

# THE RISE OF POPULISM AND THE LEFT IN LATIN AMERICA

*Mitchell A. Seligson*

*Mitchell A. Seligson*

Latin America's "left turn" was the focus of a cluster of thoughtful articles in the October 2006 issue of this journal. Since then, the trend toward the left and toward populist governments has deepened. In South America, the rise of the left is unmistakable, with Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela led by presidents with varying degrees and shapes of leftist ideology, while further north, in Mexico, a leftist presidential candidate was defeated by the narrowest of margins in the 2006 election. And of course, one must not forget about Cuba, the remaining dictatorship in the region, still firmly in the hands of the socialist left in spite of the protracted and serious illness of Fidel Castro. The most recent additions to the populist left are Bolivia's Evo Morales, who took office in 2006, and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, who began his presidency in early 2007. In Paraguay, the decades-old hegemony of the Colorado Party is being challenged by suspended Roman Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo, who espouses a mixture of leftist and populist rhetoric.

These are remarkable changes for the region. While leftists have held power in the past, never before in Latin America have so many countries been governed by presidents of the left. It should be added that the ideological variations among them are great, however. Presidents Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva of Brazil and Michelle Bachelet of Chile support free trade and close ties with the United States, while Hugo Chávez of Venezuela employs a rhetoric replete with praise of socialism and attacks on capitalism and the United States.

Populist governments are also on the rise. Latin American populism comes in right-wing as well as left-wing forms, and has a history that reaches back to the 1930s. The term “populism” is sometimes confused merely with charismatic, personalistic leaders who appeal to a broad voter base that crosses class lines. Populism properly defined, however, must include a core belief that the institutions of classical liberal democracy, especially legislatures and courts, are anachronistic, inefficient, and inconsistent with the true expression of “the people’s will” (or at least the populist officials’ interpretation of it).<sup>1</sup> Populist leaders typically propose instead to “listen to the people” with the aim of personally carrying out their will while isolating “rejectionists” who would deny it. In practice, populism often can mean running roughshod over fundamental democratic guarantees of civil liberties, especially free expression and the right to due process.<sup>2</sup>

What are we to make of the rise of the left and the resurrection of populism? The first of the two phenomena almost certainly betokens the maturation of democracy in the region, as the politics of region adapt to the coming to power of the opposition via the ballot box without serious threat of military intervention. As such, these trends may add up to little more than one of those pendular swings of the voters’ “mood” such as periodically occur in many established democracies. Alternatively and more ominously, the rise of populism and some varieties of leftist rule could represent a threat to democratic stability.

In order to take the full measure of the situation, investigating several key questions will be helpful. The first asks whether leftist political sympathies predominate in the region, and whether there is evidence of a shift to the left among the populace. A second would inquire as to whether Latin Americans support populism, meaning a style of governance that would do away with representative and judicial institutions in favor of concentrating power in the hands of the chief executive. Finally, it is worth investigating whether those who favor a leftist or a left-populist orientation are less supportive of democracy and more likely to favor some alternative system.

Answering these questions requires studying the beliefs and attitudes of Latin American<sup>3</sup> citizens across the region as well as examining how these beliefs have changed over time. Our ability to tap into the opinions of citizens worldwide has been greatly enhanced with the recent widespread expansion of crossnational surveys. The World Values Survey (WVS) is foremost among them, with the broadest coverage.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, outside the advanced industrial nations, coverage by region is spottier and in Latin America very limited. This gap can be filled, however, by regional surveys—a growing enterprise in the developing world. Many of these surveys use as their monikers variations on the name of the Eurobarometer, the grandfather of the genre, though

problems of sample design and execution mean that the data are not necessarily of uniformly high quality.<sup>5</sup>

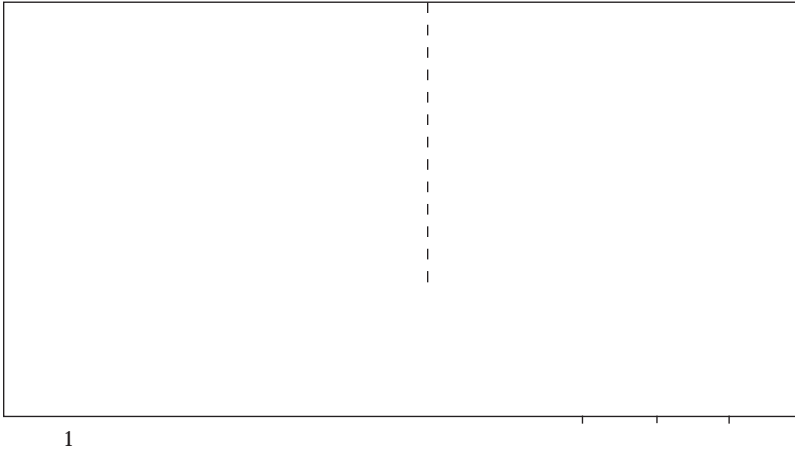
The fullest coverage of the Western Hemisphere comes from the AmericasBarometer, a survey periodically carried out by the Latin Ameri-

6.32. In sum, both worldwide and in the limited set of Latin American countries studied via the WVS, opinion skews just slightly to the right of center.

