BY Brendan O'Boyle | December 19, 2018

It was a big year for elections in Latin America: There were seven new presidents in total, with voters in Mexico and Brazil bucking the status quo by backing anti-establishment presidential candidates.

That it was also a big year for referendums is no coincidence – while voters vented their frustration with political leadership, politicians themselves looked for ways to distance themselves from the establishment and appeal to voters directly on issues of policy.

In Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru politicians resorted to a form of direct democracy that, if voters' low opinion of traditional institutions is a guide, could be a feature of Latin American politics for years to come.

"Referendums and popular consultations are playing a role in Latin America that is no longer just symbolic," said Yanina Welp, principal researcher at the Center for Research on Direct Democracy and co-director of the Zurich Latin American Center at the University of Zurich.

The logistics and content of these votes varied widely. President Martín Vizcarra championed a vote on anti-corruption reforms in Peru, while a similar referendum in Colombia had its origins in a campaign led by opposition lawmakers. In Mexico, meanwhile, unofficial consultations called by then President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), "were

essentially public opinion surveys," said David Altman, a political scientist at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and author of the upcoming book *Citizenship and Contemporary Direct Democracy*.

While observers criticized AMLO's consultations as set up to endorse decisions he had already made (as evidenced by the overrepresentation of voters from his home state), other votes did seem intended to gauge the popular will. Despite their differences, this year's referendums offer a few lessons for those following a region where "everything is in flux," said Matt Qvortrup, a political scientist at Coventry University and author of *Referendums around the World*.

Leaders lack answers – and legitimacy

While academic literature often considers pure direct democracy as being initiated by citizens, Latin America's referendums in 2018 came largely from above.

Experts suggest this is because shrinking support for political parties and politicians has made referendums more politically expedient. Latin Americans' confidence in their congresses, presidents and political parties each fell to a 15-year low in 2018, according to Latinobarómetro.

"People are looking for a response from government, and referendums may be one way for politicians to signal they're serious about changing," said Elizabeth Zechmeister, director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.

And while plenty of politicians have seen referendums backfire, legislative gridlock in 2018 in countries like Colombia and Peru created incentives for kicking policy decisions to voters.

"If the alternative is that it's difficult to govern, and you're facing opposition in congress, referendums become a way to move your initiatives forward," Zechmeister said.

That's especially true in a country like Peru, where Vizcarra faced an opposition-controlled Congress and where a regional low of 7.5 percent of citizens trust political parties. In the Americas, just 17.5 percent of citizens trust parties, compared to just over 39 percent who trust elections, according to LAPOP's 2016/2017 AmericasBarometer report. Party identification, meanwhile, fell 9 percent compared to 2014, whereas trust in elections remained relatively stable, falling only 0.4 percent.

"Parties can no longer count on the herd mentality of their followers," said Qvortrup. "They might get elected on an overall program, but people want and demand to have a say on things they don't agree with on the political parties."

The Dec. 9 vote on anti-corruption measures in Peru was aimed at cultivating confidence in institutions that have become paralyzed by a divided government. The vote also helped secure something of a mandate for Vizcarra, who took office after President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski resigned in March.

After the referendum, Vizcarra's approval rating rose to 66 percent, making December his third straight month with approval over 60 percent – an unprecedented streak for a Peruvian president this century. The same poll showed increased confidence in the judiciary, the legislative branch and the electoral system.

Referendums are also useful to presidents who already have popular support, said Qvortrup.

"Even someone like AMLO, who has a mandate, still wants to find out what is genuinely popular," Qvortrup said. "The Twitter paradox is that a society where you can get instantaneous feedback is also one where it's hardest to know what people think."

The result? Referendums on a wide range of topics, like Ecuador's February referendum on seven constitutional amendments on issues like presidential re-election, mining regulations and land speculation.

That referendum didn't boost President Lenín Moreno's popularity like Peru's anti-corruption vote did for Vizcarra. But it served a similar purpose, said Welp.

"In Peru and in Ecuador, the referendums played an important role of adding a bit of air and stabilizing the system," she said.

Voters are clear on one thing

Popular opinion may be elusive to some politicians, but three referendums in 2018 reinforced a key takeaway from the presidential elections: Voters want concrete action on corruption. In Peru, over 85 percent of voters chose to limit members of Congress to one term, make campaign financing more transparent and reform how judges are elected. In Ecuador, voters passed constitutional amendments eliminating indefinite re-election for public officials and barring from public office anyone convicted of corruption charges. And in Colombia, over 99 percent of votes cast in August's referendum favored the seven anti-corruption reforms on the ballot. Though turnout there didn't meet the required threshold to make the results binding, the referendum's supporters said it was higher than expected and called it a victory.

Referendums aren't going away

2019 already promises to be an interesting laboratory for direct democracy. In Mexico, AMLO has promised to ask the people to continue weighing in on policy decisions. Cubans, meanwhile, will vote on a new constitution. Costa Ricans could vote on oil and gas exploration, and Uruguayans look poised to vote on a package of sweeping security reforms. And in Brazil, Eduardo Bolsonaro, a congressman and son of President-elect Jair Bolsonaro, has suggested a referendum to reinstate the death penalty. (His father dismissed the possibility, which would require changing the constitution).

Experts are wary of making predictions as to how direct democracy will look in Latin America in 2019.

But one quote, attributed to the 19th-century French politician Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin, could hint at why leaders may continue to transfer lawmaking to their constituents.

"There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader."