

The Rise of the Contemporary Left in Latin America

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NESSA KENNEDY, DEC 15 2013

Throwing Them All Out! The Rise of the Contemporary Left in Latin America

Introduction

'Throw them all out! Not a single one stays!' These were the calls of protestors in Argentina attempting to 'oust' their leaders in 2001 (Boidi, 2007, p. 53). They, along with many other Latin Americans, would succeed in removing their rightwing governments who were nearly uniformly replaced with leftist governments. This event, known as the 'leftwing turn', began in 1998 when Hugo Chavez was elected President of Venezuela. In the next few years Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay would all elect leftist leaders of varying degrees (Seligson, 2007). This essay will endeavour to explain why such a seismic shift towards the left occurred.

Model of Analysis

The essay has four parts. The first examines the structural factors that facilitated the left's rise. The second discusses a series of factors related to the economy, including neoliberal reforms, a changing workforce, and a dramatic economic downturn in the late 1990s that produced mass discontent. The third demonstrates how this discontent manifested itself in the widespread ousting of incumbents, and thus the ascendancy of the left. The fourth surveys the literature of competing arguments for the leftwing turn, and illustrates the fallacies and virtues in their work.

1. Structural Factors

Soviet Union

Under the banner of defeating Communism, into which all leftist movements of any degree were grouped, the US actively worked against every leftist Latin American government from the 1950s onwards. This created a deeply negative perception of leftist governance amongst Latin Americans, who were thus disinclined to support leftwing parties. Additionally, the excuse of ending Communism gave justification to rightwing governments' efforts to crush their competition, through the repression or banning of leftwing movements (Castaña, 2006). This repression resulted in the chronic organisational and political weakness of leftwing parties, who thus had little political presence for decades. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 ended US efforts to supposedly stop Communism in Latin America, and the stigma attached to leftist governance faded, removing this block to leftwing success. Furthermore rightwing governments, devoid of anti-Communist justifications, were forced to loosen leftist repression, which enabled the left to organise itself sufficiently and thus it was only during the mid-1990s that they first became a part of mainstream political life (Castaña, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2010).

The collapse of the Soviet Union also had an internal effect on leftwing parties themselves. Many early leftwing movements had genuinely supported extremist Communist ideals, which entailed the non-democratic overthrow of governments—elections were seen to be of little importance, and thus relatively weak efforts were made to contest them, resulting in few electoral victories. However, the Soviet Union's end led to the ideological victory of democracy,

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and Communism was discredited as a viable option for governance (Cleary, 2006). Thus the only way for the left to attain power—the chief goal of most political movements—was to accept democracy. As a result, the left re-orientated its efforts to sincerely winning power through elections. This lengthy re-orientation, which entailed numerous electioneering efforts, including the moderation of the left's stance, meant that the newly organised left only became a viable option for most voters in the mid-1990s (Levitsky & Roberts, 2010).

Democratisation

A wave of democratisation swept through Latin America in the early 1980s that led to the ousting of mostly rightwing autocrats (Kirby, 2003, p. 77). However, many of these leaders did not leave office until they were sure of a rightwing successor being chosen, and the explicit marginalisation of the left was often a requirement of their departure (Cleary, 2006). Consequently, in the early 1990s most Latin American governments were of the right. Due to the aforementioned structural factors, these governments faced little competition from leftist parties (Blanco & Grier, 2010). As a result, following two or three elections, many of these rightwing governments remained in power in the late 1990s (Cleary, 2006). This had major implications for the left, as shall be explored later.

2. The Economy

The Washington Consensus

In the 1930s, Latin American countries collectively adopted a policy of Import Substitution Industrialisation which entailed the local production of industrialised goods and thus minimised imports. To fund this process, huge sums of money had to be borrowed from international creditors. Following a global economic crisis in the late 1970s, the interests on such borrowings soared, and states were simply unable to keep up with now exponential loan repayments (Naim, 1993). As a result, the 1980s were dominated by a region-wide debt crisis. In response to this crisis, virtually all Latin American governments turned towards a package of neoliberal reforms known as the Washington Consensus, which they assured citizens would solve many of the region's economic problems (Murillo, Oliveros, & Vaishnav, 2008). This economic policy entailed trade liberalisation, Foreign Direct Investment, privatisation and deregulation^[1] (Kirby, 2003, pp. 41-55).

