

Articles

# The Bureaucratic Perils of Presidentialism: Political Impediments to Good Governance in Latin America

John Polga-Hecimovich  <sup>a</sup>

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In the face of poorly performing bureaucracies, public management specialists and policy experts have been quick to suggest administrative reforms. Yet, since governance lies at the nexus of politics and administration, reforms limited to the administrative dimension are likely to fall short without concomitant political change. This essay argues that in contemporary Latin America, certain political-institutional arrangements or institutional traits are more likely to produce (in)effective governance than others. Specifically, Latin American presidentialism creates several “perils” for governance, including: the rigidity and short time horizons of presidentialism; multipartyism under presidentialism; weakly institutionalized party systems and non-programmatic parties; an imbalance of power between strong presidents and weak legislatures; the plebiscitarian nature of presidentialism; and democratic backsliding and the centralization of power in the presidency. These institutional traits incentivize patronage, promote myopic policymaking, and weaken bureaucratic autonomy. To illustrate how they manifest themselves in public policy, the paper uses evidence from the region’s responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, then concludes by suggesting political reforms that may help to improve governance in the region.

Weak governance is a defining feature of Latin American political life, with failures ranging from an inability to guarantee democratic security to poor service provision and effectiveness. This has contributed to voters’ feelings of malaise towards politics, elites, and ruling political regimes. The response of public management scholars and policy experts to the region’s underperforming public sector has been to suggest administrative reforms (e.g. Echebarria & Cortázar, 2007; Graham et al., 1999; Schneider & Heredia, 2003; Tulchin & Garland, 2000). Their success has been mixed, at best, in part because this approach overlooks the possibility that many governance failures originate in the political rather than bureaucratic realm. As Terry Moe wrote, “public bureaucracy is not designed to be effective. The bureaucracy rises out of politics, and its design reflects the interests, strategies, and compromises of those who exercise political power” (Moe, 1989, p. 267).

In this essay, I argue that Latin American political institutions and politics not only impede good governance, but directly undermine it in predictable ways. Latin American political institutions fail to provide clear policy goals, rarely allocate adequate resources to deal with the scope of the problems, and do not allow the bureaucracy sufficient autonomy in implementation. Specifically, Latin American-style presidentialism creates several “perils” for governance

in the same ways that Juan Linz (1990) famously suggested it created perils for democratic consolidation and survival. These six obstacles include: the rigidity of presidentialism and the resulting short policy horizons; party system fragmentation and its relationship to presidential patronage politics; weakly institutionalized party systems and non-programmatic parties; an imbalance of power between strong presidents and weak legislatures; the plebiscitarian nature of presidentialism; and tendencies towards democratic backsliding and the centralization of power in the presidency. These do not reflect the full range of ways in which institutional structures create incentives for practices that undermine bureaucratic autonomy, expertise, and efficiency in the region, but they provide a jumping off point for discussions of these linkages.

The global response to the Covid-19 pandemic provides numerous examples of politics influencing or dictating bureaucratic responses, from decisions to impose economically costly lockdowns, to mask wearing and social distancing mandates, to virus testing and vaccine development and administration. In fact, the pandemic responses of many Latin American governments have generally been more dependent on politicians influenced by a combination of politics and ideology than on the technocrats and health officials who are motivated by public health concerns—even

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<sup>a</sup> Political Science, United States Naval Academy, Email: [polgahec@usna.edu](mailto:polgahec@usna.edu)

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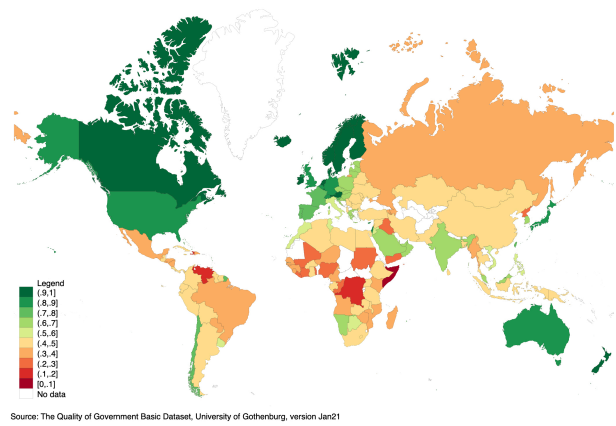
in places where the pandemic response has not been highly politicized. In part, this is due to the power of the presidency in much of Latin America, the weakness of legislatures to constrain the executive, and the resulting dearth of autonomy enjoyed by many bureaucrats. Ultimately, these pathologies cannot be successfully solved solely via reforms aimed at the public administration but those that address politics together with the bureaucracy.

The essay begins with a diagnosis and characterization of the state of Latin American bureaucracies and attempts at reform. That is followed by an examination of the administration-politics relationship and the proposition that many of the causes of governance problems are political, noting why Latin American bureaucracies are especially susceptible to political influence. The following section then discusses the six perils to governance in Latin America created by presidentialism and related institutional traits, followed by a summary of how these characteristics impede clear policy goals, sufficient resources, and administrative autonomy. The penultimate section briefly analyzes how these political pathologies impeded the Latin American response to Covid-19, with examples from Mexico and Brazil. The concluding section offers suggestions for political reform.

### Weak Governance and Reforms in Latin America

Although public welfare in Latin America has improved since the 1990s, the region continues to suffer a governance deficit. Poor policy coordination, inefficient public management, and weak institutional capacity undermine the efficacy of public policies and erode citizens' trust in public institutions and democracy. Many Latin American countries have constitutional or legal frameworks to promote public sector accountability, transparency, and integrity, but their level of implementation varies. Indeed, despite decades of administrative reforms, states are still widely considered to lack administrative capacity, responsiveness, and accountability, and bureaucracies throughout the region continue to be afflicted by clientelism, patronage, and patrimonialism (Bersch, 2019; Peters et al., 2021; Zuvanic & Iacoviello, 2010).

Standardized cross-national indicators of governance reflect these negative characterizations. For example, the Political Risk Group's International Country Risk Guide (ICRG) and the World Bank's World Governance Indicator (WGI) database place most Latin American bureaucracies in the lower or middle tiers internationally. [Figure 1](#) displays the ICRG Quality of Government scores, where values in green indicate higher quality of government and values in red indicate lower quality. The lowest-scoring countries are Venezuela, Paraguay, and Nicaragua, all of which possess public sectors characterized by informality, job entry and advancement based largely on political affiliation rather than merit, low morale, and poor institutional memory. Public sector corruption is prevalent. By contrast, the relatively highly rated cases of Chile and Uruguay more closely approximate meritocratic, highly professional, Weberian



**Figure 1. ICRG Quality of Government scores**

bureaucracies. In those places, corruption is the exception instead of the norm, and bureaucrats often reflect a high level of probity. Latin America also rates poorly in questions of administrative professionalism and corruption perceptions (Figures [A1](#) and [A2](#) in the Appendix). Yet in general, as the graphics suggest, the quality of government in the region is most comparable to Africa, ex-Soviet States, and some parts of Southeast Asia and not the high performing bureaucracies of Western Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The poor ratings reflect many of the difficulties Latin American states have faced in building modern professional civil services. One recurring problem is the longstanding reliance on patronage at the expense of merit-based hiring and firing practices. Chalmers' (1977) argument that public service recruitment based on patronage is more fully embedded in Latin American politics than in any other place in the world still rings true. On one hand, politicians may resist merit-based civil service reform since patronage systems offer them flexibility to achieve a wide variety of political and policy objectives (Grindle, 2012). For instance, in Colombia, Álvarez Collazo and Jiménez Benítez (2012) describe limited acceptance of the public service merit system among members of the country's political class since it weakens their control over the middle and lower levels of the bureaucracy. On the other, patronage practices endure even in several countries that have broadly adopted civil service reforms (Echebarría & Cortázar, 2007; Panizza et al., 2018; Zuvanic & Iacoviello, 2010).

Human resources management also suffers important deficiencies (Iacoviello, 2006). Public policy planning and budget projections concerning personnel are rarely coordinated with the public sector's institutional indicators and organizational strategies. On the contrary, the planning of policy guidelines is often separated from their human resources needs, resulting in ineffective government coordination. These flaws are compounded by the challenge of constructing updated, relevant, and reliable information systems for senior public service heads and supervisors in

<sup>1</sup> French Guiana, an overseas department of France, also fares well.

personnel management. As with the endurance of patronage practices, these human resources issues adversely affect the formulation, execution, and evaluation of public policy.

Faced with these shortcomings, the response of public management specialists and policy experts has been to suggest administrative reforms (e.g. Echebarría & Cortázar, 2007; Graham et al., 1999; Schneider & Heredia, 2003). In the 1990s, the dominant paradigm among these proposals was that of the New Public Management (NPM). However, since the 2000s, “post-NPM” reforms have emerged that stress horizontal coordination of government organizations, as well as coordination between the government and civil society (Echebarría & Cortázar, 2007; Panizza & Philip, 2005). Together, these strategies have found only mixed success, improving policy outcomes in some places (Arellano-Gault & Gil-García, 2004) yet generating significant problems in others (Narbondó & Ramos, 1999).

Explanations for the uneven success of these reforms has tended to focus on the bureaucracy. Grindle (2007) points out that due to variation in states’ administrative and political characteristics, universal standards for reform are unrealistic and successful alterations are unlikely to follow a one-size-fits-all recipe. Consequently, situationally determined responses may be more likely to improve governance and policy implementation. Others argue that Weberian reforms should precede NPM in those places with low administrative capacity, since probity and responsibility are more central to successful governance than efficiency and effectiveness (Peters, 2001; Ramió Matas, 2001). Likewise, technical reports and audits conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank tend to focus on legal and administrative shortcomings.

### The Politics-Administration Relationship

While these explanations may not be incorrect, they overlook the fact that effective governance is a function of both politics as well as administration. This is not a novel proposal. Scholars of the politics-administration relationship have repeatedly demonstrated that the Wilsonian dichotomy between the political and administrative state is, at a minimum, exaggerated (e.g. Demir, 2009; Meier, 2020; Miller, 1993; Svava, 1999; van Riper, 1984). On the contrary, the two worlds are inextricably intermixed. Goodnow (1900/2017), who is sometimes misinterpreted as advocating a separation of politics and administration, argued that effective governance required a symbiotic relationship between elected officials and public administrators in which both functions were required to be performed well. Likewise, scholars from the complementarity school have pointed out that the relationship between politics and administration can be depicted as a continuum that moves from politics toward management (Rutgers, 1997; Svava, 1999; van Riper, 1983).

The interdependence, reciprocity, and extensive interaction between elected officials and administrators help determine the size, nature, legitimacy, and workings of the administrative state. Krause (1999) shows how politicians and those responsible for implementing policy respond not only to each other, but also to events and conditions within each government institution as well as to the larger policy

environment. Changing political inputs, then, understandably alters administrative outcomes, with some political-institutional arrangements more likely to produce effective governance than others. In recognition of this, Meier (1997) suggested that bureaucracies can perform well or best when given clear goals, political support for these goals, adequate resources, and the autonomy to devise solutions based on expertise. The task for governments is to create or support political structures that foment those conditions.

As a result of the politicization of the bureaucracy, political institutions may be even more consequential for governance in places like Latin America than in advanced democracies. Practices such as a reliance on political patronage and clientelism led Wilson (1887) and others to advocate for a separation of politics and administration in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. While U.S. public administration has gained autonomy and neutral competence over time, many of those conditions persist throughout the developing world. One consequence is that the median public administrator in Latin America is more susceptible to political control and influence than the median bureaucrat in Western Europe, the United States and Canada, New Zealand and Australia, Japan, South Korea, and others.

