Where Is Latin America Headed?

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By JORGE G. CASTAÑEDA

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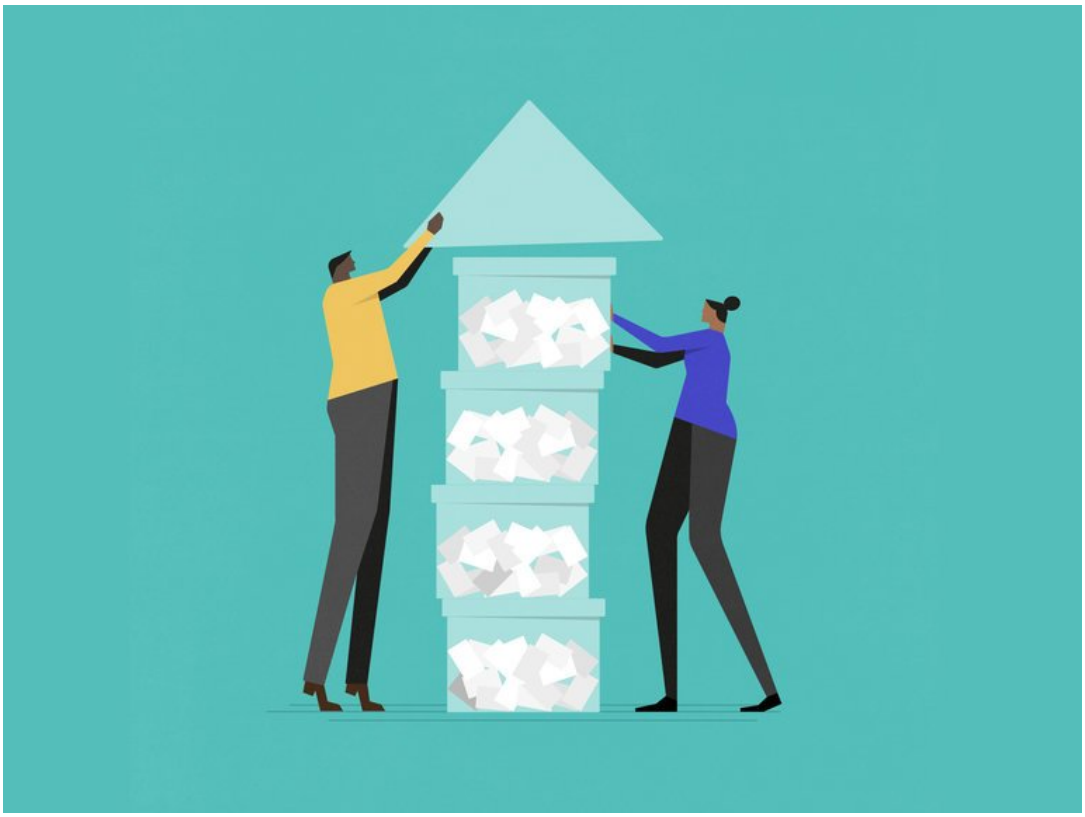

Errata Carmona

The recent presidential vote in Chile, along with the Nov. 26 contest in Honduras, signals the beginning of a yearlong electoral cycle in Latin America. By the end of 2018, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Costa Rica, Paraguay and perhaps Venezuela will have elected new leaders. As in Chile and Honduras, there will be surprises, but certain issues are sure to be important in all of these countries: corruption, crime and violence; a deep and broad dissatisfaction with democracy; and growing frustration with drawn-out, mediocre or downright dreadful economic performances.

These issues can cut in many ways. In some cases — Mexico, Brazil and Colombia — they can propel perceived or real “outsiders” into office. In others, they may generate a simple, traditional, anti-incumbency bias — perhaps in the unexpected runoff in Chile, in Venezuela if an election is actually held and quite possibly in Colombia, where a highly successful president is highly unpopular. Finally, in a handful of nations, continuity will trump risky or dangerous change, as electorates prefer the devil they know.

Some commentators have speculated recently on the resiliency of Latin American democratic institutions in the context of this electoral potpourri. Conversely, other analysts have wondered whether the insecurity, inequality and impunity rampant for decades in the region will not tempt voters to choose authoritarian candidates. Or they might tilt in the direction of undemocratic outcomes if such candidates promise, let alone deliver, a reprieve from these plagues. Others still

emphasize the persistent return to the right that many of these votes will indicate, in the same fashion as Argentina or Peru recently: a pendular movement away from the progressive or “pink tide” regimes dating from the beginning of the century through 2015.

In fact, although these questions as well as their conceivable answers, however speculative, are perfectly valid, there may be less here than meets the eye. Fortunately, Latin American democracy is becoming monotonously normal and resistant to great upheavals. If there is a common thread underlying this sequence of presidential elections, it may reside in a healthy novelty: the humdrum nature of most of the possible outcomes. This is good news for the region.