Precisely what economic impact the Washington Consensus had on Latin America is unclear, and is the subject of contentious debate (Lora & Panizza, 2002; Huber E., 2004; Walton, 2004; Weyland, 2004). However, most agree that it resulted in improved fiscal responsibility and reduced poverty by the mid-1990s. But economic growth, as promised by the incumbent governments, remained relatively weak (Kirby, 2002, p. 108-109; Lora & Olivera, 2005; Boidi, 2007, p. 121). These middling economic effects undoubtedly did little to build support for incumbent governments (Gélineau, 2007). However, the main consequences of the Washington Consensus for such governments were in other areas, which shall be explored in the following section.

A Changing Workforce and Decreased Social Spending

Neoliberalism led to very slightly improved employment levels^[2]; however its effect on employment was as whole negative, due to its consequences for the nature of available jobs. Much of the employment gains were seen in the service sector, which entailed mostly informal, low paying work, such as cleaning, that was deeply insecure. Increased numbers were employed on short-term contracts if at all, which could be ended with ease, and entailed no social security benefits. The conglomeration of agriculture led to the marginalisation of small farmers, whilst many small and medium sized family firms collapsed due to corporate competition. This led to a trend of upward social mobility being reversed as a once emerging middle class undertook urban, low paying work (Kirby, 2003, pp. 56-57; Buono & Lara, 2006, p. 312). As a consequence of these developments, the quality of employment worsened, whilst the real industrial wage and the minimum wage both fell from their 1980 levels. This left people far worse off and more likely to fall into poverty than they had been in decades^[3] (Roberts K. M., 2002). Social vulnerability, not easily captured in statistics, increased massively (Kirby, 2003, p. 111).

Compounding these difficulties was the declining government expenditure which had accompanied the Washington

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Consensus. This decline was particularly strong in the area of social spending, which typically provides cushioning in the form of welfare payments that would soften the blow of devastating economic alterations (Alesina, et al, 2008; Stokes, 2009). The state's withdrawal from the public sphere meant it was simply unable or unwilling to meet what were now desperate public needs for economic support. As a result social inequality and poverty were further increased, whilst there were few supporting mechanisms in place in the event of additional economic strain (Stokes, 2009; Levitsky & Roberts, 2010). And additional economic strain was precisely what happened.

Economic Downturn

Combined, the effect of a demoralised workforce, and nonexistent state was enough to produce discontent with government. However both of these factors were exacerbated massively by a sudden economic downturn that took place from 1998 to 2002, known as the 'lost-half decade'. This crisis was chiefly caused by the Asian financial crisis which tore throughout the region, its rapidness undoubtedly strengthened by the trade liberalisation which had weakened economic borders (Roberts K. M., 2008). Due to this crisis, poverty shot up instantly, as did unemployment and inequality[4], whilst economic growth declined by 0.3% per year (Levitsky & Roberts, 2010; Cornia & Martorano, 2010). However, whilst these figures do paint a grim picture, the massive vulnerability that neoliberalism produced led to the downturn having an even more devastating effect than such statistics can illustrate. This vulnerability was enhanced by the lack of government support, which due to further spending cuts, increased yet further (Singh, 2005, p. 14; Ocampo, 2004). As a result, people from all areas of society, including the very wealthy, grew concerned with the actions of their governments (Graham & Sukhtankar, 2004).

3. Electoral Success

It has been demonstrated repeatedly that the contraction of public services, or rather the dissatisfaction with government it produced, was crucial to the leftwing turn (Lora & Olivera, 2005; Debs & Helmke, 2008; Stokes, 2009). Stokes (2009) argues that the contraction produced a welfare gap which led voters to turn specifically to the left as an insurer of service. However from the 1980s onwards Latin American states were too fiscally constrained for there to be any social spending difference between leftwing and rightwing governments (Huber, et al, 2008). This, combined with the lack of a mass ideological turn towards the left, would suggest that the effect of government cuts was simply voters turning away from their mostly rightwing governments and towards the opposition, who happened to be on the left (Seligson, 2007).

