

# DEFINING THE LEFT IN LATIN AMERICA

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**Latin America's Left Turns: Politics, Policies, and Trajectories of Change.** Edited by Maxwell A. Cameron and Eric Hershberg. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010. Pp. ix + 289. \$27.50 paper. ISBN: 9781588267399.

**Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century.** Edited by Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 398. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781421410098.

**After Neoliberalism? The Left and Economic Reforms in Latin America.** By Gustavo A. Flores-Macias. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii + 261. \$27.95 paper. ISBN: 9780199891672.

**The Resurgence of the Latin American Left.** Edited by Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 480. \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9781421401102.

**The Success of the Left in Latin America: Untainted Parties, Market Reforms, and Voting Behavior.** By Rosario Queirolo. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 205. \$34.00 paper. ISBN: 9780268039790.

With the collapse of both the Soviet Union and the import substitution industrialization model, two of the great referents that once defined the Latin American Left fell into disgrace. What, many wondered, was left of the Left? What could, or should, the Left offer as an alternative to representative democracy and neoliberal capitalism? Writing early in this period of confusion, Jorge Castañeda described the Latin American Left as a "*utopia desarmada*" (the original Spanish title of 1993's *Utopia Unarmed*), literally "disarmed" and "taken apart" (*desarmada*) into four ideological and two functional groups.<sup>1</sup> He hoped at the time for the emergence of a social democratic Left that "formally and sincerely" accepts the logic of the market without relinquishing all state roles in the economy, though he also presciently warned, in response to proclamations of "the end of populisms in Latin America,"<sup>2</sup> that populist programs "may well be resurrected."<sup>3</sup>

Two decades later, the election of leftist and left-of-center presidents in two-thirds of Latin America's largest countries resulted in a flurry of efforts to define

1. Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Random House, 1993), 19.

2. Alain Touraine, "El fin de los populismos en Latinoamérica," *El País* (Madrid), August 6, 1989.

3. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 432, 49.

who counted as leftist and what kind of Left each president represented. Once again, the most influential and controversial definition came from Castañeda, who put the Left neatly into two categories: the “right” Left, which plays by the rules of the democratic game and accepts the constraints of market capitalism, and the “wrong” Left, “born of the great tradition of Latin American populism,” which is “nationalist, strident, and close-minded,” “loves power more than democracy,” and is “disastrous for Latin America.”<sup>4</sup> Castañeda’s typology had the virtue of predicting economic and political outcomes associated with the two types but was roundly abused for its allegedly oversimplistic dichotomy and especially its moralistic tone. Some scholars responded by proposing an alternative typology with more categories; others only softened the terminology of the typology while keeping essentially the same two groups intact.<sup>5</sup>

The books reviewed here suggest that the definition of the Latin American Left through typologies may have reached the end of its usefulness. In attempting to explain the rise and significance of leftist governments in Latin America, these works engage the question of what the most relevant differences are within the Left—understood as that portion of the political spectrum that prioritizes equality and social justice—and why they matter. Yet typologies, because they divide the world into such large chunks, tend to tell us only so much about big-picture outcomes. Much unexplained variation remains that requires a more nuanced and multilevel approach.

Rosario Queirolo’s book *The Success of the Left in Latin America* focuses on why the Left came to dominate regional governments. She rejects the hypothesis that voting for the Left sprang from popular rejection of neoliberal reforms. Leftist parties came to power on the basis of a performance mandate rather than a policy mandate. Her analysis is sophisticated and thorough. She conducts not only a cross-national analysis of the Left’s presidential vote share but also three studies of individual-level vote choice using surveys from Mexico, Brazil, and Uruguay. She finds that the depth of market reforms does not explain the vote for the Left; unemployment levels, on the other hand, do. Concerns about the economic performance of the incumbent government also affect voting at the individual level, though less consistently in Mexico than in Brazil and Uruguay.

