

# LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

First term 2026

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**Course description:** Latin America is a world region of deep inequalities and contentious politics. This course introduces students to broad topics in Latin American politics, including the legacy of colonialism, military rule and human rights abuses, and economic policy. The course readings, discussions and assignments should help students gain basic familiarity with Latin America while reflecting about broad and diverse topics in social science.

In this course, we will cover the historical and political development of Latin America. We will examine pre-colonial societies and how geography and indigenous practices shaped early economies. We will explore the impact of Spanish and Portuguese colonial rule on institutions, social norms, and legal frameworks, and how these legacies influenced state capacity and governance after independence. The course will also address the role of natural resources in shaping economic, social, and political outcomes. Finally, we will study the rise of populism and the growth of the working class in the 20th century, with a focus on countries such as Argentina and Brazil.

**Office Hours:** We will hold weekly office hours every Tuesdays from 9:00 to 11:00 am.

**Prerequisites:** An undergraduate-level understanding of quantitative and qualitative methods would be valuable.

## Course Outline:

- | Week 1: Pre-Columbian Era
- | Week 2: Institutions and colonialism
- | Week 3: Independence and legacies
- | Week 4: State building
- | Week 5: Geography and natural resources
- | Week 6: Populism and the growth of the working class
- | Week 7: Democratic breakdown and authoritarian regimes
- | Week 8: Democracy restored and market reforms
- | Week 9: Globalisation, US's influence and China
- | Week 10: Drug wars, violence and crime
- | Week 11: Democratic backsliding in Latin America

**Grading Policy:** Article decomposition memos (20%), Pre-Analysis Plan (80 %).

## Key Dates:

Policy Memos ..... Every Friday at 23:59 pm  
Pre-Analysis Plan ..... March, 2026

**Course schedule and readings:****Week 1: Pre-Columbian era**

**Background:** Understanding life in the Americas before European arrival highlights how geography, climate, and indigenous societies shaped possibilities and constraints. Native peoples had already transformed their environments, influencing European colonial institutions, while European competition, such as the French and Indian War, further shaped the region. Mesoamerica, in particular, developed sophisticated agricultural societies, including the domestication of maize, which became a staple crop and a source for food and beverages, illustrating the deep connections between environment, society, and culture. We will focus on the different indigenous groups years before colonialism.

- Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría (Jan. 2017). *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780199341962. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199341962.001.0001>
- Melissa Dell (2010). "The Persistent Effects of Peru's Mining Mita". In: *Econometrica* 78.6, pp. 1863–1903. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.3982/ECTA8121>
- Sonia Alconini (Sept. 2022). *The Pre-Columbian Inca Empire: The Capital and its Provinces*

**Week 2: Colonialism and institutions.**

**Background:** The Spanish and Portuguese empires persisted in Latin America for more than three centuries. Their ruling significantly shaped the set of a number institutions in Latin America, imported social norms that can explain. We explore how colonialism explain's current Latin American political institutions, development, and societal norms.

- Charles Gibson (Aug. 1963). "Colonial Institutions and Contemporary Latin America: Social and Cultural Life". In: *Hispanic American Historical Review* 43.3, pp. 380–389. ISSN: 0018-2168. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-43.3.380>
- John H. Coatsworth (2008). "Inequality, Institutions and Economic Growth in Latin America". In: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40.3, pp. 545–569

**Week 3: Independence and legacies.**

**Background:** We will review historical accounts of how various Latin American countries gained independence and examine the institutional and legal frameworks that have evolved from centuries of colonial rule.

- Regina Grafe and Alejandra Irigoin (2012). "A stakeholder empire: the political economy of Spanish imperial rule in America". In: *The Economic History Review* 65.2, pp. 609–651. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0289.2010.00581.x>
- H Beckles and V. Shepherd (1996). *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present*. Markus Wiener Publishers

- Rafael Dobado and Gustavo A. Marrero (2011). "The role of the Spanish imperial state in the mining-led growth of Bourbon Mexico's economy". In: *The Economic History Review* 64.3, pp. 855–884. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0289.2010.00555.x>
- Victor Bulmer-Thomas (2003). *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence*. 2nd ed. Cambridge Latin American Studies. Cambridge University Press

#### Week 4: State building.

**Background:** In this week, we will examine the roots of state capacity and fragility in Latin America. In contrast to much of the existing literature on state development, it aims to account for two distinct forms of variation in how states are built.

- Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson (2010). "State Capacity, Conflict, and Development". In: *Econometrica* 78.1, pp. 1–34. ISSN: 00129682, 14680262. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25621395> (visited on 01/06/2026)
- Miguel Angel Centeno and Agustín Ferraro (2013). "State and Nation Making in Latin America and Spain". In: *State and Nation Making in Latin America and Spain: Republics of the Possible*. Ed. by Miguel A. Centeno and Agustín E. Ferraro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. i–ii
- Dorothy Kronick and Francisco Rodr guez (Mar. 2023). *Political Conflict and Economic Growth in Post-independence Venezuela*. URL: [https://ideas.repec.org/h/spr/sprchp/978-3-031-38723-4\\_11.html](https://ideas.repec.org/h/spr/sprchp/978-3-031-38723-4_11.html)

#### Week 5: Geography and natural resources.

**Background:** Latin America is richly endowed with natural resources, and from independence onward, its economies have largely relied on commodity exports. We will examine how resource-based industries shape economic performance and their broader effects on social and political development.

- Jos  Antonio Ocampo and Mari ngela Parra-Lancourt (2010). "The terms of trade for commodities since the mid-19th century". In: *Revista de Historia Econ mica / Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History* 28.1, pp. 11–43. DOI: [10.1017/S0212610909990085](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0212610909990085)
- Stanford University Press and World Bank (2003). *Is Geography Destiny? : Lessons from Latin America*. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.lse.idm.oclc.org/lib/londonschoolecons/detail.action?docID=476182>. World Bank Publications
- E. El Bacha and A. Fishlow (2011). "The Recent Commodity Price Boom and Latin American Growth: More than New Bottles for an Old Wine?" In: *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Economics*. Ed. by Jos  Antonio Ocampo and Jaime Ros. Oxford University Press, pp. 394–410
- Albert O. Hirschman (Feb. 1968). "The Political Economy of Import-Substituting Industrialization in Latin America\*". In: *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 82.1, pp. 1–32

**Week 6: Populism and the growth of the working class.**

**Background:** In the early 20th century, we observe the rise of populism across the region and the simultaneous growth of the working class. In this week's class, we will discuss the rise of populisms in countries such as Argentina and Brazil.

- *Reorganizing Popular Politics: Participation and the New Interest Regime in Latin America* (2009). Penn State University Press. ISBN: 9780271035604. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/j.ctv14gp3pn> (visited on 01/06/2026)
- Joel Horowitz (1999). "Populism and its Legacies in Argentina". In: *Populism in Latin America*. Ed. by Michael L. Conniff. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, pp. 22–42
- Dani Rodrik (2018). "Is Populism Necessarily Bad Economics?" In: *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 108, pp. 196–199. ISSN: 25740768, 25740776. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26452731> (visited on 01/06/2026)
- Alan Knight (1998). "Populism and Neo-populism in Latin America, especially Mexico". In: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30.2, pp. 223–248. DOI: [10.1017/S0022216X98005033](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X98005033)
- Jeffrey D Sachs (Mar. 1989). *Social Conflict and Populist Policies in Latin America*. Working Paper 2897. National Bureau of Economic Research. URL: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w2897>

**Week 7: Democratic breakdown and authoritarian regimes.**

**Background:** After periods of democracy, many Latin American countries were overthrown by military coups, often with U.S. support. These events ushered in extended periods of dictatorship and widespread human rights abuses. This class explores why military coups occurred in Latin America and how their legacies continue to shape politics in the region.

- Hector E. Schamis (1991). "Reconceptualizing Latin American Authoritarianism in the 1970s: From Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism to Neoconservatism". In: *Comparative Politics* 23.2. Accessed 6 Jan. 2026, pp. 201–220. URL: <https://doi.org/10.2307/422361>
- Pablo Argote and Elsa Voytas (0). "The Anti-Left Legacy of the Pinochet Dictatorship". In: *Comparative Political Studies* 0.0, p. 00104140251381768. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140251381768>

**Week 8: Democracy restored and market reforms.**

**Background:** For much of the late twentieth century, economic policy in Latin America was shaped by neoliberal reforms commonly referred to as the Washington Consensus (WC). Key elements of these reforms included fiscal discipline, privatisation, and deregulation. This class examines how these policies were implemented across the region and their economic and social impacts.

