



## **An Overview of Elections in Latin America and the Caribbean**

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### **Abstract**

*The year 2018 has been critical in terms of political change in Latin America and the Caribbean region (LAC). Despite the diversity within the region, most of Latin America's recent elections have more in common with each other than ever before. The elections, fought on a platform against corruption, more transparency, better law and order and strong governance, have resonated with the electorate of the nations of the region. There is a sense of distrust of the political parties in Latin America; however, the peaceful transfer of power in a region largely dominated by authoritarian rule for so long points to political stability and the strength of democracy here.*

*South Asia is going through a similar process with elections in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Pakistan in 2018 and Nepal in 2017. Afghanistan, India and Sri Lanka will hold elections in 2019.*

Keywords: Latin America and the Caribbean, LAC elections, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, United States, South Asia, India

### **Introduction**

With the inauguration of President Jair Bolsonaro<sup>i</sup> in Brazil on 01 January 2019 and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador<sup>ii</sup> of Mexico on 01 December 2018, Latin America's two biggest economies have presidents who are viewed as anti establishment.

The elections in Brazil and Mexico were two, in a series of elections, held across Latin America and the Caribbean region that will change the political landscape of the region. The election cycle started in 2017, with elections in Chile, Honduras and Ecuador. In Chile, President Sebastián Piñera, a candidate right of the political spectrum won the election (in December 2017) on a platform to restart the stalled economy. The vote in Chile was seen as one against the government of the day and the electorates desire to bring change. In Honduras, the right wing leader President Juan Orlando Hernandez won his second term in office (in November 2017). However, the elections were marked by violence as protestors and members of the opposition claimed election fraud and rigging, questioning the neutrality of the election commission office. Mr. Lenin Moreno won the Presidential elections in Ecuador in April 2017. He faces pressure to create jobs amid an economic downturn and tackle graft amidst corruption scandals at the state-run oil company PetroEcuador and Brazilian conglomerate Odebrecht.

Elections were held in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador (municipal and legislative), Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela in 2018. These elections include municipal, provincial/state level as well as federal/ presidential elections.

Six countries- Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, El Salvador, Panama, and Guatemala will conduct Presidential election in 2019. Thus, in a span of two years from 2017-19, nearly sixteen countries in the region will have gone through an election cycle changing the political and economic backdrop of the region.

### **An Overview of the Elections**

Latin America has a very diverse population with many ethnic groups, countries enjoying varied levels of economic development and ideologically diverse federal governments. Yet, politics in both big and small nations has witnessed a rise of populism and the desire to elect 'strong' leaders. There appears to be a general dissatisfaction with political parties and candidates. These elections have often been about rejecting rather than voting in favour of candidates and/or political parties. The widespread cases of corruption, implicating not just one person or party, but cutting across political parties, including some Heads of States, other government leaders and prominent businesses has undermined the political process in the region casting doubts on the democratic credentials of the countries in a region with a history of authoritarian rule.

It is no surprise then that corruption has been an important domestic factor for all winning candidates. It has been the central theme in the election of President Bolsonaro, as Brazil tries to fight the most prominent corruption case implicating former presidents and other leaders and involving the State owed PetroBras. The focal point of President Obrador's campaign in Mexico was to erode corruption and bringing transparency in the government. Mexican authorities are investigating cases of corruption against high ranking officials of the PRI, the party of former President Pena Nieto. To some extent corruption was also spoken about by President Maduro during his rallies in Venezuela. It is now time for the new governments to take steps to address the people's demand for more accountability and robust investigations of charges against officials.

The widespread corruption allegations have also raised apprehension about other government institutions. There have been some instances, such as in Honduras and Venezuela, where the transparency of the election commissions have been questioned by the opposition and the international observers. Governments have tried to undermine the election monitoring teams of the United Nations and the Organisation of the American States. This led to questions being raised about voting integrity in these elections. Nevertheless, it is also the case that elections across the region were relatively free and fair and the electorate, though dissatisfied was a willing partner to help democracy strengthen roots in the continent.

The other common theme that binds the electorate in the region is demand for economic development. The elections have been held at a time of low growth, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimating growth rates of 1.7 percent and 1.9 percent in 2017 and 2018 respectively.<sup>iii</sup> While this means that the region has overcome its previous negative growth, but the international economic slowdown, dip in energy prices along with the disruptive economic policies of the United States, has meant that governments are struggling to find money to support social programmes in terms of healthcare, education, employment and poverty reduction. The move to curtail social spending has caused protests in Mexico and Brazil. These have further been amplified as it becomes public knowledge that political parties and the people's representative are being charged in bribery and corruption cases.

