Syllabus: Introduction to Latin American Politics

Jefferson Leal

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Office Hours: TBD
Office: TBD

Level: Undergraduate
Class Hours: TBD
Class Room: TBD

Course Description

This introductory course covers the historical legacies that conditioned the development of political institutions in Latin America and discusses the contemporary challenges to Latin American democracies. It focuses on regime change, democratization, the authoritarian regimes, and democratic erosion in contemporary Latin America. The course is designed to expose students to major works on Latin American politics, from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

The first block covers the historical context necessary to understand Latin American politics, including the colonial legacies, historical inequalities, landowning elites, the early twentieth-century democratic experience, the emergence of populism, and the inter-branch crises that preceded the coups and subversion of democracy.

The second block starts by exploring the region's experiences with regime instability, coups, and autocracies. It then introduces students to competing theories of democratization and to the return to democracy in the late twentieth century.

The third block concentrates on the performance and functioning of contemporary democratic processes and institutions. We will discuss the emergence of leftist parties, the rise of social movements, and patterns of clientelism in the region. We will also examine the relationship between domestic politics, economic cycles, and global politics and discuss how violence impacts elections and the state in Latin America. The course then concludes by examining recent democratic backsliding.

Class will be a structured mix of lectures and in-class participation and discussion.

Course Learning Objectives

- Develop a working knowledge of key questions in Latin American politics, as well as the most influential theories and empirical evidence related to these debates.
- Analyze political systems, ideologies, and institutions across countries using a comparative framework.
- Understand historical trajectories of state formation and regime change in Latin America.

- Develop critical skills to evaluate competing arguments in light of empirical evidence and scholarly research.
- Improve writing and communication skills.

Readings and Class Structure

The primary textbook for the course is:

- David Close. *Latin American Politics: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017

Other readings consist of journal articles and book chapters, which will be made available through the course management system or the university library. Readings listed under "Additional readings" are optional. Lectures provide a guide to the key themes and arguments in the readings and situate them within broader debates in comparative politics, but they do not substitute for individual reading. Students are expected to complete the assigned readings, attend lectures, take notes, and participate actively in class discussions.

Students may approach the readings in different ways. Some prefer to complete the readings before attending lecture, while others prefer to attend lecture first and then use it as a guide for what to focus on when reading. Either approach is acceptable. Regardless of the strategy chosen, students should ensure that they are closely following the readings so that they can engage meaningfully with the discussion and with their peers.

When reading academic work, students should focus on identifying the core structure of the argument rather than getting lost in technical details. Some readings include statistical analysis or formal models, and the mathematical notation and terminology may initially appear daunting. The goal is not to master every technical detail, but to understand how the evidence supports the author's claims. In particular, students should focus on the following elements:

- The central research question: What puzzle or political phenomenon is the author trying to explain?
- The theoretical argument: What mechanism or causal logic does the author propose?
- The empirical strategy used to test the argument: What data, cases, or methods are used to evaluate the claim?
- The strengths and limitations of the evidence: What assumptions are necessary for the argument to hold, and what alternative explanations remain plausible?

When reading, it is often helpful to focus first on the introduction and conclusion to understand the main argument, and then examine how the theoretical discussion and empirical evidence support that claim. The instructor will explain the intuition behind statistical and mathematical models when necessary.

Evaluation

Final grades will be based on three components.

Component	Weight
Midterm Exam	30%
Final Exam	40%
Participation and brief paper presentation	30%

Midterm Exam: The midterm will assess students' understanding of the core concepts and debates covered in the first half of the course. It will be an open-book, in-class exam.

Final Exam: The final exam will focus primarily on the material covered after the midterm, although knowledge from earlier parts of the course remains relevant. The exam will be open book and held in class.

Both exams will be based on the assigned readings and class discussion.

Participation: Students are expected to participate actively in class discussions and demonstrate engagement with the readings. In addition, each student will sign up to present at least one of the weekly readings during the semester. The student should prepare a presentation of 10 to 15 minutes that briefly summarizes the argument and raises important questions and criticisms for discussion.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

Students are required to comply with the university's policy on academic integrity. All submitted work must reflect the student's own reasoning and proper citation of sources. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools may be used in a limited capacity, for example, for proofreading or preliminary information search. However, grading is entirely based on students' independent analysis, argument development, and original data work. Students must disclose when and how AI tools were used in preparing their assignments. Failure to comply with academic integrity policies may result in sanctions in accordance with university regulations.

Schedule

The schedule is subject to change.

