

## INTRODUCTION

# RETHINKING LATIN AMERICA'S LEFT TURN

Beginning with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, a wave of leftist governments—the so-called pink tide or left turn—spread across Latin America. In addition to Venezuela, left-of-center governments emerged in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay. The pervasiveness of this left turn meant that by 2011 two-thirds of the region's population was governed by some form of leftist national government (Roberts 2014, 3). In one way or another these new leftist governments rose to power by channeling the public's mounting dissatisfaction with the economic insecurities and inequities wrought by the market liberalization of the preceding two decades. They shared a professed commitment to reducing social and economic inequalities, overcoming the exclusion of historically marginalized groups, and expanding popular participation in the democratic process.

Despite their shared commitments, considerable ideological and policy differences divided these leftist governments, leading some scholars to group them into two distinct camps, the so-

called wrong, contestatory, or radical left and the right, moderate, or social democratic left (Casteñeda 2006; Casteñeda and Morales 2008; Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter 2010; Weyland 2013). According to this conceptualization, the moderate left, epitomized by center-left coalition governments in Chile (Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia) and Uruguay (Frente Amplio), aspired to achieve greater equity and inclusion within the parameters of liberal democratic institutions and the global market economy. In contrast, radical leftist regimes, epitomized by the Chávez regime in Venezuela and the regime of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, rejected neoliberalism and liberal democracy in favor of twenty-first-century socialism and participatory democracy. While the proponents of this typology criticized these “radical” leftist regimes for their alleged populist assaults on liberal democracy, other scholars characterized them as new forms of popular democracy, which would overcome liberal democracy’s profound elitism and make government more responsive to, if not directly controlled by, the marginalized masses (Ellner 2011, 2012; Buxton 2011; Smilde 2011; Ramírez Gallegos and Stoessel 2018). Intense debates ensued among scholars and activists regarding the authenticity, viability, and efficacy of these competing versions of Latin American leftism. Yet underlying this contention was the hope that the left, whether radical or moderate, could finally address Latin America’s age-old problems of inequality and exclusion.

Recent events belie this hope and challenge the validity of both the “two lefts” and “popular democracy” conceptualizations. For example, the experience of Ecuador and Venezuela with “twenty-first-century socialism” contradicts in dramatic fashion the predictions of the proponents of popular democracy. In Venezuela the Chávez, now Maduro, regime has become increasingly authoritarian, repressive, and corrupt. It has overseen the collapse of Venezuela’s economy and social safety net and bears little resemblance to the participatory democracy of the twenty-first-century socialism it continues to extol in its rhetoric and party propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

In Ecuador former president Rafael Correa was convicted of corruption in absentia in 2018 and sentenced to eight years in prison. Subsequently Alianza PAÍS, the political party he created to pursue his political ambitions, imploded; its presidential candidate in the 2021 election, Ximena Peña, received only 1.54 percent of

the vote. That election was won by former banker and right-wing candidate Guillermo Lasso, whose victory established the first right-wing government in Ecuador since the late 1990s. The 2023 election, precipitated by President Lasso's impeachment, produced a similar result: right-wing businessman Daniel Noboa defeated Correa protégé Luisa González.

In Chile, the poster child for the virtues of the moderate left, the contradictions between expectation and reality, while not as extreme as the failures of the radical leftist regimes, have been striking nonetheless. Massive nationwide protests erupted in October 2019 and continued for months, reflecting the public's outrage at the political establishment's failure to address the nation's persistently high levels of inequality. Ultimately the protesters forced a plebiscite whose success authorized rewriting the Pinochet-era Constitution, which they argued impeded the establishment of a more participatory and equitable Chilean democracy. The Concertación, the center-left coalition of parties that seemed invincible during its two consecutive decades in power (1990–2010) and that had supported the preservation of the Pinochet Constitution for most of its existence, is now defunct. The public rejected the constitution drafted predominantly by leftist outsiders. While Gabriel Boric, former left-wing student activist and congressional deputy, won the 2021 presidential election with 55.87 percent of the vote against right-wing candidate Antonio Kast, his approval rating has languished at around 30 percent, and the Chilean left on the whole is fragmented and electorally diminished. Early polling for the November 16, 2025, election identifies Evelyn Matthei, former right-wing senator and minister of labor and social welfare under President Sebastián Piñera, as the clear front-runner (Harrison, Robertson, and Gerbaud 2025).

In Uruguay the Frente Amplio (FA) coalition was defeated in the 2019 elections, losing the presidency and its majorities in the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate after fifteen years in power. However, in contrast to the Chilean left, the FA has remained popular and united, enabling it to return to power in 2025, with its candidate, Yamandu Orsi, winning the 2024 presidential election over his conservative rival by a comfortable margin, 49.81 percent to 45.90 percent (Elliott and Morland 2024).

What then explains the abject failure of the leftist projects in

Venezuela and Ecuador, the implosion of Chile's center-left coalition, and the persistent strength and cohesion of Uruguay's FA? This book addresses these questions. In the process it identifies the shortcomings in the conceptualizations prior scholarship employed to understand Latin America's left turn and develops an alternative framework for assessing putatively democratic leftist regimes, past, present, and future. It accomplishes these interrelated goals by examining two sets of paired comparisons of paradigmatic cases: Ecuador and Venezuela (contestatory/radical leftist regimes) and Chile and Uruguay (moderate leftist/social democratic regimes).

The significant commonalities shared by each set of cases and the prominent differences between their distinct types make these excellent comparative case studies through which to better understand Latin America's left turn. The Ecuadoran and Venezuelan left turns were characterized by profound institutional divergence from the status quo ante. In each case new left populist parties carried out substantial regime change—including greatly increased executive authority, and rentierist and neoextractivist development policies—which populist leaders legitimized as an expression of popular sovereignty and which precipitated substantial societal polarization. In contrast, the left turns in Chile and Uruguay were characterized by institutional continuity and moderation. They were led by established parties of the left that accepted the existing institutional order and moderated their earlier revolutionary and socialist aspirations in order to avoid political polarization and prevent economic instability. Through assessment of these paired comparisons, this analysis allows us to critique prevailing understandings of Latin America's left turn and to envision what authentic leftist governance in Latin America would look like.

### THE CHÁVEZ AND CORREA REGIMES

The first half of the book examines the Chávez regime in Venezuela and the Correa regime in Ecuador, cases that both the two lefts and popular democracy literatures identify as prime examples of contestatory or radical leftism. Each of these regimes defined twenty-first-century socialism in terms of participatory democracy. Yet, as this analysis demonstrates, they each adopted institutional structures and modes of governing that stymied