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The Latest from LAPOP: Democratic Legitimacy Put to the Test in Upcoming Presidential Elections in Latin America

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Contributed by Matthew Layton of LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project)

Nine Latin American countries will hold presidential elections during the twelve-month period that began in November 2013 (see Table 1). Early news reports suggest that voters will likely re-elect incumbent parties or candidates in Costa Rica, Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, and Uruguay, but there are some cases where there is no clear frontrunner and elections should be highly competitive (Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama) or where elections will likely result in an opposition victory (Chile). Thus, even if on average, the elections yield few seismic changes in the region's politics, some of them will be contentious and will raise important questions about the legitimacy of democracy in their respective countries.

Table 1. Latin American Countries with Presidential Elections between Nov. 1, 2013 and Nov. 1, 2014

Country	Election Date	Trust in Elections
Chile	November 17, 2013	64.2
Honduras	November 24, 2013	35.5
El Salvador	February 2, 2014	54.1
Costa Rica	February 2, 2014	54.9
Panama	May 4, 2014	48.0
Colombia	May 25, 2014	46.4
Bolivia	October 5, 2014	47.3
Brazil	October 5, 2014	47.7
Uruguay	October 26, 2014	76.9

Note: The point estimate of average trust in elections is scored on a 0–100 scale based on data from the 2012 *AmericasBarometer* survey conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).

Questions of democratic legitimacy were prominent in the elections that have already occurred in Chile and Honduras. After Chile's second round of voting on December 15, Chilean voters elected former President Michelle Bachelet for her second tenure as president. This election is the first held in Chile after extensive electoral rules changes, which included a transition from voluntary registration and compulsory voting to automatic registration and voluntary voting. With these changes, voter turnout in the first round fell below 50 percent of the eligible population. This figure highlights the extent to which all of the major Chilean parties will need to find ways to bolster their legitimacy and ability to represent and mobilize this large unorganized body of the electorate in future elections.

Also as expected, the Honduran election was highly contentious. Honduras is still emerging from the disruptions that occurred during the 2009 overthrow of former President Manuel Zelaya. Presidential candidates in the recent election represented the entire partisan spectrum from pro-coup to anti-coup, including Romeo Vázquez, the general who led the Honduran military during the coup, and Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro. The first uncertified results from the election showed that the incumbent conservative party candidate, Juan Hernández, had a relatively large electoral lead; however, Castro's supporters also claimed victory, which has fed the underlying tension in the country. No matter which candidate ultimately prevails, this election is unlikely to produce a government that can claim broad legitimacy in part because overall trust in the elections is exceptionally low in Honduras (see Table 1). Consequently, instability will likely continue to characterize Honduran politics for some time.

In the other countries where elections have yet to occur, there is still considerable uncertainty about voter sentiment; indeed, some countries' parties have yet to fully finalize their selections for presidential candidates. Nevertheless, it is likely that political elites in some of these countries will also face challenges to their democratic legitimacy that are similar to those seen in Chile or Honduras. Overall, this next round of Latin American elections will highlight the region's widespread commitment to the formal trappings of electoral democracy, but it will also draw attention to the significant variation in deeper democratic consolidation within the region. Citizens across these nine Latin American countries will have the opportunity to voice their opinion on who should rule their countries through their ballots, but, as important as elections are for democracy, these elections alone will be unable to resolve deep social and political problems without the subsequent implementation of effective democratic governance.

Comments Off

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• Events

Feb 20

Nashville Symphony: Peter and the Wolf and Carnival of the Animals in English and Spanish

Feb 23

Reception, Conversation and Book Signing of Culture Is Our Weapon - Afro Reggae Brazilian Hip Hop artist Anderson Sa

Feb 24

Lunch for VU faculty and students with Anderson Sa

[Full calendar](#)

In the Spotlight

Musician and recent Reebok Human Rights recipient Anderson Sa, who has used music to help lead Brazilian youth away from drug cartels, will spend a week at Vanderbilt University beginning Feb. 22 in a joint effort by Great Performances at Vanderbilt and the Center for Latin American Studies. » [Read More](#)

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