Put another way, if political institutions matter for the administrative state and governance in places like the United States where administrators’ independence is generally high, it should be doubly important when that independence is low. To illustrate, [figure 2](#) borrows from Svava (2001) to characterize interactions between politicians and administrators given different levels of political control (the capacity to set direction and maintain oversight) and independence (adherence to professional norms in policy formation and implementation). Where administrative independence is elevated, as in many consolidated democracies, interactions range from that of “bureaucratic autonomy”, where bureaucrats advance agency interests at the expense of the public interest, to “complementarity”, where elected officials and administrators rely on reciprocal influence to work together. However, when administrative independence is low and political control is high, as tends to be the case in Latin America, it produces “political dominance” characterized by the potential for corruption and the loss of administrative competence (Svava, 2001, p. 179).

All of this is not to suggest that the Latin American public administration is blameless for weaknesses in the governance. On the contrary, “the colonial legacy, with a ritualistic adaptation of classic bureaucratic rules, in conjunction with patrimonialism and patronage, has always obstructed distinct efforts to modernize the public sector management” (Ramos & Milanese, 2021). However, it suggests that attempts to improve governance must look beyond exclusively changing managerial practices and consider political elements as well.

### The Governance Perils of Latin American Presidentialism

In a seminal and enormously influential essay, Juan Linz (1990) wrote about the “perils of presidentialism”. In it, Linz observed that most stable democracies in the world

**Figure 2. Interactions between Politicians and Administrators**

		Politicians' degree of control	
		High	Low
Administrators' independence	Low	Political dominance	Stalemate
	High	Complementarity	Bureaucratic autonomy

Source: Adapted from Svava (2001)

were parliamentary regimes and that the only presidential democracy with meaningful constitutional continuity was the United States. To explain this pattern, he argued that the institutional attributes of presidentialism, such as the competing claims of political legitimacy from the president and legislature, the rigidity of fixed terms, the winner-take-all nature of presidential politics, and a lack of incentives to form coalitions all contribute to democratic instability. While scholars have continued to tweak, update, and reiterate these central propositions (e.g. Hiroi & Omori, 2009; Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997), they remain pertinent to the discussion of democratic stability.

What Linz did not contemplate, however, is that some of these same institutional traits also adversely impact governance. Specifically, much of contemporary Latin America is a region whose politics is characterized by the following obstacles: 1) fixed presidential terms and chronic instability, 2) multipartyism and party system fragmentation, 3) weakly institutionalized political party systems dominated by non-programmatic parties, 4) overly strong presidents and reactive legislatures, 5) the plebiscitarian nature of presidentialism, and 6) delegative democracy and democratic backsliding, among others. All these characteristics undermine public policy in different ways. In the following subsections, I explore each of these six challenges, describing them and then explaining how and why they impact the public administration.

**Obstacle 1: Fixed terms and short time horizons**

Fixed terms for both presidents and legislatures mean that elected executives have short governing timeframes dictated by both their electoral cycle and the legislative electoral cycle. In combination with the winner-takes-all nature of presidentialism, presidents therefore enjoy a limited time horizon for policy making, as changes in presidencies are often associated with changes in policy priorities—or even presidents' attitudes toward the bureaucracy. Even when presidents enjoy clear congressional majorities, they must use precious political capital to pursue their key policy priorities before legislative midterm elections or the end of their own term. In Central America, for example, the dismissal of a significant number of public employees in state agencies following changes in political leadership is common practice, and the widespread absence of wage poli-

cies leads to compensation practices that are easy prey to cronyism (Echebarría & Cortázar, 2007).

The problem of mandate rigidity is compounded by Latin America's chronic political instability, which further shortens those time horizons and reduces the shadow of the future. Parliamentarism provides an institutional mechanism to remove ineffective or unpopular prime ministers or call for early elections while providing a degree of predictability and inter-temporal continuity from government to government. The same cannot be said of presidentialism. Instead, unpopular presidents must either muddle through their terms or face removal by recalcitrant legislatures, a restive citizenry, or the military, resulting in wholesale political changes. The fact that the region's public administration practices in a context of high political volatility means that it is held hostage to frequent policy, personnel, and managerial changes.

To provide of sense of this political unpredictability, [Table 1](#) lists the Latin American presidents between 1992 and 2020 who left office before the end of their constitutionally mandated terms.<sup>2</sup> Not including short-lived interim presidents, there are 21 leaders who exited office early due to impeachment, resignations due to political conflict or social protest, and military coups d'état, with multiple presidents failing to complete their terms in Peru (2000, 2018, and two in 2020), Bolivia (2003, 2005, 2019), Ecuador (1997, 2000, 2005), Argentina (two in 2001, 2003), Brazil (1992, 2016), Guatemala (1993, 2015), and Paraguay (1999, 2012). These changes in government leaders mean turnover in policy priorities as well as civil servants.

High rates of administrative turnover, in turn, can be highly detrimental to bureaucratic success. As Cornell (2014) explains, frequent bureaucratic turnover rates result in civil servants with less experience, lower institutional memory, and, mirroring politicians, shorter time horizons. Adding to this, politically appointed bureaucrats may exhibit a reluctance to engage in old projects. Even if turnover is not high, patronage-based political removals and appointments can be detrimental to policy implementation and regulation. To wit, many Latin American regulatory agencies were reformed in the 1990s to include fixed-term mandates, provisions to prevent the dismissal of staff because of regulatory decisions, and successive reappointment of board members to limit political influence on agency decisions. However, Jacint and Ramió Matas (2010)

<sup>2</sup> List does not include the Anglophone or Francophone Caribbean.

find a divergence between regulatory agency heads' mandates and their formally established fixed terms, affected by systematic early resignations.

## Obstacle 2: Multipartyism in combination with presidentialism

Multipartyism not only exacerbates the political perils of presidentialism (Mainwaring, 1993), but does the same for governance. Given party system fragmentation which ranges from moderate to extreme, presidents in Latin America's multiparty democracies rarely enjoy legislative majorities (Figueiredo et al., 2012). The region's party system fragmentation is demonstrated by the range in effective number of seat-earning parties in each of the 18 countries that held free elections from 1990 to 2019.<sup>3</sup> While some countries' party systems are clustered near two (e.g. Bolivia, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela), a majority contain three or more (e.g. Argentina, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Panama), several surpass four (e.g. Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru), and one country (Brazil) has more than 10 effective parties in elections after 2010.