Block 1: Historical Legacies, Populism, and Crises

Week 1: Historical and Contemporary Challenges to Democracy in Latin America

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 2**, "Why History Matters," pp. 29–60
- Noam Lupu and Mariana Rodríguez, eds. *Pulse of Democracy*. Nashville, TN: Center for Global Democracy, 2026. **Introduction**, "The Pulse of Democracy in 2026," pp. 4–7, and **Chapter 2**, "What Buys Goodwill Toward Democracy?" pp. 46–79

Class 2: Colonial Legacies

- James Mahoney. "Long-Run Development and the Legacy of Colonialism in Spanish America." *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 1 (2003): 50–106
- Kenneth L. Sokoloff and Stanley L. Engerman. "History Lessons: Institutions, Factor Endowments, and Paths of Development in the New World." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no. 3 (2000): 217–232

Additional readings

- Close (2017), **Chapter 1**, "Why Study Latin America?" pp. 3–28
- Noam Lupu and Mariana Rodríguez, eds. *Pulse of Democracy*. Nashville, TN: Center for Global Democracy, 2026. **Chapter 1**, "Improving Perceptions of the Status Quo," pp. 10–45, and **Chapter 3**, "Emigration Trends Have Declined Across the Americas," pp. 80–119
- David Collier and Steven Levitsky. "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research." *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430–451
- Barry R. Weingast. "The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of the Law." *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 2 (1997): 245–263
- Congressional Research Service. *Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Compilation of Selected Indices*. CRS report. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021
- Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege*. Report. Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021
- Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Noam Lupu. *The 2018/19 AmericasBarometer*. AmericasBarometer report. Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), 2019

Week 2: State Formation

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 3**, "Latin America's Political Elites," pp. 61–94
- Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith. "The Transformation of Modern Latin America, 1880s–1990s." In *Modern Latin America*, 6th ed., 42–68. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005

Class 2

- Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James N. Green. *Modern Latin America*. 7th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. **Chapter 13**, "Dynamics of Political Transformation," pp. 376–402
- Miguel Angel Centeno. *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002. **Chapter 1**, "The Latin American Puzzle," pp. 1–32

Additional readings

- Deborah J. Yashar. *Demanding Democracy: Reform and Reaction in Costa Rica and Guatemala, 1870s–1950s*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. **Chapter 1**, "Introduction," pp. 1–26, and **Chapter 2**, "Between Building States and Agricultural Export Markets," pp. 29–66
- James Mahoney. "Path-Dependent Explanations of Regime Change: Central America in Comparative Perspective." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, no. 1 (2001): 111–141

Week 3: Populism and Inter-Branch Crises

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 5**, "Political Institutions and the Machinery of Government," pp. 129–160
- Scott Mainwaring. "Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy: The Difficult Combination." *Comparative Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 198–228

Class 2

- Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. "Democratization and Constitutional Crises in Presidential Regimes: Toward Congressional Supremacy?" *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 1 (2005): 51–74

Additional readings

- Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier. *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002. "Overview," pp. 3–24

Block 2: The Authoritarian Period and (Re-)Democratization

Week 4: Coups and Democratic Breakdowns

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 7**, "Unconstitutional Political Change: Coups, Insurgencies, and Revolutions as Contentious Politics," pp. 197–230

Class 2

- Arturo Valenzuela. "The Move to a Socialist Society and the Erosion of the Political Center." In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Chile*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. **Chapter 4**
- Alfred Stepan. "Political Leadership and Regime Breakdown: Brazil." In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Latin America*, ed. by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, 110–137. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978

Additional readings

- Guillermo O'Donnell. "An Impossible 'Game': Party Competition in Argentina, 1955–1966." In *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics*. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973
- Nancy Bermeo. "The Tragedy of Democracy in Chile." In *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003
- Gretchen Helmke. *Institutions on the Edge: The Origins and Consequences of Inter-Branch Crises in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. **Chapter 4**, "Why the Mighty Fall," and **Chapter 5**, "Constitutional Coups as a Commitment Problem," pp. 73–125

Week 5: Autocracy

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 4**, "Political Traditions, Political Legacies, and Political Institutions: How Personal Rule and Political Violence Figure in Modern Latin American Politics," pp. 95–128
- David Collier. "Overview of the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Model." In *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, ed. by David Collier. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979

Class 2

- Kurt Weyland. *Revolution and Reaction: The Diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. **Chapter 6**, "The Imposition of Institutional Authoritarianism," pp. 131–173

Additional readings

- Kurt Weyland. *Revolution and Reaction: The Diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. **Chapter 3**, "A Theory of Reactionary Waves," pp. 43–70