President Obrador in Mexico having questioned the reforms of the previous administration, has to now implement policies that will allow him to increase funding for youth programmes, better education facilities, more social security for the aged while simultaneously creating more jobs and reviving the public sector energy companies. President Ivan Duque (Colombia), President Carlos Alvarado Quesada (Costa Rica) President Mario Abdo Benítez, (Paraguay) have proposed tax cuts and support for the energy industry in their respective countries in a bid to revive their economies. Within the region, Venezuela is perhaps the most in need of a policy to stimulate its economy. Incumbent President Nicolas Maduro, who won the May 2018 elections for his second six-year term despite allegations of fraud, has stated that he would work to stabilise the economy.

Businesses in Latin America and the Caribbean region are hoping that governments introduce business friendly policies that would attract more investments into the countries. Leaders have also pledged to improve security to achieve a stable environment for economic growth. The new government would have to not only balance budget deficits with economic growth but has to also take steps to reduce poverty, address the growing gap between the rich and the poor and make policies that would empower the underprivileged.

Foreign policy has largely been underplayed in favour of domestic issues. When discussed foreign policy has been largely in relation to domestic issues. Migration, the economic health of the continent and the need to attract investments for development policies as discussed during the elections were both part of the domestic and foreign policy agenda. Relations with the United States have been the principle foreign policy issue with domestic fallouts during these elections. The United States is the paramount power, providing aid and assistance to many countries of the region. The Trump administration's current

policies on illegal migrants, economic plans to encourage more companies to manufacture in the United States and its cuts in USAID programmes have direct consequences for many nations in the LAC region. President Trump's generally unflattering view on the people of the region has meant that the new political leaders have to strike a balance between popular rhetoric and maintaining cordial relations with the United States.

President Bolsonaro (Brazil), President Duque (Colombia) and President Obrador (Mexico) have indicated that they would be working with the Trump administration to address the issues of illegal migrants and tackle the drug menace. President Bolsonaro and President Duque have also expressed support to the policy of isolating President Maduro of Venezuela, however, they have also indicated that they would not be willing to support military action. President Obrador has indicated that he does not support either action. Just after his inauguration President Obrador announced his plans for a Marshall Plan for Central America to address the migration issue. President Díaz-Canel (Cuba) has also indicated that Cuba continues to desire good relations with the United States, but as equal partners. He has called on the United States to remove the sanctions.

On relations with Asia, China is gaining attention as the latter builds its ties with the region. President Díaz-Canel and President Duque have indicated that they would like to work with China. Colombia especially would like to attract Chinese investments to revive its economy. President Obrador, on the other hand, was critical of China during the campaign. However, China is an important trading partner for Brazil and the challenge for the new Brazilian government would be to formulate a policy on China that will increase investments and reduce the trade deficit.

President Bolsonaro has indicated that he will strengthen ties with Israel and also shift the Brazilian embassy to Tel Aviv. This will complicate relations other countries in West Asia. Cuba on the other hand has decided to strengthen its ties with Russia. This is much needed for the Cuban economy which was heavily reliant on Venezuela.

## **Conclusion**

Timely elections, relatively high voter participation and peaceful transition of power show a maturity in the democratic process in the region. It is noteworthy that in some countries, there were a high number of first time candidates. A considerable number of these candidates have been women and participation of indigenous people in Brazil and Mexico has risen. On the other hand, the elections have also shown fragmentation within the major political parties such as in Brazil and the polarisation among voters. Violence against the candidates especially in Mexico, highlights the penetration of gang related violence into the political system of the region.

There is no general trend of conservative right wing parties riding the tide in the region, away from the left wave that dominated in the beginning of this century. It is true that the right of centre has won the Presidency in some countries, most notably in Brazil. On the other hand Mexico is an example of leftist views coming to power in opposition to the centralist and right of centre ideology of the opposition parties. One common factor of these elections is that people have voted for candidates who have projected themselves to be

nationalists and have been viewed as ‘strong’ leaders. The new governments have been elected with mandates to address corruption and ensuring economic development. However, there is a fear that such sentiments may be used by the newly elected heads of governments to sideline and persecute the members of the opposition. This may allow them to build powerful presidencies which may undermine the larger legislative checks and balances.

The focus of the new governments for the time being will be on relations within the region. With political change within the region, governments will reach out to each other to consolidate their relations or build new partnerships. Brazil, Colombia and Mexico are major powers in the region and now have new Presidents supportive of views that are different from their predecessors but facing similar challenges. This allows them to build new ties but also push for change within the region. Argentina, another major power will have Presidential elections this year.

Asia in general has not been in focus in these elections. However, with the growing footprint of China in the region, relations with the Asian nation would be important. Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are looking towards China as a market for their produce and an investment partner in their domestic development projects.

On a wider radar it is possible to see the electoral processes in Latin America and the Caribbean region mirroring some of the themes that dominate the political discourse in South Asia, which is in a similar process of a region wide election cycle, with an emphasis on economic growth, job creation and transparency in government.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> President Bolsonaro won the presidential election in October 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> President Obrador won the presidential elections in July 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Zovatto, “Latin America’s super election cycle is wide open,” <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/06/latin-americas-super-election-cycle-is-wide-open/>, Accessed on 28 November 2018.