This is problematic for governance in several ways. While the rules of parliamentarism provide for coalition and government formation under (moderate) multipartyism, presidentialism lacks a similar mechanism. Instead, presidents are forced to cobble together governing coalitions through the distribution of selective incentives ranging from cabinet appointments to particularistic benefits to political appointments (Chaisty et al., 2018). This is particularly acute in places with extreme fragmentation, such as Brazil, Ecuador, or Guatemala. As Praça et al. (2011) show in Brazil's case, rotation of political appointees to shore up government support among coalition partners weakens the bureaucracy and gives political justification to the persistence of patronage systems.

Excessive political involvement also poses threats to professionalism in the public sector. Reliance on political appointees may generate distrust among career civil servants, decreasing the reliability of information flow and policy implementation (Resh, 2015), while frequent changes in those appointees further weakens institutional memory (Cornell, 2014). Worse, given its political expediency, politicians may resist actions such as merit-based civil service reform since patronage systems offer politicians flexibility to achieve a wide variety of political and policy objectives. Given the political imperative, it is little surprise, then, that Latin American civil service systems tend to be substantially more politicized than those in Western European countries and more similar to the "in and out" system for the upper level of the U.S. federal administration (Peters et al., 2021).

**Table 1. Early Presidential Exit (1992-2020)**

Country	Year	President
Brazil	1992	Fernando Collor de Mello
Guatemala	1993	Jorge Serrano
Venezuela	1993	Carlos Andrés Pérez
Ecuador	1997	Abdalá Bucaram
Paraguay	1999	Raúl Cubas Grau
Ecuador	2000	Jamil Mahuad
Peru	2000	Alberto Fujimori
Argentina	2001	Fernando de la Rúa
Argentina	2001	Adolfo Rodríguez Saá
Argentina	2003	Eduardo Duhalde
Bolivia	2003	Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada
Bolivia	2005	Carlos Mesa
Ecuador	2005	Lucio Gutiérrez
Honduras	2009	Manuel Zelaya
Paraguay	2012	Fernando Lugo
Guatemala	2015	Otto Pérez Molina
Brazil	2016	Dilma Rousseff
Peru	2018	Pedro Pablo Kuczynski
Bolivia	2019	Evo Morales
Peru	2020	Martín Vizcarra
Peru	2020	Manuel Merino

Source: Author

## Obstacle 3: Non-programmatic parties and weakly institutionalized party systems

Beyond Linz's observations, the non-programmatic and weakly institutionalized nature of many Latin American political parties disincentivizes administrative reform, lowers efficiency, and impedes coordination. Most clearly, clientelist politicians resist reforms that restrict their patronage powers. O'Dwyer (2006) shows that patronage-based parties are linked to inefficiencies and larger numbers of administrative personnel. By contrast, electoral competition from programmatic parties contributes to state building and efficiency gains. Although his evidence comes from newly democratized nations in Eastern Europe, the same logic applies to Latin America. A second mechanism through which non-programmatic parties undermine public sector efficiency vis-à-vis programmatic ones is through weaker oversight of policy implementation, a consequence of voters' inability to draw ideological distinctions between parties and assign credit or blame. Using data from World Bank public sector reform loans across the globe, Cruz and Keefer (2015) demonstrate that such reforms are significantly less likely

<sup>3</sup> This is calculated using Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula of  $N = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2}$ , where  $n$  is the number of parties with at least one seat and  $p_i^2$  is the square of each party's proportion of all seats.

to succeed in the presence of non-programmatic political parties.

Unfortunately for the region's citizens, Latin America is characterized by weakly institutionalized political party systems and non-programmatic parties—organizations that essentially come together to contest elections and share the spoils of victory, but have neither ideological coherence or any long- or medium-term stability (Kitschelt et al., 2010; Mainwaring, 2018). Often, these parties are electoral vehicles for ambitious and charismatic leaders, and their fortunes follow that of the leader. In one of many instances of this in the region, Rafael Correa's *Alianza PAIS* was the largest vote-earning party in Ecuador during his 2007-2017 presidency yet disappeared in the 2021 elections as he switched party allegiances. Indeed, some Latin American party systems are so weakly rooted in society and volatile that Sánchez (2009) refers to them as “party non-systems”: party universes with a fundamental absence of inter-temporal continuity in the identity of the main parties, high extra-systemic volatility (persistently high transfers of votes away from the main parties towards new and small parties), and an ever-changing constellation of parties without a stable core. At the time of Sánchez's writing, systems in Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia all fit these characteristics. However, this is increasingly the situation across the region as party systems have broken down or collapsed in Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Chile, and El Salvador, while extreme multipartyism and a proliferation of non-programmatic parties remains the norm in other places.

#### **Obstacle 4: Strong presidents and reactive legislatures**

Another characteristic of Latin American presidentialism that undermines oversight of the public administration is the unbalanced separation-of-powers systems where presidents are strong to very strong and legislatures are generally weak to very weak (Morgenstern et al., 2013). This was purposeful: while the U.S. founders were more concerned with representation and therefore envisioned a balance of powers between the branches, Latin American constitutional framers were more concerned with efficiency and therefore endowed their presidents with greater formal powers (Alemán & Tsebelis, 2005). As a result, Latin American executives typically have greater powers of unilateral action than either U.S. presidents or European prime ministers. The region's “reactive” legislatures, meanwhile, often lack the resources and power to carry out their own policy agenda and are restricted to amending and vetoing executive proposals (Cox & Morgenstern, 2001).

This executive-legislative imbalance is one reason Guillermo O'Donnell characterized many Latin American democracies as “delegative democracies”. Echoing Linz's warning of winner-take-all or zero sum nature of presidential politics (Linz, 1990, p. 55-58), O'Donnell noted the tendency that in Latin America, “whoever wins election to the presidency is... entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office” (O'Donnell, 1994, p. 59). Powerful presidents face few legal and con-

stitutional constraints to execute their policies and often considered institutions as hindrances. Among other things, this precludes the development and strengthening of an autonomous and professional bureaucracy.