- Michael Albertus. *Autocracy and Redistribution: The Politics of Land Reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. **Chapter 5**, "A Cross-National Analysis of Land Reform in Latin America," pp. 142–189
- Gabriel L. Negretto. "Authoritarian Constitution Making: The Role of the Military in Latin America." In *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes*, ed. by Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, 83–110. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014
- Beatriz Magaloni. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006

Week 6: Transitions to Democracy I

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 8**, "Democracy and Democratization," pp. 231–266
- Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi. "Modernization: Theories and Facts." *World Politics* 49, no. 2 (1997): 155–183

Class 2

- Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. **Chapter 4**, "Regime Survival and Fall," pp. 93–123

Additional readings

- Andreas Schedler. "What Is Democratic Consolidation?" *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 91–107

Week 7: Transitions to Democracy II

Class 1

- Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. **Chapter 5**, "Resurrecting Civil Society (and Restructuring Public Space)," and **Chapter 6**, "Convoking Elections (and Provoking Parties)"

Class 2

- Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo. *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. **Chapter 2**, "Elites and the Causes and Consequences of Democracy," pp. 25–62

Additional readings

- Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo. *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. **Chapter 7**, "Chile," pp. 209–246

- Terry Lynn Karl. "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America." *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 1 (1990): 1–21
- Eduardo Viola and Scott Mainwaring. *Transitions to Democracy: Brazil and Argentina in the 1980s*. Kellogg Institute Working Paper 21. Notre Dame, IN: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame, 1984

Week 8: Midterm Exam

Class 1: Course Review

Class 2: Midterm Exam (open book, in class)

Block 3: Contemporary Politics in Latin America

Week 9: Party Systems

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 6**, "Parties, Elections, and Movements," pp. 161–196
- Mark P. Jones and Scott Mainwaring. "The Nationalization of Parties and Party Systems: An Empirical Measure and an Application to the Americas." *Party Politics* 9, no. 2 (2003): 139–166

Class 2

- Herbert Kitschelt et al. *Latin American Party Systems*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. **Chapter 6**, "Long-Term Influences on the Structuring of Latin American Party Systems," pp. 177–208, and **Chapter 7**, "Democratic Politics and Political Economy since the 1980s: Transforming the Programmatic Structure of Latin American Party Systems?" pp. 209–235

Additional readings

- Kenneth F. Greene and Mariano Sánchez-Talanquer. "Authoritarian Legacies and Party System Stability in Mexico." In *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse*, ed. by Scott Mainwaring, 201–226. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018
- Steven Levitsky, James Loxton, and Brandon Van Dyck. "Introduction: Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America." In *Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America*, ed. by Steven Levitsky et al. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. pp. 1–33
- Scott Mainwaring, ed. *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. **Chapter 1**, "Party System Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse," pp. 17–23; **Chapter 2**, "Party System Institutionalization in Contemporary Latin America," pp. 57–63; and **Chapter 3**, "Party System Institutionalization, Predictability, and Democracy," pp. 71–101

- Noam Lupu. "Brand Dilution and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America." *World Politics* 66, no. 4 (2014): 561–602

Week 10: Civil Society and Accountability

Class 1

- John A. Booth and Patricia Bayer Richard. "Civil Society, Political Capital, and Democratization in Central America." *The Journal of Politics* 60, no. 3 (1998): 780–800

Class 2

- Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández. "Mexico's Difficult Democracy: Grassroots Movements, NGOs, and Local Government." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 17, no. 2 (1992): 165–208
- Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti. "Societal Accountability in Latin America." *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (2000): 147–158

Additional readings

- John Clark. "The State, Popular Participation, and the Voluntary Sector." *World Development* 23, no. 4 (1995): 593–601
- Donna Lee Van Cott. "Latin America's Indigenous Peoples." *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 127–142
- Deborah J. Yashar. "Contesting Citizenship: Indigenous Movements and Democracy in Latin America." *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 1 (1998): 23–42
- Jason Seawright. *Party-System Collapse: The Roots of Crisis in Peru and Venezuela*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. **Chapter 1**, "Party-System Collapse in South America," pp. 1–31

Week 11: Poverty, Redistribution, and Clientelism

Class 1

- Valeria Brusco, Marcelo Nazareno, and Susan C. Stokes. "Vote Buying in Argentina." *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 66–88
- Steven Levitsky. "From Populism to Clientelism? The Transformation of Labor-Based Party Linkages in Latin America." In *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, ed. by Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, 206–226. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007

Class 2

- Ana L. De La O. *Crafting Policies to End Poverty in Latin America: The Quiet Transformation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. **Chapter 1**, "Introduction," pp. 1–23
- Juliana Martínez Franzoni and Diego Sánchez-Ancochea. "The Double Challenge of Market and Social Incorporation: Progress and Bottlenecks in Latin America." *Development Policy*