The AmericasBarometer data for 2006 reveal a regional average of 5.77, which places Latin America slightly to the right of the 5.56 world average.<sup>10</sup> The 2004 figure for the Latin American countries that were included in both the 2004 and 2006 rounds was 6.17, however, so it appears that there has been a recent shift to the left. Averages can, of course, be deceiving, but in this case they are not. Looking at countries that can be compared directly in the 2004 and 2006 AmericasBarometer rounds all but two of them moved to the left, and of the ones that did not, only one experienced a statistically significant shift to the right. Thus, the slight “shift to the left” has indeed occurred, and the trend is regionwide, but the magnitude of the shift is small and the center of gravity remains somewhat to the right. Moreover, longer-term trend data would need to be examined before we could be confident about the existence of any secular long-term trend.

For ideology to matter, it must translate into behavior—such as voting for candidates who espouse leftist or rightist positions—which is consistent with this or that ideological orientation. Since the AmericasBarometer includes questions not only on ideology but on

**FIGURE 1 IDEOLOGICAL DISPOSITION AND PRESIDENTIAL VOTE CHOICE:  
COSTA RICA**



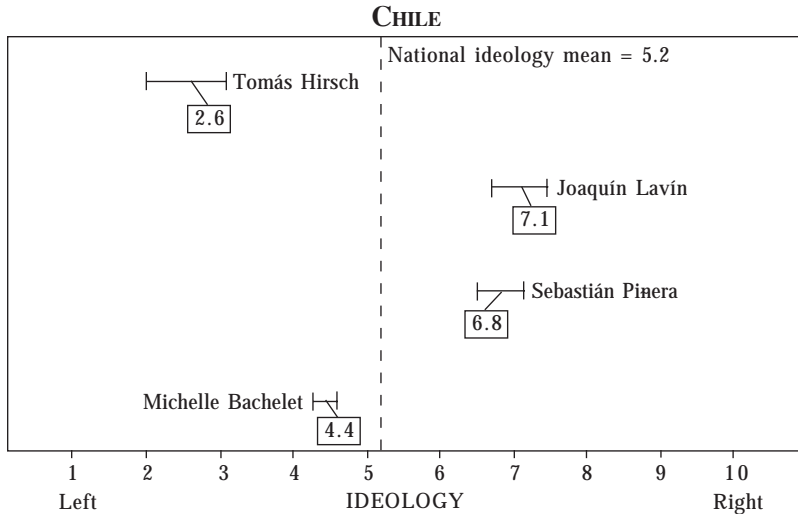
center Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC), which saw its electoral support collapse in 2006 amid scandals involving two former presidents, coincides directly with the national ideological mean. Interestingly, supporters of the traditionally left-of-center National Liberation Party (PLN) averaged 6.3, slightly to the  $\swarrow$  of the national mean. These findings dramatically illustrate the electoral realignment taking place in that country but speak even more directly to the very narrow range of ideological difference in Latin America's oldest and most stable democracy. Even though the electoral scene has been marked by declining voter participation and evidence of declining support for the system,<sup>11</sup> Costa Rica remains at the top of all the countries in the region in terms of political legitimacy, and, as these results show, the ideological disagreements are very limited.

As noted above, Costa Rica's Central American neighbors Nicaragua and El Salvador present considerably more polarized pictures (see Figure 2). In the former country, those who supported Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega—who in late 2006 won back the presidential office from which the voters had ejected him in 1990—are predictably a fair distance to the left of their fellow citizens who supported President Enrique Bolaños (r. 2002–2007) of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC). More importantly, the left-right ideological gap is far wider in Nicaragua than it is in Costa Rica—which one would expect to be the case if one holds, as we do, that ideology still matters. In El Salvador, the ideological chasm is much broader still. There, supporters of the 2004 presidential candidacy of Schafik Hándal (d. 2006) of the Farabundo

Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN)—the leftist party that emerged from the guerrilla forces of the 1980–92 civil war—averaged a 3.3 as compared to the 7.5 ideology score registered by backers of Antonio Saca, the candidate of the rightist ARENA party that has won the presidency in every election since democracy was restored to that country.

Ideological cleavages also stand out in Chile, where Socialist Party candidate Michelle Bachelet won the presidency in a January 2006 runoff by attracting voters who were closest to the national ideological mean (see Figure 3). Far to her left was Tomás Hirsch, who espoused a more radical program during the campaign but won only a small vote share (which explains the wide confidence interval around the mean of the survey respondents who say that they voted for Hirsch's party). The

FIGURE 3 IDEOLOGICAL DISPOSITION AND PRESIDENTIAL VOTE CHOICE:



Horizontal lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.  
Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP.

from 2004 to 2006. Third, the role of ideology in defining the electorate varies sharply from one country to another. In some cases, voters (and thus viable candidates) cluster heavily in the center while in other countries, vast ideological chasms separate voters, who in turn align behind candidates spanning the left-right spectrum. In short, the end of the Cold War has not meant any “end of ideology” (to borrow Daniel Bell’s famous phrase) for Latin America.