Unbalanced power mitigates the “multiple principals, one agent” problem (Gailmard, 2009), but severely weakens administrative oversight. Specifically, although executives both in the United States and Latin America have incentives to politicize the bureaucracy, Latin American legislatures are less able to exercise constraint (Negri, 2021). Instead, legislative oversight tends to be informal. Siavelis (2000) highlights four non-codified mechanisms in Chile by which constitutionally limited political actors can exercise control over the state's administrative apparatus. Similarly, Ferraro (2008) describes four informal means of congressional influence over the bureaucracy in the same country. Lastly, Arana Araya (2013) builds on both aforementioned works by explaining how congress is able to use *protocolos*—agreements signed between the legislature and the executive during Chilean budgetary negotiations—to exercise greater influence over the bureaucracy than the one granted by the constitution. Notably, though, all three of these examples come from the same country.

Lastly, Latin American legislatures are not just weaker, but often less professional than their U.S. counterpart, further negatively impacting governance. Careerism is far less common than in the United States and legislators' main intent is to advance their political careers elsewhere (Samuels, 2003). Re-election rates may range from 10% (Ecuador) to only 50-60% (Chile, Uruguay). One result of the low professionalism and short tenures of these “amateur legislators” (Jones et al., 2002) is that they may not be concerned about placing future burdens upon bureaucratic capacity. The combination of indifferent legislators and scarce resources gives assemblies few incentives to involve themselves in matters of bureaucratic performance: rewards for strengthening the legislature's role as the bureaucracy's principal will arrive late, which is useless for the lawmakers' immediate electoral interests. The data bear out these expectations. Negri (2021) shows a positive and statistically significant link between a battery of Latin American legislative indicators (legislator experience, committees per legislator, committee strength, career development, congressional technical capacity) and bureaucratic development. This lends support to the claim that there is a causal connection between the institutional strength of the legislative assembly and the overall development and performance of the bureaucracy.

#### **Obstacle 5: Plebiscitarian nature of presidentialism**

Linz also pointed out that the style of presidential politics that results from zero-sum elections and a head of government whose survival is separate from that of the legislature can imperil democracy (Linz, 1990, p. 60-62). He argued that winner-takes-all elections generate a sense of plebiscitarian legitimacy, where a president may acquire a sense of being the only elected representative of the popular will and may conflate his supporters with “the people” as a whole. This identification of a leader with the people fos-

ters a populism which, among other things, may bring on a refusal to acknowledge the limits of the mandate. Further, this plebiscitarian tendency of the presidency also affects the public administration.

Peters and Pierre (2020) identify several expectations about governance in a regime dominated by populist parties: loss of expertise in governing, politicization of governing, and centralization of power. With regards to the first point, oftentimes as outsiders, populists lack the expertise to design policies or to implement the policies. Rather, in broad strokes they seek to disrupt the status quo. Populists may also be distrustful of bureaucrats and expertise and eschew policy guidance from civil servants. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's initial policy reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrate this: much like U.S. president Donald Trump, they discredited social distancing, rejected mask wearing, and even promoted super spreader events, ignoring policy recommendations from their health ministers and scientific advisors.

Second, populists politicize the public administration under the assumption that the civil servants in place consist of officials of the old, corrupt system which cannot be trusted or must otherwise be replaced (Bauer & Becker, 2020). For instance, during his time in power, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez created alternative structures to implement policy due to his distrust of career bureaucrats (Brewer-Carías, 2011). One strategy was to bypass established administrative channels in favor of delegating policy implementation to actors like the armed forces whom the president considered to be more ideologically aligned. This began upon taking office in 1999 with the "Plan Bolívar 2000" national development project and continued with the antipoverty distributions and relief efforts that were a part of the government's so-called social missions. In another strategy, the government sought to circumvent elected opposition governors and mayors through the creation of parallel state and municipal level "protectors" that administered their own budgets. What is more, the government also bypassed bureaucrats by devolving a limited amount of policymaking power to grassroots organizations.

Third, populists like to centralize power, structure, and resources. Bauer and Becker (2020) argue that the modus operandi for incoming populist governments is to centralize administrative structures by reducing autonomy in vertically and horizontally differentiated systems. In a series of steps, these governments then reconfigure power to grant the chief executive total authority over the bureaucracy and silenced external pressures. The authors note that in the places they studied, centralization was aimed not only at better administrative control but also at the elimination of internal dissent. Similarly, the reallocation of resources was meant to starve out deviant agencies. The goal was not to professionalize civil servants but to abolish norms of bureaucratic neutrality and guarantee obedience. In short, populist politics can undermine bureaucratic structures, administrative resources, personnel, civil service norms, and accountability, which is troubling for a region so prone to electing populists (de la Torre, 2010; Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016).

## Obstacle 6: Democratic backsliding and authoritarianism

A final political impediment to governance in Latin America is the region's recent democratic backsliding and, in some places, a return to authoritarianism. A longstanding debate in the comparative public administration literature examines whether regime type has an impact on the bureaucracy's policy-making role, its accountability to the public, and the character of its professional norms (e.g. Heady, 1966; Heper et al., 1980; Riggs, 1963). One line of thinking holds that authoritarian leaders are good for governance. Centralized decision making may solve some problems associated with presidentialism, such as a tendency toward short-term policymaking, the competing principals dilemma, and weak oversight. However, there are more reasons to believe that authoritarianism detracts from good governance—even in places like East Asia's "developmental dictatorships" (Thompson, 2004).

Authoritarians are less tolerant of bureaucratic dissent than democrats and they are more effective at politicizing the bureaucracy, which undermines expertise at the expense of loyalty/ideology. The well-recognized tradeoff between control and expertise in delegation from a political principal to a bureaucratic agent (e.g. Bendor et al., 2001) helps to explain this. Under democracy, bureaucratic leadership is based on following normative rules in management and decision making and adhering to lines of authority. Under autocracy, however, the leader makes all decisions and exerts a high level of control over the subordinates, potentially sacrificing expertise to maximize loyalty.

Venezuela under the populist authoritarians Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro provides an example. Since the early 2000s, the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela has exercised nearly absolute control over public policy decisions and implementation, giving little autonomy to civil servants regardless of their political stripe. In fact, today, the bureaucracy is little more than an extension of the ruling party and ruling ideology. The installation of loyalists at all levels of the civil service as well as tightened control over policymaking and implementation reflect a desire to realize a controversial socialist and "Bolivarian" policy platform in the face of fierce resistance as well as a growing authoritarianism that was intolerant of dissenting voices (Brewer-Carías, 2010). The public administration has suffered: using the "government effectiveness" scores from the World Governance Indicators database, Venezuela has fallen constantly since 2000, ranking tenth lowest of 214 countries globally in 2019.

Authoritarians may also simply care less about the public good than democrats, undermining public policy effectiveness. In their cross-national analysis, Huber, Mustillo, and Stephens (2008) find that Latin American democracies make higher investments in social security and welfare as well as health and education. This assumption is also at the heart of Dixit's (2010) formal model of associative matching between regime type and bureaucrats. Taking for granted that autocrats care less about the welfare of their states than democrats, the model suggests that social welfare maximizing governments selectively hire concerned bureaucrats while kleptocratic governments hire selfish ones.

Other empirical evidence from Latin America supports the link between regime type and governance. Figures 3 and 4 plot the scores for Government Effectiveness and Regulatory Quality, respectively, from the World Bank’s World Governance Indicators database, against the Liberal Democracy Index from the Varieties of Democracy project, for 19 Latin American countries in the most recent available years.<sup>4</sup> Overlaid on both graphs is a best-fit linear regression line. As the scatterplots and lines illustrate, there is a positive relationship between democracy and each governance indicator: as level of democracy increases, so do bureaucratic effectiveness and regulatory quality. Grouped together in the lower left of the scatterplots are authoritarian Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, none of which are renowned for their bureaucratic responsiveness or regulatory quality, while clustered in the upper right are democratic Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica, all of which enjoy much better reputations for public administration. There certainly may be other underlying factors driving both regime type and bureaucratic quality, but these data are nonetheless illustrative.

In a region with a long history of authoritarian interruptions—and which presently counts Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua as dictatorships—this relationship bodes poorly. What is more, this “Latin American problem” is a global problem, too, as the world suffers a third wave of autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

### Governance pathologies of Latin American presidentialism

Latin America’s political institutional traits have predictable and overlapping consequences for the public administration. Meier (1997) asserted that bureaucracies are optimal policy tools, but that political institutions can undermine them when they fail to provide the bureaucracy with clear policy goals, when they do not allocate adequate resources to deal with the scope of the problems, and when they do not allow the bureaucracy sufficient implementation autonomy. That is precisely the case with the six political institutional obstacles identified here.

In many contexts, multiple political principals can create dueling or contradictory imperatives for the bureaucracy. However, with weak legislatures, this is not generally the case for Latin American states. Instead, it is the short policy time horizons created by fixed terms and political turbulence and uncertainty which result in volatile bureaucratic goals and budgets. This is a well-recognized phenomenon. A report from the Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies warns that political instability and a lack of long-term planning has limited the capacity of some Central American states to implement effective public policies. The

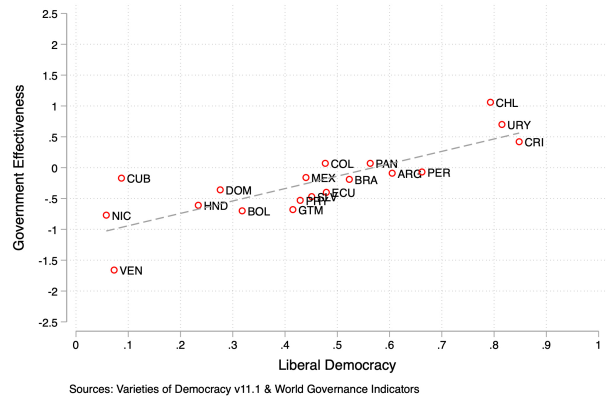


Figure 3. Liberal Democracy and Government Effectiveness (2019)

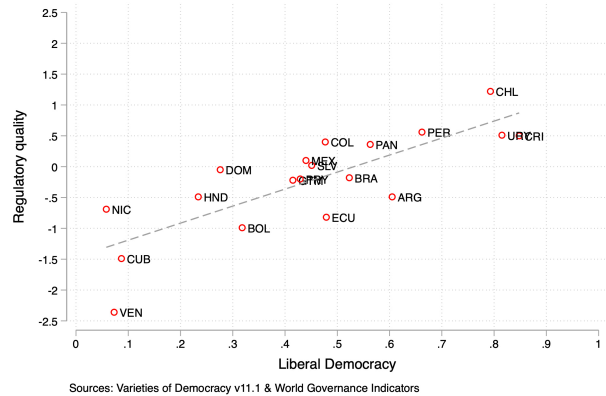


Figure 4. Liberal Democracy and Regulatory Quality (2019)

study highlighted the cases of Costa Rica and Honduras—both of which had tried to reduce the fiscal deficit—while in Nicaragua the reduction stems from the ongoing political instability (Medina Bermejo, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

Multipartyism in combination with presidentialism can exacerbate problems with inadequate bureaucratic resources. Scarce resources are a common theme in the region. Democratic regimes across Latin America often fail to provide sufficient resources to public agencies in domains, including anti-poverty policies (Repetto, 2000), public health (Moloney, 2009), science and technology and research and development (Ciocca & Delgado, 2017)<sup>6</sup>, and even cultural preservation. As an example of the latter, in September 2018, a fire destroyed most of the 20 million

4 This is the most recent year in which data was available from both sources. Government Effectiveness captures “perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation” while Regulatory Quality captures “perceptions of the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development” (Kaufmann et al., 2010).

5 The study also found that the region lacks appropriate systems of planning such as evaluations of the cost/benefit of public policy decisions.



items at Brazil's National Museum, a tragedy that may have been preventable if not for years of underfunding (BBC, 2018). This is certainly an economic problem, but it is also a question of political priorities. Presidents and other politicians in the region have long deployed public expenditures as a tool of political survival under multipartyism, using the budget to reward or penalize different groups and regions—and therefore impeding the ability the public administration to get things done.