Among Queirolo’s cases, Mexico stands out for the low predictability of the vote for the Left. The Mexican case proves crucial to Queirolo’s argument that the vote for the Left was not so much a vote *for* anything—not a policy mandate—but rather a vote *against* poor performance. When voters could choose between more than one “untainted” opposition party (142), meaning a party that had not governed and therefore could not be held responsible for poor performance, ideology was irrelevant, and voters selected the party that they judged to have superior

4. Jorge G. Castañeda, “Latin America’s Left Turn,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2006): 29, 41–42.

5. A sampling of these works includes Nicolás Lynch, “What the ‘Left’ Means in Latin American Now,” *Constellations* 14, no. 3 (2007): 373–383; Francisco E. Panizza, “The Social Democratization of the Latin American Left,” *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 79 (2005): 95–103; Jeffery R. Webber and Barry Carr, eds., *The New Latin American Left: Cracks in the Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013); Kurt Weyland, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, eds., *Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

competence. Thus, in Mexico, it was the conservative and pro-market Partido Acción Nacional that benefitted from voter rejection of the incumbent party rather than the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Queirolo deliberately rejects the idea that it is useful to divide leftist parties into types, or that a vote for the Left in Venezuela might be qualitatively different from a vote for the Left in Chile. This is consistent with her conclusion that voters do not evaluate what they are voting for anyway—only what they are voting against.

Nevertheless, to the extent that there is a connection between economic outcomes and the policies promised by a leftist government, Queirolo's shortcut masks considerable endogeneity. Queirolo's findings suggest that Latin Americans punish leftist parties when they implement neoliberal reforms. Thus, the "good" Left that accepts the parameters of neoliberal markets and the "bad" Left that rejects them are not in the same position. Queirolo also finds strong effects of partisan loyalties and ideology on votes for the Left in the cases of Brazil and Uruguay but not Mexico. These are different kinds of parties; support for the Left is not the same across all cases.

Finally, the time frame of Queirolo's research—from 1985 to 2004—limits the implications of her findings. She refers, frequently and insistently, to the position of the Left as an "untainted" opposition. She also notes that leftist parties' status as "untainted parties is lost immediately after gaining access to government" (155). Yet in the decade since 2004 many leftist parties have been reelected. The book "does not explore the rationale behind re-election" (155), and Queirolo has little to offer the reader in terms of theoretical expectations about the survivability of the new leftist governments except the probability that sooner or later, it will be "time for a change" (156).

In contrast to Queirolo's refusal to explore differences within the Latin American Left, differences abound but stubbornly resist classification in *Latin America's Left Turns*, edited by Maxwell A. Cameron and Eric Hershberg. The book takes as its starting point a rejection of Castañeda's dichotomy. The editors offer instead a "tour d'horizon" of Latin American Lefts (deliberately plural) that they see as "at times hydalike and almost anarchic in their diversity," encompassing broad social movements as well as the electoral victories of leftist presidential candidates (5). The causes of the rise of the Left for the authors of this volume lie in a deep crisis of incorporation, created by the failures of liberal democracy and neoliberal policies to bring about economic and political inclusion.

Aside from these points, the individual contributors disagree, at times sharply. Juan Pablo Luna offers a typology of leftist governments with four types based on levels of constraints on governments and the nature of change sought by the leftist project. Jon Beasley-Murray does not identify any types at all. In fact, he begins his chapter with the provocative claim that "there are only two problems with the notion of a Latin American 'left turn': First it isn't left; second, it isn't a turn" (127). He remains "skeptical about the radicalism of either Lula or the Kirchners, or even Morales or Chávez" (135). By refounding Venezuelan institutions and opening up spaces for inclusion, Beasley-Murray suggests, Hugo Chávez (temporarily) saved political order and representative democracy rather than creating something

truly new. The chapter on economic policies by Juan-Carlos Moreno-Brid and Igor Paunovic, on the other hand, comes dangerously close to the dreaded dichotomy between good and bad Lefts, engaging in a discussion of populist economic policies and then describing Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador as a group that has engaged in “redistribution of existing rents,” versus Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, which “have been enhancing public-private partnerships and have mainly adopted economic policies that stimulate production and competitiveness” (205). Finally, Luis Reygadas and Fernando Filgueira offer a threefold classification of types of social policy: a liberal strategy that focuses on equality of opportunity (and includes privatization of services as well as conditional cash transfers), a social democratic policy that focuses on equality of capacity (and features universal social policies and progressive tax reforms), and a radical populist strategy that focuses on equality of results (and requires redistribution and state intervention in the economy). The classification does not lead to a classification of countries or types of Left, however, as most cases used a mixture of strategies.

