

LATIN AMERICA AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Political models and the search for authority

One of the most pressing and also most enduring problems that leaders of Latin American nations faced in the decades after independence was establishing the legitimacy of their new [governments](#). In this regard the break with the colonial system proved traumatic. In Iberian political traditions, power and authority resided to a great extent in the figure of the [monarch](#). Only the monarch had the ability to dominate the church, the military, and other powerful corporate groups in Iberian and colonial Latin American societies. Representative government and the concept of popular sovereignty, as a corollary, had a weak presence in Iberian political culture. With the Spanish king removed—and with him the ultimate source of political legitimacy—Creole elites had to find new foundations on which to construct systems of governance that their compatriots would accept and respect.

Although in practice they were unable to abandon the legacies of three centuries of Iberian colonial rule, leaders in Latin America turned generally to other political traditions for solutions to the problem of legitimacy. Adapting models from northern Europe and the United States, they set up republics across the region. Doing so not only helped justify their separation from Spain but also enabled Latin American elites to try to follow the example of countries they most admired, particularly Great Britain, the United States, and France. Many in the upper classes of Latin American societies identified political institutions as sources of the economic progress those countries were enjoying. At the same time, efforts to implement those political systems in Latin America brought to the region's new countries Enlightenment conceptions of

politics based on rationality and a vision of politics as an interaction of individuals who enjoyed specific, definable rights and duties.

Constitutions

Particularly in the first, heady years of independence, elites throughout Latin America exhibited the influence of the [Enlightenment](#) in their propensity for producing constitutions. Those documents demonstrated not only attempts to impose rational plans on new nations but also the changing attitudes of elites toward their societies.

The earliest constitutions appeared in Venezuela, Chile, and New Granada in the years 1811–12. The authors of those founding documents rather optimistically intended to create representative government in independent Latin America and to declare inalienable natural rights of liberty, security, property, and equality. To implement those ideas, these constitutions set up a division of power in which the executive was comparatively weak.

From the mid-1810s to mid-century the overwhelming tendency was to move away from those early schemes. With different regions and elite factions battling against each other, the first liberal constitutional governments had failed. Now leaders in the region sought to erect stronger and more highly [centralized](#) states, again carefully laying out their programs in constitutions. This shift was not a rejection of foreign models. On the contrary, this change followed the evolution of European political thought; Latin American elites were now basing their ideas on different foreign theories, turning away from those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and toward those of more conservative thinkers like Montesquieu and Jeremy Bentham. At the same

time, the movement toward stronger executives and more centralized states reflected specific circumstances of these emerging new nations. At first, elites wanted a more powerful state to complete the victory over Spain and then to gain recognition from a Europe by this time dominated by anti-republican attitudes. As political order proved difficult to achieve, many Latin American leaders also looked to a more centralized state as an instrument against political and civil unrest.

Hopes for a new and stronger government only rarely centred on the idea of monarchy. Leaders in Argentina and Chile discussed the possibility of introducing a constitutional monarchy with a European king at its head. Mexico had emperors, first with Iturbide and then in 1864–67 with the Austrian emperor Francis Joseph's brother Maximilian, and Brazil enjoyed relative stability in a constitutional monarchy that lasted from independence until 1889. Still, such initiatives were temporary and exceptional. Latin Americans encountered a great deal of difficulty in finding suitable European princes to rule their countries. Local figures, furthermore, lacked the necessary authority to be accepted as monarchs. Thus, for practical as well as ideological reasons, [republics](#) were the rule during the 19th century. As leaders sought greater centralization, they adopted new forms of republicanism. Some, particularly military leaders such as Bolívar and the generals who had served under him, followed the model of a Napoleonic state. Bolívar's recommendation of a powerful president-for-life and a hereditary or life senate, resembling the structures of constitutional monarchy with republican ornamentation, was never followed. The predominant model was that of the regime that Spanish liberals had set up in 1812. Not all new constitutions after 1815 jettisoned federalism; Mexico in 1824, for instance, embraced that ideal. Overall, Latin America moved toward stronger, more-centralized republican governments by the mid-19th century.