Last, the politicization arising from multiparty presidentialism, weakly institutionalized parties and party systems, strong presidents and reactive legislatures, a tendency towards populism and democratic backsliding all detract from bureaucratic autonomy. Political appointments as a tool to forge support among coalition partners ties those bureaucrats to partner parties. Similarly, when presidents are strong and the other branches of government are weak, presidents can act with fewer constraints and more easily politicize the governing apparatus. This tendency grows if that president reflects populist or authoritarian tendencies. Under those circumstances, the more likely the president is to want to centralize power, resources, and governing structures, and the less likely s/he will be to tolerate bureaucratic autonomy and potential dissent.

### Political Obstacles in Action: Regional Responses to Covid-19

Latin America's collective response to the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates many of the political weaknesses highlighted here. Despite quick pandemic lockdowns and effective deployment of vaccines in places like Chile and Uruguay, Latin America has the ignominy of the World Health Organization calling it the world's epicenter of COVID-19, accounting for 35 percent of all coronavirus deaths in the world by early 2021, despite having just 8 percent of the global population (Turkewitz & Taj, 2021). In fact, as of July 15, 2021, Peru had suffered the world's highest mortality rates (5.8 per 100,000), Brazil, Mexico, and Peru ranked second, fourth, and fifth globally in total number of deaths, and the region accounted more than 1.3 million losses, despite accusations of government undercounting (Ritchie et al., 2021). The region has reeled from overburdened health systems, deteriorating economic conditions, and policy volatility.

Political problems rooted in the region's institutions have directly interfered with and hampered bureaucratic responsiveness. Pandemic reactions in much of the region were dependent on politicians, especially presidents, who were driven by a combination of politics and ideology, and less dependent on the technocrats and health officials who were guided by maximizing public health outcomes. Between 2020 and 2021, Human Rights Watch criticized sev-

eral Latin American presidents for a litany of faults, including: contradicting public health advice, discouraging social distancing, telling citizens to ignore stay-at-home orders, insisting that masks were not essential, limiting Covid-19 tests, promoting unproven and potentially dangerous remedies like hydroxychloroquine, and underplaying the seriousness of the pandemic (Vivanco, 2021). Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) were two of the worst perpetrators of Covid denialism who hurt the ability of public health officials to convince citizens to take steps to mitigate the virus's risk.

Throughout the region, populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies politicized the virus response with the help of a compliant legislative majority (Mexico, Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador) or in the face of a splintered legislative minority which could do little to dictate policy or mitigate the impact of presidential declarations (Brazil).<sup>7</sup> After the pandemic outbreak, the populist and semi-authoritarian AMLO continued to hold mask-less political rallies and kiss supporters despite public health declarations to the contrary, and in the midst of a coronavirus surge in his country he requested that Mexicans go out shopping to prop up the country's sputtering economy (Ibarra-Nava et al., 2020). The president had already hobbled the public health response by pushing wage reductions in the public sector and politicizing the civil service; this caused the resignation of top career civil servants and led U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Roberta Jacobson to assert that AMLO had "gutted the technocratic capabilities of the public sector" after arriving in office (Ward, 2020). As a result, there was little pushback to the president's policy positions from such a captured public service.

The politicization of the public administration, short policy time horizons, and few executive constraints permitted a similarly disastrous response by Bolsonaro in Brazil. There is no better illustration than the fact that four different Ministers of Health served from March 2020 to March 2021. The first, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, a pediatric orthopedist by training, was fired on April 16, 2020, after promoting social distancing measures and discouraging use of hydroxychloroquine as a virus cure, directly contradicting the president on those subjects. The second, oncologist Nelson Teich, was forced to defend a nationwide virus testing plan and resisted Bolsonaro's endorsement of hydroxychloroquine and lasted less than a month in office. The appointment of his successor, Eduardo Pazuello, demonstrates the allure of loyalty over expertise for authoritarians and populists: far from being a doctor, epidemiologist, or infectious disease specialist, he was an active-duty army general—Bolsonaro served in the army and enjoyed great support from officers—with expertise in logistics who had landed the position without any prior health experience.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank data show that all Latin American countries except Brazil spend less than one percent of their GDP on research and development, while developed countries spend about 2.4% of their GDP on research and development activities.

<sup>7</sup> Even leaders in Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina who responded more responsibly to the pandemic threat contradicted public health officials at times by refusing to mandate lockdowns or bringing their countries out of lockdowns (Parks, 2021).

The fourth minister, Marcelo Queiroga, had been a doctor, but upon his appointment, he failed to assert any autonomy from the president, stating that his Covid-19 policy would be “of the Bolsonaro administration, not of the health minister” (“Brazil Names New Health Minister as Covid Deaths Hit New Record,” 2021). The ministerial revolving door reflects the politicization of the bureaucracy, its lack of autonomy, weak political-bureaucratic coordination, few legislative constraints of the executive, and the dangers of centralized presidential authority. It also effectively illustrates the challenges of implementing effective measures to control Covid-19’s spread in Brazil—and even of politicians and bureaucrats agreeing which measures were necessary.

### More Comprehensive Ways to Reform Governance

In the face of poorly performing bureaucracies, many public management specialists and policy experts have been quick to suggest administrative reforms. Yet as scholars have long argued, governance lies at the nexus of politics and administration, and reforms limited to the administrative dimension require concomitant political changes. Moreover, as this essay highlights, certain political-institutional arrangements or institutional traits are more likely to produce effective governance than others. In the case of contemporary Latin America, presidentialism creates several “perils” for governance in the same ways Juan Linz argued that it created perils for democratic consolidation and survival. Some of these obstacles include fixed terms for the executive and legislature, and presidentialism’s plebiscitarian nature; party system fragmentation, weakly institutionalized party systems, and the proliferation of non-programmatic parties; an imbalance of power between strong presidents and weak legislatures; and democratic backsliding. These characteristics or tendencies lead to problems like short policy horizons, bureaucratic politicization, and a loss of bureaucratic autonomy.

