

Latin America's Center Cannot Hold If It Doesn't Exist

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Argument

Mainstream establishment parties across the continent have been replaced by populists offering easy and empty answers.

By Christopher Sabatini

| June 22, 2018, 2:57 PM



Brazilian congressman and presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, waves to the crowd during a military event in Sao Paulo, Brazil on May 3, 2018. (NELSON ALMEIDA/AFP/Getty Images)

On July 1, Mexican voters will head to the polls. In October, Brazilian voters will do the same. This wave of elections in the region — Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Paraguay have all voted in the past year, too — comes at a time when popular anger against the political class is rising and support for democracy is in decline.

Over the past 16 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, voter support for traditional parties that had been anchors for their respective democracies has been declining, as voters opt instead for independent candidates and new, smaller parties. In the first round of Colombia's recent election, none of the top three candidates represented either branch of Colombia's previous two-party system, long dominated by the Liberal and Conservative political machines. Instead, two polar opposite candidates — one from the right-wing Democratic Center party, Ivan Duque, and the other from Colombia's new left Progressive Movement, Gustavo Petro — faced off in the June 17 runoff election. Although Duque won Sunday's election with 54 percent of the vote, the first-round results showed that the country is extremely polarized.

It's a trend that is being repeated in Mexico and Brazil. Self-proclaimed outsider candidates offering easy, vacuous answers to voter malaise.

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In Mexico, the projected leader in the one-round presidential election system is Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the head of his own National Regeneration Movement party. Twelve years earlier, running under the banner of another party — the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) — López Obrador lost to the conservative Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party by fewer than 300,000 votes and claimed fraud. He then led a two-month protest that blocked Mexico City's main thoroughfare and staged an inauguration in which he was sworn in as the "legitimate" president and named his own presumably legitimate Cabinet. Slowly, though, Mexicans tired of the performance, which hurt the small businesses along La Reforma avenue (some of them López Obrador supporters), where he maintained his protest. Eventually, he decamped and waited for the next election in 2012.

Today, reflecting popular disgust over recent corruption scandals under current President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and concerns over security, López Obrador is leading in the polls. He has positioned himself ahead of Mexico's three traditional parties — PRI, which governed Mexico for more than 70 years, the National Action Party, and PRD — by depicting himself as an outsider, despite the nearly 40 years he spent in the political arena on behalf of two of the country's traditional parties, first in the PRI and later in the PRD.

In Brazil, a spreading corruption scandal has led to the imprisonment of the former but still-popular President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva from the Workers' Party (PT). The scandal has reached across the political class and ideological spectrum, ensnaring leaders in Brazil's two other main parties, the Social Democracy Party and the Democratic Movement party. Despite serving a 12-year prison term for corruption, however, Lula still plans to run in the October presidential election and, according to recent polls, could win. An electoral court has until Sept. 17 to decide whether Lula can run, but the deadline for registering candidates is Aug. 15.

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Five months before the country's first-round elections on Oct. 7, in a polling aggregate that assumes Lula will be disqualified, slightly more than 20 percent of Brazilian voters pledged their support for Jair Bolsonaro, a former Army captain who has attacked female politicians by declaring them too ugly to rape, said Afro-Brazilian women aren't worthy of procreating, praised the past military government, and promised an iron fist against Brazil's criminals. Since being elected to Congress in 1991, Bolsonaro has changed parties several times but is running for the presidency as a member of the small Social Liberal Party. In second place in the polling aggregate is the Afro-Brazilian environmental activist and evangelical Christian, Marina Silva, who served as environment minister under Lula from 2003 to 2008 but broke with the PT to form her own party, the Sustainability Network. The establishment parties are, at the moment, way behind. With Lula in jail, the PT is leaderless, though there are a number of party leaders who are hoping to get the nod from the former president; the Social Democracy Party candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, is a distant fourth; and the popularity of outgoing President Michel Temer of the Democratic Movement remains in the single digits.

Political parties across the region remain one of the least-trusted institutions. According to surveys conducted by Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer, only 13.8 percent of Mexican citizens trust political parties, while 10 percent of Colombians and 9 percent of Brazilians do. A wave of corruption scandals is largely to blame. According to the surveys, more than 82 percent of citizens across North and South America believe that half or more of their politicians are corrupt. All of this has led to a decline in support for democracy. In Brazil, only 52.4 percent of citizens say they prefer democracy over other forms of government; in Mexico, that number drops to 49.4 percent.

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Their policy prescriptions have been devoid of specifics, lacking any proposed institutional or legal reforms to address the structural roots of venality and impunity. Instead, in classic populist fashion, both men present themselves as outsiders, the only clean options to fix polluted systems — despite their long political careers.

When pressed what he plans to do, López Obrador's oft-repeated promise is honesty, security, and prosperity. Bolsonaro emphasizes his distance from the traditional political system — though he's been in Congress for 27 years — and his military background. His resume, apparently, is his plan for tackling corruption and crime. While López Obrador has denounced civil society groups that criticized him, Bolsonaro has raged against what he sees as an excessively rights-obsessed culture and its advocates.

In a region often considered to have the world's most enduring tradition of populism, Mexico and Brazil are poised to see its return, but this time while populists are on the rise from Turkey to Hungary, Italy, and the United States. While Bolsonaro's path to victory in Brazil's two-round presidential election, with the second round to be held, if necessary, on Oct. 28, is not as clear as López Obrador's in Mexico's one-round system, the popularity of their candidacies signals deeper structural and attitudinal changes. The two men come from different ends of the ideological spectrum — López Obrador from the left and Bolsonaro from the right. But as Italy's present governing coalition illustrates, when it comes to populism, the ideological spectrum bends around until the left and right meet at the intolerant, policy-free extreme.

The decline of traditional parties in Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia doesn't necessarily spell the end of democracies. But the withering support for more mainstream parties and citizens' support for a sweeping mandate to clean up corrupt systems — against a backdrop of declining confidence in democracy — represent a genuine threat to democratic institutions and constitutional checks and balances in the region. At the same time, without the traditional anchors of mainstream parties and their political machines, electoral volatility is likely to become the norm, as has been the case in Peru since the collapse of its party system in the late 1980s.

A Venezuela-like humanitarian collapse is unlikely to follow in either case. López Obrador's Mexico-first promises will inevitably clash with those of the man leading his populist neighbor to the north. And Bolsonaro, if he prevails, is likely to find common ideological cause with other tough-on-crime populists such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and nativists such as Viktor Orban in Hungary. Thanks to the deterioration and collapse of party systems, they are unlikely to face a coherent opposition to keep them in check.

And if history is any guide, in Latin America, elected populists have never served democracy or democratic institutions well.

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