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Disorder and [caudillismo](#)

Written constitutions were not, however, sufficient to enforce order in the new countries of the region. Particularly in the 1825–50 period, Latin America experienced a high degree of political instability. National governments changed hands rapidly in most areas, which only prolonged the weakness and ineffectiveness of the emerging political systems. In [Mexico](#), to take but one example, the years 1825–55 saw 48 turnovers in the national executive. Neither those in power nor those seeking office evinced consistent respect for the often idealistic provisions of constitutions. In some cases the very authors of constitutions broke the rules laid out in them to gain or preserve control over governments. Like any other member of their society, they knew better than to expect their fellow political actors to stay within the strictures of the law. Extralegal maneuvers and the use of force became common elements of politics.

Much of the conflict that characterized these years consisted of simple disputes over power. Still, by the end of the 1830s and into the 1840s, politics in many areas coalesced around two ideological poles, usually known as [liberal](#) and [conservative](#). These groupings were not mass-based political parties in the 20th-century sense but rather factions of the elite; believing the majority of society to be ill-prepared for democracy, both liberals and conservatives intended to construct governments for the people but not by the people. Nonetheless, at times groups of artisans or peasant villagers took sides in the factional battles, hoping thus to press their own interests.

The precise definition of the sides in those fights is very difficult, owing to variations between countries and time periods. Urban merchants, rural landowners, and other economic interest groups overlapped so frequently—often within a single family—that it is impossible to generalize about the different origins of political factions. Moreover, the positions taken by one group

could be surprising; in Venezuela in the 1840s, for instance, it was conservatives who supported free trade with the exterior, a stance that elsewhere was one of the classic tenets of liberalism. In general, however, one can say that liberals pressed harder for free trade and the rationalization and modernization of their societies—which essentially meant the adoption of European and North American liberal understandings of society as a collection of autonomous individuals. Conservatives, on the other hand, proved more favourable to old institutions, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, and to traditional visions of society as grounded in corporate groups. Indeed, in many contexts the question of whether or not to curtail the power of the church was the key point of divergence between otherwise similar liberal and conservative factions.

To an extent, the role that violence or the threat of violence played in politics reflected a militarization brought about by the long period of the wars of independence. Only in Peru and even more so in Mexico did this phenomenon involve the continued influence of a regular, professional military class. Elsewhere the professional military failed to form a coherent interest group, and in many countries civilian politicians managed to control or even reduce the size of their national armies. It was rather in the power of militias and individual military leaders that the militarization of society was most visible. Throughout the region such forces grew to influence or even head national governments.

The military men who rose to positions of dominance were examples of the [caudillo](#), a figure that epitomized this unstable period. Often coming to power through the use of violence, these leaders imposed themselves through the force of their own personalities, their control over armed followers, and their strategic alliances with elite groups. Some caudillos rose to power from humble beginnings, while others came from wealthy, landowning sectors and used their dependent workers as the core of their support. The stereotype of the caudillo as

charismatic enough to win the enduring loyalty of his men and skilled enough to ride or fight better than any of them did not, of course, apply to all, but these were domineering and macho leaders. Whatever their social origins, caudillos in the postcolonial period became key political actors, working in alliance with, and at times under the control of, the economically powerful and civilian political leaders of the new nations of Latin America.

In a few cases caudillos contributed to political order. In [Chile](#) in the 1830s, for instance, the caudillo [Diego Portales](#) was a key figure in the establishment of a comparatively stable government. Allying with conservative elements, Portales helped found a political order that survived his death in 1837. It was an order based, as he put it, on “the weight of the night,” meaning the ignorance and passivity of the popular majority—something he made little effort to change. [Juan Manuel de Rosas](#), a caudillo who is said to have been able to outpace and outstep his gaucho supporters, imposed a brutal political regime in [Argentina](#) from 1829 to 1852. Seeing his homeland split into partisan factions, Rosas sought to ensure a kind of peace by achieving the ultimate victory of one side. His iron-fisted administration, which made use of propaganda and a secret police force, pursued the interests of Rosas and his fellow Buenos Aires ranchers; still, caudillos from other provinces repeatedly tried to oust this violent leader. Indeed, the very foundation of their power in personal relations and in violence meant that the legitimacy of caudillos’ rule was always in doubt. Few were able to set up networks of alliances that could withstand the challenges of new leaders who emerged with their own armed supporters and wealthy allies. The system of caudillismo was a volatile one. Although the general type continued to exist throughout the 19th century, it was the post-independence period that represented the golden age of the caudillos.