It could be posited that the effect of government cuts *alone* produced the swing away from incumbents. However, this suggestion would be misleading—strong provision of social services would not be required in an economically healthy state. Indeed, voter support for social spending rises massively as the population becomes progressively poorer (Baqir, 2002). Thus, the economic downturn too played a massive role in leftwing success, and alongside the crisis was a stark decline in support for incumbent governments (Graham & Sukhtankar, 2004; Benton, 2005).

Although relatively popular in the mid-1990s, the Washington Consensus was indelibly associated with these apparently failed governments, and the economic crisis also corresponded with a steep drop in popularity for some of its provisions (Stokes, 2009)[5]. As a result, protests against neoliberalism were seen across Latin America[6] (Graham & Sukhtankar, 2004; Arditì, 2008). However, these protests, generally dominated by the unemployed, were not merely calls for an end to neoliberal reforms; they were calls for a change in governance and the manner in which it was undertaken (Arditi, 2008; Smith & Gómez-Mera, 2010, p. 139).

Blame was directed toward these governments for such economic problems and was enhanced by the fact that they had been in office for so many years. Murillo et al. (2008) found strong evidence indicating that the left's success was largely the result of discontent produced by the length of these governments' time in office. Debs and Helmke (2008) find no empirical support for this proposition. However, their study is flawed because it focuses only on the rise of the 'pure' left candidates who ran on redistribution platforms, when the significance of leftwing leaders was in their existence as an alternative to the incumbent government. Their policies were largely irrelevant, although leftwing leaders did enable anti-neoliberal rhetoric to take center stage in many of their campaigns (Lora, Panizza, & Agnoli, 2004; Levitsky & Roberts, 2010). This was not surprising, given society's deep dislike for the neoliberal reforms.

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The power of the left's ability to act as an alternative was enhanced by the structural factors noted previously, which meant most of the leftwing parties had never held office before, and thus shared no blame in the economic problems^[7] (Bruhn, 2006; Queirolo, 2007, p. 124). In almost every case, these parties were opposing traditional parties or incumbents that appeared to be part of the system that caused the economic devastation (Arditi, 2008). From 1998 to 2004, fourteen incumbent parties lost in eighteen Latin American states. Most of the parties that won were of the left (Levitsky & Roberts, 2010).

An incredible number of these leftwing parties were re-elected^[8] due to a commodities boom which took place from 2003 onwards, just as many of these parties began governing. This boom resulted in soaring employment and economic growth, which enabled the extension of once curtailed government services. Despite most of these governments continuing to implement neoliberal policies, leftist parties were re-elected throughout the region (Levitsky & Roberts, 2010). This provides further evidence to suggest that the left's success was based on the economic factors noted previously.

4. Alternative Explanations

A number of other theories have been posited to explain the left's success. Often cited as being crucial to the leftwing turn is inequality, both positive and negative (Castañeda, 2006; Debs & Helmke, 2008). However, numerous studies find no relation between increasing or decreasing inequality and a swing towards the opposition (Lora & Olivera, 2005; Murillo, Oliveros, & Vaishnav, 2008; Blanco & Grier, 2010). An alternative suggestion is that low economic growth, itself partially caused by inequality, was the reason for the shift (Birdsall, 1998; Rodrik, 1999; Weisbrot, 2006). However this has found little empirical support (Lora & Olivera, 2005; Stokes, 2009).

Cleary (2006) argues that the leftwing surge is explained by the ability of labour based movements to launch political challenges^[9]. However, leftwing parties in Chile and Uruguay attained most of their support from the middle class who would have no connection to such labour movements—thus, although interesting, this theory is not a sufficient explanatory variable by itself (Kaufman R. R., 2009).

A collective ideological swing to the left is often cited as well (Castañeda, 2006; Lupu, 2009). Although Latin Americans' electoral preferences have become slightly more leftist, there has been no significant alteration in ideology, and indeed the majority of Latin Americans are of the right. Thus this cannot be a significant factor (Seligson, 2008; Murillo, Oliveros, & Vaishnav, 2008).