Review 32, no. 3 (2014): 275–298

Additional readings

- Adam Przeworski. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. **Chapter 1**, "Democracy," pp. 10–50
- Javier Auyero. "The Logic of Clientelism in Argentina: An Ethnographic Account." *Latin American Research Review* 35, no. 3 (2000): 55–81

Week 12: Latin America and the Global Economy

Class 1

- Close (2017), **Chapter 9**, "Political Economy and Economic Policy in Latin America," pp. 267–302
- Andrew Schrank and Marcus J. Kurtz. "Credit Where Credit Is Due: Open Economy Industrial Policy and Export Diversification in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Politics & Society* 33, no. 4 (2005): 671–702

Class 2

- Close (2017), **Chapter 10**, "Latin American International Relations," pp. 303–338
- Lucas M. Novaes and Luis Schiumerini. "Commodity Shocks and Incumbency Effects." *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (2022): 1689–1708

Additional readings

- Kevin P. Gallagher and Roberto Porzecanski. "China Matters: China's Economic Impact in Latin America." *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 1 (2008): 185–200
- Rhys Jenkins, Enrique Dussel Peters, and Mauricio Mesquita Moreira. "The Impact of China on Latin America and the Caribbean." *World Development* 36, no. 2 (2008): 235–253

Week 13: The Pink Tide: New Leftist Governments

Class 1

- James Loxton. *Latin American Politics: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. New York: Oxford University Press, 2027. **Chapter 7**, "The Politics of the Left," and **Chapter 8**, "The Politics of the Right"
- Kirk A. Hawkins. *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. **Chapter 2**, "Chavismo, Populism, and Democracy," pp. 15–49

Class 2

- Samuel Handlin. "Social Protection and the Politicization of Class Cleavages During Latin

America's Left Turn." *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 12 (2013): 1582–1609
- Peter R. Kingstone and Aldo F. Ponce. "From Cardoso to Lula: The Triumph of Pragmatism in Brazil." In *Leftist Governments in Latin America: Successes and Shortcomings*, ed. by Kurt Weyland, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, 98–123. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010

Week 14: Violence and Politics

Class 1

- John Bailey and Matthew M. Taylor. "Evade, Corrupt, or Confront? Organized Crime and the State in Brazil and Mexico." *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 1, no. 2 (2009): 3–29

Class 2

- José Miguel Cruz. "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State." *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 4 (2011): 1–33
- Jóhanna K. Birnir and Anita Gohdes. "Voting in the Shadow of Violence: Electoral Politics and Conflict in Peru." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 181–197

Additional readings

- Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk. "Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.–Mexican Context." In *Shared Responsibility: U.S.–Mexico Policy Options for Confronting Organized Crime*, ed. by Eric L. Olson, David A. Shirk, and Andrew Selee. Washington, DC, and San Diego, CA: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars / Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, 2010
- Guillermo O'Donnell. "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries." *World Development* 21, no. 8 (1993): 1355–1369
- Jenny Pearce. "From Civil War to 'Civil Society': Has the End of the Cold War Brought Peace to Central America?" *International Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1998): 587–615
- Charles T. Call. "War Transitions and the New Civilian Security in Latin America." *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 1 (2002): 1–20
- Sonja Wolf. "Mara Salvatrucha: The Most Dangerous Street Gang in the Americas?" *Latin American Politics and Society* 54, no. 1 (2012): 65–99

Week 15: Democratic Erosion

Class 1

- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown, 2018. **Chapter 4**, "Subverting Democracy," and **Chapter 5**, "The Guardrails of Democracy"
- Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold. *Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011. pp. 1–47

Class 2

- Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power. "Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash." *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 68–82
- Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez. "Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador." *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 19–32

Additional readings

- Alisha C. Holland. "Forbearance." *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (2016): 232–246
- Javier Corrales. "Authoritarian Survival: Why Maduro Hasn't Fallen." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 39–53
- Guillermo O'Donnell. "Delegative Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (1994): 55–69
- Arturo Valenzuela. "Latin American Presidencies Interrupted." *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (2004): 5–19
- Frances Hagopian. "Brazil's Accountability Paradox." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 119–128
- Charles D. Kenney. *Fujimori's Coup and the Breakdown of Democracy in Latin America*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004. **Chapter 6**, "Fujimori versus Congress and the Coup"
- Kai M. Thaler. "Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo." *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017): 157–169

Week 16: Final Exam

Class 1: Course Conclusion

- Close (2017), **Chapter 11**, "Latin America in Comparative Perspective," pp. 339–362

Class 2: Final Exam (open book, in class)