Logically, then, governance reform means findings polit-

ical solutions to region-specific problems rooted in institutions as well as political pathologies. It is unreasonable to suggest or expect states to abandon their political systems (i.e., substitute parliamentarism for presidentialism). However, there are other reforms or changes that could blunt some of the worst tendencies or incentives of presidentialism. For instance, more balanced separation-of-powers systems would help Latin American legislatures better constrain executives and hold them accountable. However, most importantly, one major imperative is to encourage limits on patronage appointments to mitigate short-term policymaking, disruptive bureaucratic turnover, and unclear or contradictory policy objectives.

Similarly, changes to reduce limit party system fragmentation would help dull another deleterious aspect of presidentialism. Such things include measures to strengthen programmatic political parties and to encourage electoral reforms that would restrict the proliferation of parties via such mechanisms as lowering district magnitude and imposing higher thresholds for parties to earn legislative seats. Reinforcing the programmatic nature of parties and tweaking electoral rules could also help prevent the rise of outsider candidates and limit their ability to win office. And instead of administrative reforms based on new public management platforms, it may be more helpful to reinforce the legislature’s connection to the bureaucracy.

Latin American style presidentialism does not doom the region to weak governance any more than it precludes democracy. Nonetheless, many states in the region continue to exhibit low state capacity and weak governance, despite decades of administrative reform. Of course, if political institutions matter for the administrative state and governance, then it is imperative that ambitious reformers and policy makers also consider political reforms to improve bureaucratic performance and prioritize reforms that are coordinated across both realms.

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## Appendix

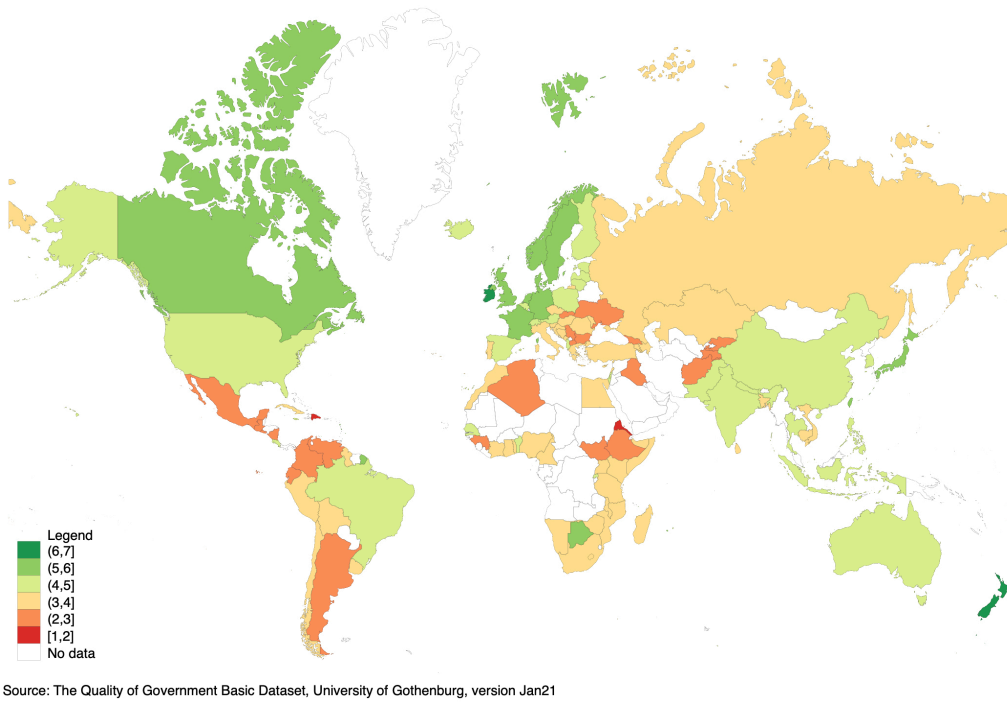


Figure A1. Administrative Professionalism

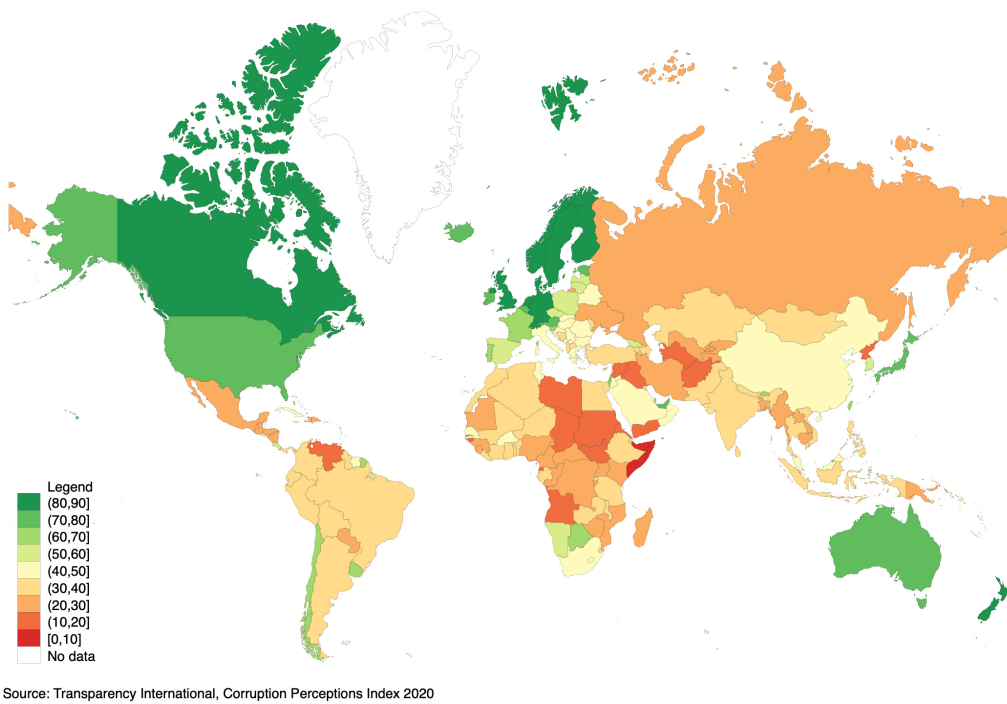


Figure A2. Corruption Perceptions Index (2020)