A quick summary of actual or foreseeable results, according to polls in each country, seems to corroborate this thread. Despite disgust with the political elite, turnout in Chile in the first round of the election last month was almost identical to what it was four years ago, at 6.7 million. The favorite, the former President Sebastián Piñera, is no longer assured of victory in the runoff on Dec. 19. But if he does win, Chile will have been governed from 2006 to 2022 by either Mr. Piñera or the departing head of state, Michelle Bachelet — not bad as far as continuity goes.

Mexicans, for their part, are fed up with a corrupt party system, and with discredited, unrepresentative parties, yet independent candidates (allowed for the first time in a presidential election) are facing an uphill fight to round up the necessary signatures to appear on the ballot.

Brazilians loathe the corrupt politicians from the Workers’ Party, which governed from 2003 through last year, but the former president and party founder Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is leading in the polls for next year’s vote. If allowed to run, despite serious corruption charges, he may be elected to a third term.

And although Nicolás Maduro would almost certainly lose a presidential contest in Venezuela in 2018, if one were to be held, his party was able to win or steal a large number of state governorships just last month. He has clearly weathered the storm created by mass protests and egregious human rights violations.

Finally, a tight race in Honduras has left a popular incumbent in limbo. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal announced that a special count gave President Juan Orlando Hernández a 1.59 percent lead over the opposition candidate, Salvador Nasralla. But uncertainty still clouds the final result: widespread fraud is suspected, a recall is being demanded by Mr. Nasralla, international observers are calling for a recount, and the final outcome remains in doubt with the possibility that his challenger may yet achieve an unexpected victory, having run on an anticorruption plank.

In Colombia, next May’s vote could be transformed into a referendum on Juan Manuel Santos’s agreement with a guerrilla organization that destabilized the country for more than half a century. If so, supporters of that agreement in his own party and on the left could be swamped by supporters of former President Álvaro Uribe, who has ferociously fought against the peace deal. His successors could be swept back into office. But aside from the war-or-peace issue — admittedly, not a minor one — on many other issues Mr. Santos’s candidates and Mr. Uribe’s differ mostly in tone. The former FARC guerrillas will be on the ballot as the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force party; that is a novelty. They are expected to receive such a tiny percentage of the vote that they will make it into Congress only because the peace agreement guarantees them seats.

Only in Mexico and Brazil — granted, of enormous weight in the region — is there a founded fear

of outsider incursions. Five years of widespread corruption; 10 years of a bloody, exorbitantly expensive and useless war on drugs; and 25 years of mediocre economic growth might finally lead Mexican voters to despair and Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Running for the third time as the Morena party candidate, Mr. López Obrador, the former left-wing mayor of Mexico City, will be competing against lackluster candidates from the P.R.I. and the P.A.N., whose recent administrations have disappointed everyone. He paints himself as an outsider, despite being as much a member of the political class as his opponents. If he is elected, that will be the time to see whether Mexico's institutions are as strong as expected and whether President Trump was wise in stoking the fires of Mexican nationalism. Mr. López Obrador's probable election is the only real outlier on the region's electoral horizon.

The danger in Brazil springs from the opposite side of the political spectrum. Jair Bolsonaro is certainly not an outsider — he has been in Congress since 1990 — but he is a right-wing, authoritarian former army parachutist who thinks, along with many Brazilians, that the country should be run with an iron fist. They are exasperated with a recession that has lasted nearly three years, an interminable corruption scandal that led to a presidential impeachment, and to jail for front-line politicians and Brazil's most prosperous businessmen.

Mr. Bolsonaro seems highly unlikely to be elected, if only thanks to the runoff system Brazil wisely adopted many years ago. But again, seemingly strong institutions will be tested if this extreme-right candidate — he favors torture, gay "re-education" and the military regime of yesteryear — continues to place second in most polls. As of now, Mr. da Silva, if he is allowed to run, and Geraldo Alckmin, the governor of São Paulo and the Social Democratic Party presidential candidate in 2006, stand the greatest chances of winning. Both belong to the traditional political elite.

Does this "new normal" mean that voters are content with the status quo? Not at all. One regionwide survey after another — Chile's Latinobarometro, Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project — show that Latin Americans are dissatisfied with their democracy as well as their economic and social situation. They seem increasingly resentful of the United States. They may not express this at the polls, but they could become targets for manipulation and exploitation by firebrands, liars and even foreign powers. There are growing fears and suspicions, for example, that Vladimir Putin, his hackers and Russia Today are tempted to meddle in Latin American elections: for the Workers' Party in Brazil, for the P.R.I. or Mr. López Obrador in Mexico and in support of Mr. Maduro in Venezuela if an election is held.

But most likely, electoral events in Latin America next year will be uneventful. And that is a welcome change.