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Less to the left

Latin America is currently beginning an active cycle of presidential elections that will continue throughout 2006. The re-election of Argentine President Nestor Kirchner in October by a wide margin reinforced the conventional wisdom that Latin America was moving ever more to the left. Furthermore, until recently, it seemed a foregone conclusion that Bolivia, Chile and Mexico would all elect new presidents in the coming months who at best could be characterized as left of center and at worst, as radical leftists. Finally, the intense media coverage of President Chavez at the Mar del Plata summit, and the virtual absence of equivalent coverage of more moderate Latin American leaders, strengthened perceptions that the hemisphere was veering leftward.

More recently, however, the electoral panorama has begun to change. Evo Morales, the radical, anti-American, indigenous leader and Chavez ally, remains in the lead in Bolivia. Nevertheless, the gap between him and former president Quiroga has narrowed. A similar process has occurred in Chile, where it seems less likely that Michelle Bachelet, the Socialist candidate facing two conservative opponents, will be elected on the first round. And in Mexico, where polls had given Lopez Obrador, the leftist candidate, a large lead over other likely candidates, the selection of Francisco Calderon to be the conservative PAN's candidate has placed the three main presidential contenders in a dead heat.

It is interesting to speculate what caused the reduction of support for the candidates on the left. In the case of Chile, some analysts have argued that voters are still too traditional to elect a woman as president. Perhaps. But the increased support for conservative candidates may have been provoked more by fears of having a leftist Bolivia allied with Hugo Chavez as a neighbor. This may also explain the increased support for more conservative candidates in Bolivia itself. In Mexico, the sudden entry of an appealing conservative candidate has given middle-class Mexicans who do not want to vote for a leftist candidate, or for the candidate of the recently ousted PRI, an acceptable alternative.

Even if all three elections ultimately produce leftist presidents, however, it is clear that the populations in each of these countries are divided, although Chile is far less polarized than Bolivia or even Mexico. Such divisions can be either bad or good. They can be bad if they produce stalemated political systems that cannot make needed decisions. They can also produce disillusionment with democratic politics. From another perspective, however, divided government can be good if it forces negotiation, compromise and the building of consensus. And if such processes produce good policy, the legitimacy of democratic government is strengthened.

Latin America needs more moderate leftist, as opposed to radical leftist, governments. Radical leftists are too committed to "changing the model" to one that concentrates economic and political power in the hands of the state. They also tend to have a messianic belief that this is the best or only way to end poverty. Although such governments often do succeed in giving more benefits to the poor, their policies are generally very costly, disruptive and ultimately, economically unsustainable.

Because so many Latin Americans are poor, they remain very vulnerable to the appeals of radical leftist candidates who promise to give them what they do not have. As long as this situation persists, Latin American democracy will remain fragile and weakly institutionalized. And Latin American economies will continue to lurch between cycles of boom and bust.

It is therefore important for Latin America to elect leaders who, while committed to ending poverty, do so in less disruptive ways. This is another way of saying that Latin America needs more socially conscious, moderate governments, whether of the right or of the left. The reality, however, is that the large number of poor people place Latin America's political center of gravity to the left, rather than to the right, of center. This means that leftist candidates generally have broader appeal than rightist ones, except in cases such as Colombia where personal security is a major concern. Given Latin America's unfortunate vulnerability to leftist radicals, divided government may turn out to be a good thing.