

Why poor people vote conservative

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Until fairly recently, the main threat to electoral processes in Latin America came from the right, specifically from military coups. The military usually received political support from middle-class and upper-class groups that were eager to prevent the lower classes from obtaining political power.

During the past few years, however, the main threat to electoral processes in the region has come from the left, specifically from populist, charismatic leaders who claim to represent the poor. And in a kind of mirror image of earlier right-wing military coups, the leftist mass mobilizations are increasingly challenging the legitimacy of rightist presidents to govern. As a result of this dynamic, presidents in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador have been driven from office during the past decade.

Electoral transparency

The current political crisis in Mexico is part of this trend. A series of electoral reforms put into place over the past decade has given Mexico one of the most transparent presidential electoral systems in Latin America. The July election, however, was very close, with the apparent winner, Felipe Calderón, getting about 225,000 votes more than the second-place candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, out of a total of 41.6 million votes cast. Understandably and legitimately, López Obrador asked for a recount in a number of electoral districts that had given Calderón big majorities. The electoral authorities agreed to do so.

But instead of waiting for the authorities to finish their recount, López Obrador encouraged his followers to take to the streets, where they shut down one of Mexico City's main thoroughfares. He demanded a total recount of the votes cast and later on called for the nullification of the election. He then threatened to continue his mass mobilizations for years and to extend them to other parts of the country.

Poor people's candidate

Finally, he called for the restructuring of the entire political system. All during this process, López Obrador insisted that he had won the election because he was the candidate of the poor and Mexico had more poor people than rich people. He refused to accept the fact that many poor Mexicans voted for a rightist candidate.

López Obrador is not the only one who finds it hard to accept the idea that poor people in Latin America might vote for conservative candidates. This bias is widespread throughout the region. It is understandable given Latin America's history of right-wing military governments and the historical concentration of power in the hands of economic and religious elites.

Yet many of the region's poor are not as poor as they used to be. Having been victims of failed and irresponsible economic policies, they subsequently saw their living standards improve as a result of conservative policies that controlled inflation and stabilized their country's currencies. In Mexico, many of these upwardly mobile lower-class people, particularly in the north, voted for Calderón.

The inability to accept this new reality leads many people, both within Latin America and abroad, to sympathize with, tolerate and even support illegal and disruptive behavior that threatens to undermine Latin America's still weak democratic institutions. These people assume that mass movements composed mainly of poor people deserve sympathy and compassion, even if they break the law. This bias in favor of

the left also makes it difficult for Latin America's developing democracies to devote the necessary resources to improve institutions such as the police and the military, which are needed to guarantee the rule of law. It is, of course, always risky to take action against mass movements that break the law since such actions could result in uncontrolled violence and the death of innocent people. It is particularly risky to do so when confidence in the institutions charged with maintaining public order is low, as it is in much of Latin America.

For improvement

It would be better for Latin America if the bias in favor of the poor produced a real commitment on the part of the region's governments and the people who elected them to improve their situation. It would also be better for Latin America if the bias in favor of the poor allowed the strengthening of the law-enforcement capabilities of the region's democracies.

Improving the capabilities of law-enforcement agencies and institution is, of course, only a partial solution to the problem. The other obvious solution involves strengthening the commitment of both the regions' democracies and the people they represent to making their societies more equitable and just.

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