive and concrete alternatives.

To do that, left parties need to gain control of power, but once they do so they prove to be ineffective at implementing their agenda.

One interpretation of the left's shortcomings in office is simply a question of a lack of governing experience. While the traditional oligarchy has centuries of experience in implanting a rightwing agenda, grassroots activists and the left in general have had precious few opportunities to test and adjust their policy proposals in practice.

Given this reality, once the far right gains power even by a very thin margin, it is well positioned to force through its neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization. In contrast, even when the left wins by a wide margin and seemingly with a strong mandate it lacks the skill to make important changes.

For some, this translates into the importance of gaining governing experience, even if on a municipal level, before attempting to implement more far-reaching policies of redistribution.

Another factor is the oligarch's traditional control over the communications media, and in recent years it has proved to be more effective than the left in exploiting new forms of social media.

A narrative, particularly when the right does not hesitate to present a narrow victory as a strong mandate, creates an advantage that the left appears incapable of countering. To some degree this is due to the left's natural embrace of critical thinking rather than the superficiality of political rhetoric that lacks material substance.

Responses to the twin devastating earth-quakes that shook Venezuela on June 24 provide evidence of how the right is able to spin narratives to their advantage. Conservatives criticize the shortcomings of the government's relief efforts while at the same time condemning its perceived authoritarianism even while standard response guidelines call for limiting access to disaster sites.

Furthermore, the contrast to Hugo Chávez's response to a devastating 1999 landslide that occurred in the same region as the recent earthquakes can be stunning, and highlights the right's desire to score polemical points rather than to solve very real problems.

Coming from a career in the military and accustomed to command structures, Chávez effectively mobilized disaster relief and in the process gained a good deal of popular support although there is retrospective criticism that the new housing may have been too hastily and inadequately constructed.

Now, instead of celebrating what they theoretically present as an alternative to the current administration's perceived shortcomings, conservatives opportunistically portray Chávez's actions as evidence of the inherent dictatorial nature of socialist governance.

Lean Left/Vote Right

In "Déjà Vu," Roger Waters sings, "you lean to the left, but you vote to the right." That conundrum has long perplexed the left, and defines the current political terrain across the Americas and around the world.

Surveys reveal that people favor the left for their redistributive politics that address longstanding problems of inequality, but end up electing conservative politicians out of security concerns.

With some notable exceptions (currently the second highest homicide rate in the world is in Ecuador under the rightwing Daniel Noboa administration), that fear is exaggerated as most crime rates have steadily fallen over the years. Yet law-and-order policies (known as *mano dura* or iron fist in Latin America) play well.

Some leftist commentators advise against diminishing these sometimes very real fears, but broadly they do lead to people voting against their class interests.

The current outliers to these patterns are Mexico and Brazil. Mexico's president Claudia Sheinbaum currently enjoys some of the highest popularity ratings for chief executives, not only in the Americas but around the world. With a doctorate in energy engineering, she is the first woman and the first person with Jewish heritage to hold the office.

Both her resilience and ability to lead Mexico in the face of constant threats from the Trump administration have led to praise, even as objectively Sheinbaum has made little headways in addressing the country's deep-seated

economic and social problems.

In Brazil, Lula is currently serving his third term as president and plans to run for reelection in October's contest. More than any other country, Brazil shares parallels with the United States, but with key differences.

For example, similar to Trump's supporters' storming of the U.S. capital on January 6, 2021, a year later on January 8, 2022, the losing candidate Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil attempted a coup against Lula. Unlike in the United States with Trump, Bolsonaro, along with many of supporters, were convicted and are currently in prison.

Ironically, and despite assumptions to the contrary, sometimes institutions and the rule of law are more established and better respected in Latin America than they are in the United States.

Polarization

Much of the Americas remain deeply polarized. In Brazil and elsewhere (although not universally), a rising Christian right provides a base of support for conservatism. As in the United States, that often translates into strong Zionist sentiments — underlaid with latent antisemitism.

Culture wars lead to fierce racist and sexist attacks, including on gender identities and reproductive rights. A religious left that fueled the social justice concerns of Liberation Theology and faith-based campaigns against U.S. intervention in Central America in the 1980s has all but dissipated.

That absence has become most obvious in the lack of an organized response to Trump's attacks on Venezuela and Cuba.

While most Latin American countries are now under the thumb of rightwing regimes, the fact that Mexico and Brazil, the region's two largest countries, remain under progressive administrations translates into the fact that numerically, most still live under some form of leftist governance.

While it may appear that the right has a dominant presence, another way of looking at the current situation is that the left is not quite dead yet. But the hard work on implementing redistributive policies in the face of an aggressive, vindictive, mean-spirited, and frankly anti-democratic and dictatorial right wing still remains in front of us.

Source: September-October 2026, [ATC 244](#).

PS:

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[1] Photo: Cero Rico, near Potosi, Bolivia. It has been mined since 1545 for silver. Extractivism is still the basis of Latin America's economy. Mhwater at Dutch Wikipedia.