So are there four Lefts? None? Two? Three? Or an infinite variety? The inability to decide leaves us with little theoretical or analytical purchase on the final question about what implications different types of Left might have for outcomes. Nevertheless, the volume’s inclusion of the nonelectoral Left, and its focus on the shortcomings of liberal democracy as well as neoliberalism, creates an interesting narrative running through many of the chapters about mobilizational strategies as a distinguishing marker of different forms of leftist government. When Chávez decides to rewrite the constitution, how is the process different from when Evo Morales does it (see the chapter by Cameron and Kenneth E. Sharpe)? Who mobilizes, and how? How do different kinds of social policies mobilize and incorporate the poor? And how do different mobilizing strategies affect the capacity of different Lefts to govern (e.g., Luna, 26)?

In their altogether more ambitious volume *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*, Steven Levitsky and Kenneth Roberts propose to explain the revival of leftist alternatives, to map and explain the variation among leftist governments, and to discuss the implications and effects of leftist governments in the region.

The “why” is a combination of three conditions: electoral competition under conditions of inequality, which gave the Left a potential support base; economic reforms followed by an economic crisis, which provoked a backlash against incumbents; and a commodities boom in the early part of the twenty-first century that allowed the Left to govern on the left, as opposed to candidates in the 1990s who campaigned on the left but governed on the right (see the chapter by María Victoria Murillo, Virginia Oliveros, and Milan Vaishnav).

The question “what is the Left” is answered with a two-dimensional typology, first, whether or not the leftist party is established or new, and second, whether authority is dispersed or concentrated under a dominant personality. Intriguingly, the categorization seems independent of any qualities specifically related to the leftist project—its policies, its orientation toward democracy, or its radicalism—and might just as easily be applied to parties of the Right.

Nevertheless, the editors suggest that the type of Left diagnosed under this system has an impact on the type of policies adopted, whether they are relatively

moderate or radical. Overall, the editors think that the institutionalized partisan Left, marked by established party organizations and dispersed authority, is likely to adopt moderate policies that promote sustainable economic and social policies with liberal democracy. The logic is that institutionalized parties tend to limit the sort of adventurism associated with radical policies and promote incremental policy change instead.

Eight chapters addressing thematic questions are followed by eight country studies, mostly written by well-known US-based political scientists. Each chapter addresses the question of why the Left won (or didn't win) and what kind of Left it is. The thematic chapters end up grouping the countries rather more conventionally than might be anticipated by the editors' initial two-dimensional table. In political terms, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay are counted as liberal democratic, while Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador are plebiscitary. Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay are examples of social liberalism in social and economic policy, while Bolivia and Ecuador are heterodox, and Venezuela—even more radical—is statist. The countries thus fall into the same groups as Castañeda's "right" and "wrong," even if they are called something different, with their fates determined essentially by whether the main leftist party is established or new. The degree of personalism also seems to drop out of the analysis in terms of basic outcome type.

A notable challenge to this view of party institutionalization as the driving force comes from Samuel Handlin and Ruth Berins Collier's chapter. Drawing on LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project) survey data, they show that the types of party linkages differ significantly among three parties classified within the same typological box as an "institutionalized partisan Left" (Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil), and that some similarities exist between Uruguay and Venezuela across this dividing line of institutionalized/uninstitutionalized, principally in terms of party identification. While Handlin and Collier focus more on explaining the origins of different types of linkage than on their consequences, Jennifer Pribble and Evelyne Huber argue in their chapter on social policy in Chile and Uruguay that these different types of linkage had clear effects on the extent to which each state moved toward universalistic coverage in social policy. The stronger social linkages of Uruguay's Frente Amplio forced it to back away from education reform (in deference to teachers' unions), but support from unions and other constituencies helped it achieve more progressive policies in health care, tax reform, and the establishment of consultative councils to adjust the minimum wage.

