



**Men of the people:** Leftists often get lumped together, but they represent vastly different groups.

## The Many Lefts of Latin America

*Latin America's leftists are anything but united.*

By Javier Corrales

For half a decade now, the headlines from Latin America have touted the rise of the Latin left. As leftists have moved off the streets and into government in Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, and elsewhere, however, the story line has changed. The vision of a united leftist coalition of Latin nations opposing the United States and free market reforms is an illusion. Instead, intense fights have broken out within the left as protest movements struggle to govern. The Latin American “left,” it is now clear, actually comprises a wide range of movements with often conflicting goals.

**The Revolutionaries:** These are the old radicals who have not changed much since the 1960s. They share an angry romanticism and a strong dislike of markets and institutions. “*¡Qué se vayan todos!*”—“Let’s get rid of everyone”—is their slogan, and it became a refrain during the 1999 Constitutional Assembly in Venezuela, the 2001 financial crisis in Argentina, and the 2003 street protests in Bolivia.

**The Protectionists:** Many business owners and union leaders in Latin America support

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tariffs and protection against cheap imports from abroad. They can be found in industries such as auto parts, light manufacturing, toy and apparel producers, and financial services. This camp lost a lot of ground with the reforms of the 1990s and is desperate to regain control of economic affairs. Their slogan is “No to the Free Trade Area of the Americas.”

**The Hypernationalists:** Latin America’s unexpected alignment with the United States during the 1990s on trade and drug policy alarmed this group. Inheritors of the “Yankee Go Home” mentality, the hypernationalists pervade the region’s universities, and parts of the media, the military, and the middle classes. They deplore U.S. foreign policy since 9/11, believe that U.S. drug enforcement efforts do more harm than good, and consider the International Monetary Fund (IMF) a tool of the White House. Ironically, they also dislike the growing obstacles to getting a visa to visit the United States.

**The Crusaders:** These are loosely organized citizen groups, such as Alianza Cívica in Mexico, who want greater transparency in government, more public participation in budget decisions, less corruption, and

functioning courts. Crusaders gained strength in the 1990s and gravitated toward the left, but they have weaker ideological moorings than other groups.

**The Big Spenders:** These are groups including teachers’ unions and government contractors who want to invest more in social services and old-fashioned statist projects such as infrastructure and energy development. Tired of more than two decades of budget controls, the big spenders have had enough. They’re not inherently anti-market, but they reject the tight fiscal policies of the past two decades, which they blame on the IMF and bond traders.

**The Egalitarians:** A hybrid of the revolutionaries and the big spenders, the egalitarians advocate blunt redistributive policies to help the poor. Their slogan is, “For the good of all, the poor first,” which was Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s presidential campaign slogan in Mexico.

**The Multiculturalists:** They want to end the system of ethnic apartheid prevailing in parts of Latin America, especially in the Andes, where long-neglected ethnic groups still lack political representation. The victory of Evo Morales in Bolivia—the first time an indigenous candidate won the presidency—was a high point.

**The Macho-bashers:** This more recent trend in the Latin American left started in the late 1980s with the effort to grant

women more political and civil powers. They are now beginning to think about how to make these macho societies a bit more gay friendly. The impulse to empower women has made impressive strides, culminating with the groundbreaking election of Michelle Bachelet in Chile, who campaigned on a platform of "gender parity." As for efforts to make Latin American society less machista, that may take decades.

The revolutionaries, the protectionists, and to some extent, the hypernationalists and egalitarians are the most determined enemies of market reform. Market-oriented politicians will have little success cracking their ranks. The other groups, however, have more confused loyalties and represent demands that could be met while pursuing market reforms.

If the left is to remain in power, it must prevent groups like the egalitarians from peeling away from the movement. And that means the left will have to grow up. A protest movement can accommodate almost any grievance. A functioning government cannot. As rulers, the left will not avoid the wrenching process of prioritization. That could lead to political maturity. But the infighting might also lead to economic and political disaster, as happened in Ecuador under Lucio Gutiérrez, in Argentina under Fernando de la Rúa, and very nearly in Brazil under Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva.

High commodity prices have improved the economic situation and made governing easier, but the day of reckoning will come for these leftist coalitions. Compromise with market forces and the various leftist currents will be essential. Radicals have gone the farthest in Venezuela, and this has produced a degree of polarization unseen in the region since the Sandinistas governed Nicaragua in the 1980s. No other government will want to take that perilous route. How successful the inevitable process of adjusting to power will be depends on which left wins out. **FP**

But the electoral defeat of candidates running on platforms perceived to be too extreme or too close to Chávez does not mean that the ideas they represent are unappealing. Latin American voters are aggrieved, impatient, and eager to vote for new candidates who offer a break with the past and who promise a way out of the dire present.

## IF NOT LEFT, THEN WHERE?

Since the late 1990s, Latin American political systems have been rocked by a wide variety of frustrations. Therefore lumping the different types of discontent under generic "leftist" or "populist" monikers is misleading. Indeed, in today's Latin America, some of the grievances are clearly anti-market, while others are rooted in dissatisfactions caused not by overreliance on the market but by governmental overreach. Curbing corruption, for example, is a strong political demand that is unlikely to be satisfied by increasing the economic activities controlled by an already overwhelmed and corrupt public sector. Other grievances unite the far left and the far right. Economic nationalists who resent the market-opening reforms that allow foreign products to displace locally made ones include both right-wing business groups who profited handsomely from the protectionism, as well as leftist labor leaders who have seen their ranks shrink as local factories went out of business, unable to compete with foreign imports.

The responses to these political demands have also been varied. Some leaders, like Chávez and Kirchner, are behaving in a traditional, populist fashion, relying on massive and often wasteful public spending, on prices kept artificially low through governmental controls, or the scapegoating of the private sector to cement their popularity. Many others, however, like Lula in Brazil, Vicente Fox in Mexico, Alvaro Uribe in Colombia, or Ricardo Lagos in Chile have been models of more responsible economic governance and have shown a willingness to absorb the costs of unpopular but necessary economic policies.

What unites almost all Latin American countries, however, are two long-standing trends that multiply and deepen the variety of the grievances that are sprouting throughout the region: Prolonged mediocre economic performance, and the decay of traditional forms of political organization, and political parties in particular.

Latin America has suffered from slow economic growth for more than a quarter-century. Episodes of rapid growth have been short lived and often ended in painful financial crashes with devastating effects on the poor and the middle class. Economic growth in Latin America has been slower than it was in the 1960s and 70s, worse relative to all other emerging markets in the world, and unremittingly less than what the region itself needs to lift the poor standard of living of most of the population. This economic disappointment has become increasingly unacceptable to voters who have been promised much and gotten little and who have become better informed than ever about the standards of living of others at home and abroad. Latin Americans are fed up. Naturally, the frustrations produced by the wide gap between expectations and reality and between the living standards of the few who have so much and the many who have almost nothing create fertile ground for the fractious politics that make governing so difficult. Inevitably, political parties, and