Others state that the shift represented disappointment with democracy (Roberts K. M., 2002; Schamis, 2006; Cardoso, 2006; Mainwaring, 2006). However, whilst Latin Americans undeniably became unhappy with how democratic government was run, increasing numbers supported democracy as a form of government during the left's ascension, so this cannot constitute a full explanation (Chu, Bratton, & Lagos, 2008).

It has been argued that voters were initially reluctant to vote for a leftwing candidate due to fear of a coup, which had typically been instigated by rightwing leaders. As democracy matured, this fear withered and Latin America's poverty and inequality provided the left with a natural advantage that it could mobilise (Cleary, 2006; Cameron, 2009). However, Stokes (2009) found no empirical evidence for this argument.

The most prominent of all explanations for the leftwing turn is that dislike for the Washington Consensus, as advocated by rightwing governments, led to the shift (Lora & Olivera; Hammond, 2006; Lynch, 2007; Weyland, 2010, p. 2; Baker & Green, 2011). This argument posits that such dislike functions independently of economic circumstances. However, the two are inextricably linked. Dissatisfaction with privatisation, for example is largely dependent on people's evaluation of the current economic situation (Panizza & Yañez, 2005; Bonnet et al, 2006). Furthermore, even where neoliberalism appeared to lead to economic gains, incumbents were re-elected^[10] (Levitsky & Roberts, 2010). Thus, dislike for neoliberalism as a *policy*, did not impact the left's success^[11], although as outlined above, it had major ramifications for the governments that implemented it.

Conclusion

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This essay has only focused on the major reasons for the left's success. It is undeniable however that individual factors played a role in the election of certain leaders, such as Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, who benefited greatly from sharp cleavages amongst the right (Kaufman R. , 2010). However, the *broad* trend that swept across Latin America was facilitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the process of democratisation that resulted in rightwing parties dominating Latin American governments by the close of the twentieth century. Economic conditions, partially created by neoliberalism, led to widespread discontent which in turn resulted in a mass overthrow of incumbents, who were replaced with their leftwing counterparts. Studies of the left's success too often focus on individual factors such as inequality, or poor growth. However, as this essay has illustrated, the emphasis should be on the wider picture: it is not one factor that caused the leftwing turn, but rather a combination of many that produced an unprecedented level of discontent with incumbent governments.

What then is the future for Latin America's leftwing governments, now that they too have been in power for several terms? With the election of several rightwing leaders, it has been suggested that the tide may be turning away from the left and towards the right once again (Guerrero, 2010; Thomson, 2010). It is unlikely though, that such a range of factors will simultaneously converge to produce a similar rightwing wave. As Latin American states age, political ties deepen, and paths diverge, the leftwing turn should be remembered as a seminal but temporal moment in the history of the region.

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[1] The extent and time at which the reforms were implemented varied across the region. Brazil, for example, did not seriously implement market reform until 1995 (Kirby, 2003, pp. 54-55).

[2] Employment grew from 39% of the population in 1990, to 42% in 1999 (Kirby, 2003, p. 112).

[3] The 1996 average industrial wage was 5% lower than it had been in 1980. Average minimum wage fell by 30% between 1980 and 1997 (Roberts K. M., 2002).

[4] This caused a further 200 million people to drop below the poverty line (Indart et al, 2004, pp. 54-55).

[5] Support for trade liberalisation remained high, as it carried small benefits for many citizens, and big losses for just a few (Stokes, 2009).

[6] Interestingly, it has been found that economic liberalisation directly leads to increased social mobilisation (Arce & Jr., 2007).

[7] Of 16 Latin American Presidential elections from 2000-2005, 11 were won by parties that had never held office before (Bruhn, 2006).

[8] Leftwing incumbents were re-elected in Brazil (2006), Chile (2006), Venezuela (2006), Argentina (2007), Bolivia (2009), Uruguay (2009), and Ecuador (2009).

[9] Madrid (2004) too found that the level of unionisation was a strong determinant of the left's vote from 1978-2002.

[10] This occurred in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru (Levitsky & Roberts, 2010).

[11] This is linked to the broader trend of weak issue voting in Latin America due to generally to low information levels (Htun, 2003, p. 129; Johnson & Ryu, 2010).

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