The greatest contribution of this book is that it provides a clear framework of analysis that gives us theoretical purchase in explaining outcomes. The chapters are consistently excellent. However, the chapters by Handlin and Collier, and Pribble and Huber, point toward something that seems underdeveloped: discussion of the roots of party institutionalization. Parties are, or are not, established and long-standing. Yet as the editors note in their concluding chapter, there is a "tension between governing and maintaining grassroots linkages" (421). Leftist parties that prioritize programmatic moderation and consensus governing—the sort of parties that the editors praise and prefer—suffer more from the effects of this contradiction. The effect is similar to the impact of "tainting" that Queirolo's

parties might experience but is more profound in that it affects a party's most loyal activists. Meanwhile, "notwithstanding their illiberal behavior, there is some evidence that populist and movement left governments actually enhanced public support for democracy" (418). Are established leftist parties inadvertently bankrupting themselves politically and opening up space for new challenges from outsiders?

Despite the careful efforts of Levitsky and Roberts to establish a typology of leftist governments free of the loaded populist label, half of the authors of the country chapters in *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* classified the Left as some form of populism; Levitsky and Roberts themselves use the term. When it comes to the Latin American Left, populism seems an inescapable reference.<sup>6</sup> *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century* takes this walk on the dark side one step further. There are no chapters in this book about the responsible Left. Editors Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson want instead to explain why populism—primarily but not exclusively of the Left—has reemerged in Latin America and how contemporary populism compares to historical populism.

The book's goal, certainly, is laudable. We begin to suspect that the editors' task was all but impossible when we find five chapters devoted to the meaning of populism, and we know it for certain when we realize that these five chapters fail utterly to impose any semblance of a common understanding of the concept. The remaining empirical chapters on seven Latin American countries must each be taken on its own terms, as it is not at all certain that the authors are talking about the same thing. For Hector Schamis, populism died out in the 1970s and may never have existed except in Argentina under Perón, his paradigmatic case and the only verified case of "real" populism that he mentions. For Francisco Panizza, populism is a symbolic discursive style and a political strategy that involves antagonism and disruption (103). For Enrique Peruzzotti, populism means polarization and mobilization (79). But César Montúfar describes Rafael Correa as a radical populist despite his relatively limited efforts to mobilize Ecuadorian society outside of periodic plebiscitary campaigns led by the state.

Perhaps the strongest answer to the question of why populism has reemerged comes from the contribution of Kenneth Roberts, coeditor of *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*. Consistent with the focus of his coedited volume, his chapter in this work argues that populism is more likely to emerge when parties are weak. Second, he suggests that the collapse of import substitution industrialization, prolonged economic crises, and the adoption of neoliberal reforms weakened many traditional political party systems in Latin America, opening the way for populist challengers.

6. The literature on populism in Latin America is voluminous; references include David Doyle, "The Legitimacy of Political Institutions: Explaining Contemporary Populism in Latin America," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 11 (2011): 1447–1473; Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, Working Paper Series 316 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1989); Sebastian Edwards, *Left Behind: Latin America and the False Promise of Populism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Kenneth Roberts, "Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America," *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 82–117; and Kurt Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 4 (1999): 379–403.

Rather than structural or economic conditions, however, most of the authors of the empirical chapters stress the historical roots of populism in particular countries, probably partly in response to the editors' request that contributors put contemporary populism in historical context. The prevalence of populist leadership in some countries but not others thus appears to reflect cultural affinities or the persistence of party system weakness over time: once party systems have collapsed, like Humpty Dumpty, they cannot be put back together again. In part, this may result from the efforts of populist leaders who, in attempting to bypass the constraints imposed by parties, may further weaken them.