Economic obstacles

Complicating the construction of stable, constitutional governments in the decades after independence were the economic circumstances that prevailed in the period. Creoles who had expected the dismantling of colonial restraints on Latin American economies to produce a wave of new wealth found their hopes dashed in the 1820s. In many ways the region's economies were poorer and less integrated in the first decades after independence than they had been in the late colonial period. Political disorder was both a cause and result of this situation. Unable to rely on old taxes for revenue and faced with military and bureaucratic expenses greater than those of the colonial regime, new governments commonly found themselves in tight financial straits. Their resulting weakness contributed to political instability, which at the same time impeded the reorganization of economic systems.

The wars of independence contributed to the disappointing postwar economic picture. In some areas, such as Venezuela, damage from the wars was extensive. Even where the destruction of human life and economic resources was less widespread, disruptions in financial arrangements and systems of labour relations provoked a decline in important economic sectors. Mining suffered particularly in many countries. The richest mineral producer, Mexico, needed roughly half a century to regain its pre-independence levels of production.

As they emerged from their battles for emancipation, the new nations encountered other difficulties. The mere fact of political independence did not eliminate long-standing problems of transportation, but it did break down some traditional commercial networks. The entrance of foreign merchants and imported goods, although on a much more limited scale than would later be the case, led to competition with, and in some areas the displacement of, local traders and producers. Apart from loans

that left most countries in debt, the region received little capital from foreign sources. The departure of, or discrimination against, peninsular Spaniards reduced what had been a major source of skilled labour and administrative know-how, as well as capital for investment. Relatively few exports, such as coffee, sugar, and cattle products, found world markets favourable enough to stimulate the expansion of their production in Latin America. Colonial patterns had been destroyed, but the economies of the region had not yet found a consistent new orientation.

Social change

Mobility and hierarchy

The Creole elites who had headed the independence cause throughout Latin America had no intention of losing their social, economic, and political power in the construction of new nations. Managing to solidify and even expand their influence after the removal of colonial administration, these elites emerged as the great beneficiaries of independence.

The situation of other social groups and institutions was more mixed. Leaders across the region quickly eliminated the system of separate ethnic castes. Persons of mixed race were, in theory, to have the same legal rights as members of the white upper classes. Indeed, the period of independence saw the ascension of individual mestizos and *castas* to positions of prominence. Service in the wars was particularly useful in this regard. Men such as the mulattoes Manuel Piar in Venezuela and José Padilla in New Granada rose to the rank of general and admiral, respectively, in Bolívar's forces. In practice, however, the old hierarchies did not fall so easily and continued on informally. Those nonwhites who managed to achieve the status of elites were clearly exceptions to the general rule. The destruction of the caste system allowed for only limited loosening of racial and class hierarchies.

Indeed, both Piar and Padilla were executed under rather questionable circumstances.

The position of [Indians](#) changed rather slowly in the post-independence era, despite some early and energetic initiatives. Spain had ended Indian tribute in 1810, and in the years after that several Latin American nations saw fit to repeat that measure with abolitions of their own. More generally, leaders frequently spoke of breaking down the barriers between the indigenous and more Hispanized sectors of their societies. Still, in the aftermath of independence, governments tended to reverse their positions toward Amerindian populations. The countries of the Andes, for example, reinstated Indian tribute, albeit under different names. Bolivian governments derived as much as 80 percent of their revenues from that source through mid-century. Full-scale attacks on indigenous communities' lands came later in the century.

Strong measures against African [slavery](#) similarly appeared in many areas by the late 1820s. Lawmakers declared the children of slaves to be free, banned the slave trade, or even ended slavery itself. Once again, however, there was a pattern of backsliding, so that, where slave labour played a significant economic role, the final [abolition](#) of the institution of slavery came about in most countries only about 1850. The growth of sugar production in Cuba and coffee production in Brazil, furthermore, meant that those two slave societies continued to flourish. Both areas continued to receive large numbers of new enslaved workers from Africa until after mid-century (1865 in Cuba, 1851 in Brazil) and only abolished slavery in the 1880s (1886 in Cuba, 1888 in Brazil).