Understanding Latin American Politics

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Imagine a president disappears from public view, leaves his country for extended periods to get cancer treatments, and even misses his inauguration. There is clamoring by the opposition to prove he’s alive, expressions of concern by other countries, and shows of support on the streets. The interim president says he’s still receiving orders from the sitting president, but the evidence for this is disputed. The president then returns to his home country and not long after is pronounced dead. This example describes what happened in Venezuela with its president, Hugo Chávez, in late 2012 and early 2013. How should we unravel Chávez’s secretive behavior and why different political actors responded as they did?

As its title suggests, the ultimate goal of this book is to lay the foundation for a better understanding of Latin American politics. The main audience is undergraduate students, who can use some guidance to navigate what they read and hear from friends, family, and the media. There is almost too much to consider at once: Why was Hugo Chávez such a polarizing figure? What developments led Venezuelan politics to this moment? Why did presidents and heads of state of other nations react in different ways to the crisis? Answers to these questions often defy easy explanation.

If we want to understand why certain political events are occurring in Latin America, we need to get a bird’s-eye view and then zoom in to get a look at people on the ground. By doing that in a comparative way, we can uncover not only why events are happening, but also whether they are likely to occur in other countries as well. In this book, these different perspectives all come together to form a more complete picture. The Venezuelan case, with all its surprises and uncertainties, can start making more sense.

The essence of this book is to highlight three different levels of analysis: international, national, and local. Decisions are not made in a bubble, political forces are often not isolated, and interaction with other countries creates multiple layers of complexity. The chapters ask students to ponder how each level of analysis is integral to political and economic outcomes.

**Text Features**

This book begins with an introductory chapter that lays out major theoretical frameworks and initiates the conceptual discussion. Chapters 2 through 4 provide the historical grounding necessary to grasp the major political and economic themes that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Latin America. From there we move to country case studies, sixteen countries in nine chapters: Central American and three Andean countries are grouped together. All of the country case study chapters include clear comparative discussions to show how we can make generalizations that further our understanding of political and economic events.
The chapters provide a host of analytical tools that go beyond just a narrative:

- Timelines of key events
- Key economic indicators (gross domestic product growth, inflation, unemployment, poverty rate, and the human development index)
- Boxes discussing key country characteristics
- Boxes discussing important political institutions in each country
- Annotated lists of additional readings and Web sites
- Annotated primary documents
- A glossary of key terms
- Suggested topics for student term paper research

From long experience, I know it is no easy task to present the right combination of country studies and analytical tools in a single class, but I believe students will come away from using this book with a better understanding of Latin American politics.

This book is available in a variety of formats—digital and print. To learn more about Pearson programs, pricing, and customization options, visit www.pearsonhighered.com.

Acknowledgments

This book originated with a lengthy phone conversation I had with then Longman Acquisitions Editor Vik Mukhija back in 2007, just after I had completed another book on U.S.-Latin American relations. I talked about how none of the existing texts really fit the structure and content of my Latin American politics class. Vik is an energetic and enthusiastic editor and encouraged me to consider tackling another book. Almost seven years later, here we finally are. At Pearson thanks must also go to Beverly Fong and Melissa Mashburn, who ushered me through various stages of the process and brainstormed with me. At the tail end, I appreciate the help of Doug Bell, who led me through the tortured but necessary process of obtaining all necessary permissions.

Mulling over Latin American politics was in part a public exercise. As ideas or topics occurred to me, I blogged about them at Two Weeks Notice: A Latin American Politics Blog (http://weeksnotice.blogspot.com/) where I have been writing since early 2006. Thanks to all the readers, anonymous or otherwise, who commented—positively or otherwise—on my meandering posts. Further, I am very grateful to the many undergraduates in my Latin American Politics course at UNC Charlotte who read draft versions and directly or indirectly made me think of ways to improve the manuscript. I was also pleased at the high quality of the external reviews I received, and I expect some of you will recognize the impact of your own suggestions on the final book. I would like to thank the following reviewers: Stephen Morris, Middle Tennessee State University; Gratzia Villaroel, St. Norbert College; Richard Levy, Salem State University; Candice Ortbals, Pepperdine University; Adrian Hull, SUNY Cortland; Velma Garcia, Smith College; David Scott Palmer, Boston University;
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