Despite the lack of an overarching theoretical argument, many of the chapters are fascinating, enjoyed as individual cases. Panizza's chapter is particularly provocative, as he compares presidents José Mujica of Uruguay, "Lula" da Silva of Brazil, and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, asking which of them is populist and why. The term "populist," he argues, is frequently used with normative intent, to paint a given politician as especially dangerous. But does the content of a discourse necessarily imply a specific policy content and outcome? In other words, does it do us any good to know who is a populist and who is not? This collection of cases of populism raises at least some doubt about that question.

The question of what good it does to classify the Left as one type or another brings us to the final work covered in this review: *After Neoliberalism? The Left and Economic Reforms in Latin America*, by Gustavo Flores-Macias. Rather than using a typology, Flores-Macias develops a scale of economic reforms to distinguish between different leftist governments as well as between governments on the left and governments on the right. His causal question is why some leftist governments acted decisively to roll back market reforms while others only conducted moderate reforms. His answer—similar to that of Levitsky and Roberts—is that countries with weak party systems and low levels of party identification experienced radical reforms while countries with institutionalized party systems had moderate reforms. The logic is similar to that of Levitsky and Roberts: in institutionalized party systems, the kind of candidate who rises to the top has played by the rules, is indebted to a broad party coalition, and will not engage in reckless reform, while in weak party systems, outsider candidates make rash promises and come to power with a mandate for radical change, unconstrained by parties.

In his index, Flores-Macias provides us with comparative data about the economic policies of ten Latin American countries from 1999 to 2010, including eight countries governed by the Left and two (Mexico and Colombia) governed by the Right. Changes in five policy areas—privatization, taxation, budgetary matters, trade and financial liberalization, and poverty alleviation—are classified as pro-market, statist, or neutral (if there is no change) and an overall score is assigned to each country, ranging from minus five (Venezuela, the most statist) to four (Colombia, the most promarket). Because each dimension is given separately, one can see how countries that otherwise get lumped together due to strongly anti-neoliberal rhetoric—such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia—actually behave differently. Bolivia, for example, adopts promarket policies when it comes to government spending, and Ecuador does not adopt antipoverty programs that one might otherwise expect (32).

The author's substantive argument rests mostly on case studies rather than quantitative analysis, and this may trouble some readers. He presents only simple two-by-two figures with one independent variable and his index of reform to show eyeball plausibility for his suggested correlation between party system institutionalization and more moderate reform. It is likely, however, that the small number of cases made it difficult to do much more.

Significantly, he argues that "there is no discernible pattern regarding whether leftist governments following a particular policy orientation, statist or pro-market, performed better" (181). Since the index refers to changes in policy rather than where the particular country started from or what the cumulative sum of its policies looks like, it may be premature to conclude that policy does not predict outcome. Moreover, without a model controlling for other factors, no economist would be satisfied with such a conclusion.

Nevertheless, this kind of measurement does seem promising for the future. The reform index proposed by Flores-Macias positions Latin America's governing leftist parties along a continuous scale, breaking free of the constraints imposed by even the best typologies, which force countries into boxes and limit the number of dimensions to one or two. Levitsky and Roberts try to slip in a third dimension of variation by declaring Uruguay a subtype of the "institutionalized partisan Left" on the grounds that it has stronger ties to unions and other social constituencies, but this problem could also be handled by defining a separate factor describing the nature of party linkages (as Handlin and Collier suggest), where Uruguay's Frente Amplio might have more in common with Bolivia's *Movimiento al Socialismo* than with Chile's Socialist Party. The dispersal of political power, party linkages, partisan institutionalization (as a scale rather than a dichotomous variable), reliance on mobilization—these factors as well as contextual variables could then be related to more nuanced versions of outcomes than the simple typological forms employed by Levitsky and Roberts (moderate or radical; social liberal, heterodox, or statist; liberal democratic or plebiscitary). Typologies can be useful informational shortcuts, but they can also limit our understanding to a couple of big-picture insights. It may be time to turn from typologies toward multiple-variable analysis in order to delve deeper.