

## **In Latin America, Right in Retreat as Left Wins More Elections**

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BOGOTA, Colombia — More than two decades after the Cold War, during which the United States backed anti-communist military rulers and pushed free-market policies in Latin America, conservative governments have virtually disappeared from the region. The leftward shift has been underway since the start of the millennium, but in recent years, the political axis of the hemisphere has tilted even further, as candidates who promise greater social spending and wealth redistribution win again and again. When the term of Chilean conservative Sebastián Piñera ends in March, right-leaning presidents will be in power only in small Central American nations and Paraguay.

“I think it’s difficult for conservative candidates to move forward because inequality is such an entrenched issue,” said Ana Quintana, a Latin America expert at the Heritage Foundation in Washington. “And it’s hard to implement free-market, institutional reforms when you need to make sure a significant portion of the population can get enough to eat.”

Latin America’s right could once identify itself as pro-business and supportive of law and order and as closely aligned with the United States. But many of the region’s leftists and centrists have co-opted some of those issues as they have become more moderate, regional observers say, leaving conservatives with less to run on.

“I think the right is struggling to define itself in the new environment,” said Carl Meacham, the Americas director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Meacham, who was a policy adviser to former Indiana senator Richard Lugar (R), said Latin America’s conservatives could do more to emphasize “market approaches to increased social mobility,” rather than the state-oriented strategies offered by leftists. “Folks in current leadership positions on the right don’t seem to have the answers,” he said. “We need a reset and new, younger voices.”

While dominant, Latin America’s leftists are hardly a monolithic bloc, and significant policy differences have emerged, especially on matters of trade protectionism and relations with the United States.

But in big, geopolitical ways, the region has undergone a massive realignment. With Washington’s diplomatic attention largely focused elsewhere, on Asia and the Middle East, Latin America’s shift has resulted in declining U.S. influence.

Evidence of this will be on display this week, when 33 heads of state and top officials are due to meet in Havana for a summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), a regional organization founded in 2011 as an alternative to the Washington-based Organization of American States (OAS).

The summit's host will be Cuba's 82-year-old leader, Raúl Castro.

While the fledgling organization has played mostly a symbolic role so far, its meeting — in communist-run Cuba, of all places — is especially notable given that no date has been set for the next Summit of the Americas, the OAS-sponsored gatherings that have until now been Latin America's most important multilateral assemblies.

At the last summit, held in Colombia in April 2012, leaders from across the hemisphere's political spectrum displayed rare consensus by insisting that future summits should not exclude Cuba, which is not an OAS member. The summit's agenda was largely obscured by a prostitution scandal among the Secret Service agents sent to guard President Obama.

CELAC was partly the creation of late Venezuelan ruler Hugo Chávez, who viewed it as a vehicle for the long-lost Latin American integration dreams of his idol, 19th-century independence hero Simon Bolivar.

With Chávez's death last March, the more radical end of Latin America's left is without a clear leader. His successor, Nicolás Maduro, is viewed as far too preoccupied with his own political survival to try to assume his mantle.

“Maduro is no international leader,” said Jose Rafael Zanoni, a former Venezuelan ambassador to Egypt and Iran. “He's not even a leader in Venezuela.”

If anything, the strong-armed statist model that Chávez promoted during his 14-year rule has served as a cautionary tale for leftist candidates in the region.

They are quicker to identify with the path charted by Brazil's popular former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, characterized by greater social spending on the poor but also an embrace of private enterprise and global capital.

The Chávez-vs.-Lula comparison became an oversimplified prism for the region's leftist tendencies, analysts say, but it remains a useful gauge.

“The two defining elements are relations with the United States and relations with the private business community,” said Carlos Romero, a foreign affairs analyst in Caracas. “Venezuela represents the extreme.”

Still, in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, the Chávez school remains strong, as leftists in those countries have thrived through increased confrontation with Washington, the concentration of executive power and in many cases, attempts to stifle the press and political opponents.

But in other countries, particularly in Central America, Washington continues to wield enormous influence. In Honduras, locals still refer to the U.S. diplomatic mission as “The Embassy,” as if it were the only one in the country.

Farther south, Latin American relations have diversified, particularly as a result of booming trade with China and the emergence of Brazil as South America's dominant economic and geopolitical power. Brazilian leftist President Dilma Rousseff is running for reelection in November, and the outcome may be partly determined by her government's management of this summer's World Cup soccer tournament.

In Mexico, the conservative National Action Party is out of power once more after 12 years in office, but President Enrique Peña Nieto and his Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) have assimilated many policies that were once associated with the right. During his first year in office, Peña Nieto has opened Mexico's government oil monopoly to private investment, worked to expand free-trade agreements with the United States and others, and weakened Mexico's powerful unions.

Increasingly, analysts say, the overarching division in Latin America is not right vs. left, but free trade vs. protectionism. While countries such as Argentina, Venezuela and, to a large extent, Brazil continue to protect domestic industries and intervene heavily in their economies, nations such as Chile, Peru, Colombia and Mexico are backing the U.S. proposal for a Pacific Rim free-trade zone.

Colombia, a key U.S. ally, has traditionally been a bastion of Latin American conservatism. But President Juan Manuel Santos has moved toward the center, engaging in peace talks with FARC guerrillas and feuding with former president Álvaro Uribe, the standard-bearer of Colombia's right. Santos is up for reelection in May and has a large lead in polls over a challenger from Uribe's party.

But Colombia is an outlier in the region, said Leon Valencia, a former guerrilla turned political analyst in Bogota. "The winning electoral strategy in Latin America right now is left-populism," Valencia said. "In Colombia, the left is anti-populist because it's a radical, Marxist left that's linked to violence."

In addition to Colombia and Brazil, presidential elections are also scheduled this year in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Uruguay and Bolivia. Leftists are strong contenders in most of the races.

During the Cold War, the United States worried that Latin America's poor masses would heed the siren call of communist radicals and Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution. With the consolidation of democratic governance since then, few nations have voted for dramatic upheaval, but they tend to back candidates who boost social spending and offer a wider safety net, said Geoff Thale, program director at the Washington Office on Latin America.

"Greater political participation by the poor and middle class has led to political movements and parties that call for less extremes of inequality," he said.