

Is latin america a more democratic place today than it was in 1945

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Is Latin America a more democratic place today than it was in 1945? Given the word and time restrictions, an in depth analysis of each Latin American country's democratic progression across the time period would simply not be feasible. Instead I will attempt to look at Latin America's progression as a whole and will provide examples of specific countries situations where relevant, in particular Venezuela. Firstly it is important to distinguish between two ideas. One is democracy. For democracy to work, there must be free and fair elections.

There must be more than one political party. The people of the country should have a good education so that they can make informed choices. They should share a common culture. All must accept the idea that everyone has equal rights. Finally, there must be rule by law, not by power. In other words there must be a separation of power, which means that the judiciary has to be a completely different body from the governing power of the country. Many nations in Latin America have had difficulty achieving democracy because all these factors are not present.

The second idea is that of democratic culture. This involves the existence of constitutions, respect for rights, transparency when it comes to policies and governmental decisions and crucially, no corruption. Latin America, when viewed as a whole, is generally viewed as a more democratic place now than in 1945 but it would be wrong to assert that during the past 68 years Latin American countries have undergone a steady increase in democracy. Brazil is a prime example of a country that has gone through fluctuations in democracy throughout the period.

Currently in Latin America, despite being in a state of relative poverty when compared to the rest of the world, the majority of countries have become, at least formally, electoral democracies. 13 countries are now classed as free, 8 as partially free, with only Cuba and Haiti being deemed as not. Venezuela, following the recent passing of Hugo Chavez, is at a crossroads on its journey to democracy. However many question how democratic a ruler Chavez actually was in his time as president. One of two very important relationships to analyse is that of democracy and the level of development in a country or in this case Latin America.

This leads on to what is one of the most stable relationships in social sciences, the positive correlation between high levels of wealth and established democracy (Lipset 1959). To back this statistic up, a democratic regime has never fallen after a country has reached a certain level of income per capita, which is said to be \$6055 (Przeworski 2000). In 1945 Latin America was still recovering from the economic shockwaves caused by the great depression of 1930. This global economic crisis meant that the rest of the world was not demanding any imports from Latin America.

At the time these would have been mainly raw materials and this lack of export revenue for the South American countries had a detrimental effect on their situations in the majority of cases. During the decade or so after the great depression, around 1945, the effects will have trickled down and income per capita and GDP levels will have been significantly reduced. This will in turn have destabilised democracy attempts and can be viewed as a reason for why Latin America was less democratic then than it is now.

Without the economic and financial means it is very difficult to achieve a fully functioning democracy.

Of course it is worth pointing out that we are nearing the end of a fairly gruelling global economic downturn today but the consequences for Latin America are far less in this instance. The economic growth in Latin America has been very modest throughout the 68 years in question but more importantly it has been volatile. Periods of prosperity in several countries have been followed by long periods of stagnation and even negative growth. This volatility can be seen in Latin American countries progression since independence in terms of democracy as well.

Take Brazil as an example. The country became independent in 1822 and was ruled by a monarchy. In 1930 this monarchy was overthrown and the country was under a dictatorship for a couple of decades. In 1956 an elected leader was installed only to be replaced by military rule 10 years later. Finally in the 1980's, as a result of yet another economic decline, Brazil was yet again ruled by an elected president. The other significant relationship that needs to be looked at is that of democracy and corruption.

Corruption is usually defined as a violation of the norms of public office for personal gain (Nye 1967). It has been suggested that corruption permeates everyday life in Latin America with only very high profile cases ever being unveiled in a court of law and even then this only happens in the more democratic countries (Blake and Morris 2009). Here are a few statistics to back this assertion up. In a 2004 survey 42 % of respondents ranked the probability of paying a bribe to the police as high, while 35% expressed the same ease of bribing a judge (Blake and Morris 2009).

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In a 2005 survey, 43% of respondents in Paraguay and 31% in Mexico admitted to having paid a bribe just within the past twelve months (Blake and Morris 2009). Democracy has a complex and multifaceted relationship to corruption (Doig and Theobald 2000). It provides alternative avenues to obtain and then use power and wealth. This leads to brand new opportunities for corruption. However despite the fact that democracy makes it easier for corruption to exist, when there is a democracy it becomes of even greater importance to suppress corruption as it strikes at the very meaning of democracy itself.

To sum this idea up, corruption undermines the essence of citizenship, distorting and crippling democracy (Blake and Morris 2009). It is clear from the statistics in the previous paragraph that corruption continues in today's Latin America to have a tight grip over many if not all of its countries. Therefore it is very difficult to say that democracy has come on in leaps and bounds since 1945 when as crucial a factor as corruption is still such a plague to the region. Another factor when looking at democracy in the continent is the level of education.

People must be aware of the fact that there is more than one option in a democracy. It is also crucial that the population of a country understands the concept of propaganda. A democracy can only work in a country with a certain level of education otherwise it can easily be classed as brainwashing, especially with the level of influence that the media can have over an ill-educated population. An example of what a lack of education can do in a democracy is that during the elections in which Chavez was voted in, he very

nearly missed out on the appointment because his main rival was a former Miss Venezuela.

The implication of this is that a worrying amount of the Venezuelan public didn't vote for Chavez because there was a far better looking female alternative. Of course this could just be cynicism and she may well have had a very impressive manifesto and realistic yet progressive goals. During Chavez' time in power though, he managed to substantially increase literacy along with reducing poverty by over half. Chavez had many positive effects on Venezuela, not least providing them with 14 years of stable rule. However his recent death has thrown the country off its feet and they are at risk of descending into political turmoil.

Further examples of why Latin America was less democratic in 1945 include the fact that leading South American countries such as Columbia and Argentina had still not given women the right to vote. Universal suffrage is something that can be found in certain definitions of democracy for example Dahl's and was definitely holding those countries back at that stage in their bid for democracy (Dahl 1971). To conclude, it is safe to say that Latin American countries are in a better overall place than in 1945 but that corruption in particular is holding them back.

A country needs to be not only ready for democracy but also willing to accept it. It can definitely be argued that not all Latin American countries are ready for democracy but one final point may indicate that they are nearing acceptance of it. This is that something the Latin Americans care greatly about is their national identity, an idea that is very closely linked to democracy. Therefore with the rapid increase in globalisation endangering <https://assignbuster.com/is-latin-america-a-more-democratic-place-today-than-it-was-in-1945/>

this coveted national identity, South American countries are rapidly warming to the idea of being democratic. Bibliography: Charles H. Blake & Stephen D. Morris (1999), *Corruption and Democracy in Latin America*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. * R. A. Dahl (1971), *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, published by Yale University Press. * Alan Doig and Robin Theobald (2000), *Corruption and Democratization*. * S. M. Lipset (1959), *Some Social Requisites of Democracy, Economic Development and Political Illegitimacy*. * A. Przeworski (2000), *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-being in the World 1950-1990*, Cambridge University Press.