- Beatriz Magaloni (2006). *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press

- Ruth Berins Collier (1999). *Paths toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press
- Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman (2003). "Latin American Class Structures: Their Composition and Change during the Neoliberal Era". In: *Latin American Research Review* 38.1, pp. 41–82. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2003.0011>
- Francisco Panizza (2013). *Contemporary Latin America: Development and Democracy beyond the Washington Consensus*. 1st ed. Imprint: Zed Books. ISBN: 9781848136335. Bloomsbury Publishing
- Kenneth M. Roberts (2013). "Market Reform, Programmatic (De)alignment, and Party System Stability in Latin America". In: *Comparative Political Studies* 46.11, pp. 1422–1452

### Week 9: Globalisation, US's influence and China.

**Background:** The strategic rivalry between the United States and China is increasingly shaping global politics, including in Latin America. This class explores how both countries engage with the region, where their interests align or conflict, and the nature of their interactions—whether competitive, cooperative, or somewhere in between. We also discuss the implications of this competition for U.S. policy, including whether concerns about China should drive greater attention and resources toward Latin America.

- Kevin P. Gallagher (2016). *The Dragon in the Room: China and the Future of Latin American Industrialization*. Stanford University Press
- Melissa Dell and Pablo Querubin (Sept. 2017). "Nation Building Through Foreign Intervention: Evidence from Discontinuities in Military Strategies\*". In: *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133.2, pp. 701–764
- Clayton L. Thyne (2010). "Supporter of stability or agent of agitation? The effect of US foreign policy on coups in Latin America, 1960 to 1999". In: *Journal of Peace Research* 47.4, pp. 449–461. DOI: [10.1177/0022343310368350](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310368350)

### Week 10: Drug wars, violence and crime.

**Background:** Efforts to combat drug trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean have often produced unintended consequences, including increased violence, high incarceration rates, and public health crises. Despite decades of police and military campaigns, criminal groups have expanded and diversified, with competition over drug profits driving much of the region's persistent violence. This class examines the dynamics of the drug trade and its social and political impacts in the region.

- Robert A. Blair, Lucía Mendoza-Mora, and Michael Weintraub (n.d.). "Mano dura: An experimental evaluation of military policing in Cali, Colombia". In: *American Journal of Political Science* n/a.n/a (). URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12977>

- Gonzalo Croci and Spencer Chainey (Nov. 2022). "An Institutional Perspective to Understand Latin America's High Levels of Homicide". In: *The British Journal of Criminology* 63.5, pp. 1199–1218. ISSN: 0007-0955. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azac083>
- Renard Sexton (2020). "Unpacking the Local Resource Curse: How Externalities and Governance Shape Social Conflict". In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64.4, pp. 640–673
- Christopher Blattman et al. (2021). "Gang Rule: Understanding and Countering Criminal Governance". Preprint available at OSF. DOI: [10.31235/osf.io/5nyqs](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/5nyqs)

## Week 11: Democratic backsliding in Latin America.

**Background:** Democracies worldwide are increasingly threatened not by sudden coups, but by the slow erosion of democratic norms by elected leaders. This phenomenon, called democratic backsliding, has affected several countries in Latin America. In this class, we focus on Brazil and Venezuela as key case studies to understand the dynamics and consequences of this process.

- Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2021). *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*. 1st ed. Appendix. Case study: Brazil (pp. 43–55) or Venezuela (pp. 257–269). Cambridge University Press
- Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, Nicholas Schmidt, and Daniela Vairo (2019). "Presidential Hegemony and Democratic Backsliding in Latin America, 1925–2016". In: *Democratization* 26.4, pp. 606–625. DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2019.1566321](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1566321). URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1566321>
- Laura Gamboa, Benjamín García-Holgado, and Ezequiel González-Ocantos (2024). "Courts against backsliding: Lessons from Latin America". In: *Law & Policy* 46.4, pp. 358–379. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/lapo.12246>
- Andreas Kyriacou and Pedro Trivin (n.d.). "Populism and the rule of law: The importance of institutional legacies". In: *American Journal of Political Science* n/a.n/a (). URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12935>
- James Hollyer, Marko Klasnja, and Rocio Titunuk (0). "Charismatic Leaders and Democratic Backsliding". In: *The Journal of Politics* 0.ja, null