Beyond the ballot box, the AmericasBarometer data show that ideology is relevant to the far deeper question of support for democracy. According to the survey, it is generally the case that people who self-define as more leftist also tend to view their political systems as less legitimate, and are less likely to favor democracy as a political system. A frequently used approach to measure democratic support in many contemporary democracy surveys is drawn from the work in postcommunist Europe of William Mishler and Richard Rose. The item has become known as the “Winston Churchill question,” after that statesman’s famous remark about democracy being the worst system of government except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time. The survey measures agreement or disagreement with this statement: “Even though democracy has many problems, it is better than any other form of government.”<sup>12</sup>

Another key dimension in democratic support is legitimacy, as de-

defined in the classic works of Seymour Martin Lipset and David Easton.<sup>13</sup> The AmericasBarometer uses a 10-point scale to measure the Churchill item, and a five-variable composite index (each of the five variables is measured on a 7-point scale) to measure legitimacy, thus avoiding the way that other research uses yes-or-no or 4- or 5-point scales—crude gauges ill-suited to capturing subtle but significant variations of opinion among citizens. As shown in Figure 4, the further ideology trends to the left in Latin America as a whole, the lower will tend to be both belief in the Churchillian view of democracy as the best system possible



Is there evidence that citizens of Latin America would prefer popu-

How low are these scores? The WVS uses a different metric, scoring trust in these institutions along a mere 1-to-4 scale. Yet an examination of the WVS rank-ordering shows that the lowest average trust score across all countries worldwide belongs to political parties, with the legislature and then the justice system the next least-trusted institu-



limits on dissent. Fully explaining what draws today's Latin American youth to populism will require more analysis, but one plausible hypothesis posits that many older citizens of the region, having lived through the military dictatorships of the 1970s, are "immunized" against populist-authoritarian appeals in ways that younger citizens simply are not. The young know only the disappointments of the current democratic period, when economic growth across much of Latin America has been less robust than expected, and worse, has largely failed to reach the poor. Moreover, it may well be that older citizens are more jaded in general, having seen politicians of all stripes come and go, and there-



genuine choices of party and ideology that can be expressed in free and fair elections, so not all trends are negative. But the negative trends are real enough, and their potential effect on democratic stability in the region remains to be seen.

## NOTES

I thank Kirk and Darren Hawkins, José Miguel Cruz, María Fernand Boidi, and John Booth for their suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Kurt Weyland defines populism as: "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. This direct, quasi-personal relationship bypasses established intermediary organizations or deinstitutionalizes and subordinates them to the leader's personal will." Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Journal of Democracy* 34 (October 2001): 14.

2. Among the classic works exploring the elements of the populist tradition are Michael L. Conniff, ed., *Populism in Latin America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999); and J.M. Malloy, *Populism in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977). For more recent view, see Kenneth M. Roberts, *Populism in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

3. The AmericasBarometer covers Latin America plus four Caribbean countries and the United States and Canada. In this article, when the term "Latin America" is used, it includes the Caribbean as well.

4. Ronald Inglehart et al., *Global Attitudes and Values* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2003), 200.

5. Some regional surveys present a mix of national samples and urban samples, while others limit themselves to the official national language, excluding significant linguistic minorities; since intranational variation on many opinion and behavior variables is often wider than international variation, direct comparisons of samples with sharply varying coverage can be seriously misleading. See Mitchell A. Seligson, "Improving the Quality of Survey Research in Democratizing Countries," *Journal of Democracy* January 2005, 51-56.

6. The countries were stratified into a small number of geographical regions (usually numbering four to six). Within each region, moreover, the samples were substratified into urban or rural zones. Questionnaires translated into widely spo-

8. A 0-to-100 scale would have provided a true neutral point, but the AmericasBarometer conforms to the World Values Survey standard of a 1-to-10 scale.

9. The WVS has expanded its range of countries over the years, moving from a concentration on advanced industrial democracies to one that now includes many countries from the developing world. Looking exclusively at the seventy countries surveyed since 1999, the mean ideology score is 5.58, nearly identical to the entire series since 1981, indicating no worldwide shift in the post-Cold War epoch. Worldwide, nonresponse on this question is typically higher than on other survey items. The WVS mean is based upon 193,531 individuals who responded to the ideology question on at least one wave of the WVS. The AmericasBarometer encountered a nonresponse rate of about 20 percent, which is typical for many surveys.

10. This comparison includes a subset of ten countries from 2004 that were also surveyed with the identical survey item in 2006.

11. See Fabrice Lehoucq, "Costa Rica: Paradise in Doubt," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (July 2005): 140–54, as well as the subsequent exchange between Lehoucq and former Costa Rican president Miguel Angel Rodriguez in the April 2006 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.

12. William Mishler and Richard Rose, "Five Years After the Fall: Trajectories of Support for Democracy in Post-Communist Europe" in Pippa Norris, ed., *Democracy in Europe: A Report on the State of Democracy in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78–99.

13. See, for instance, Seymour Martin Lipset, *Democracy in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 100–101.