

Introduction to Latin American Politics and Societies
POL 305F
Fall 2025

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Office Hours:
TW 11:30-12:30 Sidney Smith 6024
(and by appointment)

Teaching Assistant:

Overview

This historical survey seeks to provide students with the context necessary to understand developments in contemporary Latin American politics. The class develops thematically and chronologically, exposing students to a range of issues and debates from North American and Latin American academic and activist circles. Substantive issues will include the changing face of state sovereignty, human rights and social movements, the legacies of (neo)colonialism, neoliberalism, and ‘21st century socialism.’

Learning Objectives

The specific learning objectives of this course will be:

1. To read, understand, and compare a number of interdisciplinary approaches to Latin American politics;
2. To develop a critical appreciation of recent trends in Latin America, as well as their historical roots;
3. To introduce students to contemporary and canonical social theory concepts specific to Latin American politics;
4. To improve and refine writing skills through the composition of research and response papers;

Course Requirements

Students are expected to have finished the day’s assigned readings before lecture, and are encouraged to bring questions and concerns to class. **Lectures will compliment but not necessarily replicate or summarize assigned readings.** I am, however, always willing to answer questions on specific readings or concepts in class or office hours – in fact, I encourage it. Our aim is to develop not only a critical repertoire on the key debates surrounding Latin American Politics, but to also hone our own abilities as writers, colleagues, and global citizens.

Assessment in this course will be determined by your performance on the following:

Assignment	Weight	Due Date
Country Profile I. Introduction	25 pts	October 8
Country Profile II. Peer Review Session	5 pts	November 19
Country Profile III. Final	25 pts	December 2
Midterm Quiz	20 pts	October 22
Final Exam	25 pts	TBD, exam week

Country Profile: The Country Profile provides students the opportunity to practice the fundamentals of a research paper in a short period of time. Students will identify a topic, narrow the scope of inquiry, hone a research question, and conduct research of scholarly materials. The goal of this project is to conduct the primary stages of a rigorous research project without committing the time necessary to actually compose a full length thesis. Each step of the assignment builds on the previous one; students are encouraged to revise and add to their existing work.

Part I: Introduction, Research Question, Concepts, and Annotated Bibliography (30 pts, 5-7 pages double spaced)

In the first stage of the country profile you will identify and introduce your selected country and selection criteria as well as your initial hypothesis and findings. Please note that this introduction may be composed with a combination of brief narrative summary and bullet-point style formatting.

For Background on your selected county, you may find the following resources helpful:

United Nations Development Programme <https://hdr.undp.org/>

*this is the link to their Human Development Reports page, but there is much useful information elsewhere on their various sites.

United Nations Economic Office on Latin American and the Caribbean
<https://www.cepal.org/en>

Inter-American Development Bank <https://www.iadb.org/en>

CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>

World Bank Open Data <https://data.worldbank.org/>

You may also find the UN and IGO Database put together by the U of T library staff useful: <https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/igo>

Your basic contextualization should include, at a minimum:

1. *Basics* (eg, Population, Demographic Composition and Trends, Major Cities and Urban Population)
2. Politics (eg, Political System, President and Significant Political Parties, Significant Social Issues/Tensions of relevance to your topic)
3. Economics (eg, Chief Economic Sectors, Workforce composition – in/formal, manual labor v. service economy, etc – Exports and Trading Partners)
4. Environment (eg, Significant Environmental issues/tensions/threats)

You should also include your rationale for choosing:

You should come to your country after reflection and preliminary research, having developed a scholarly basis for your selection. This could arise from questions you have encountered in other classes (e.g., electoral reform, corruption, federalism, LGBTQI+ rights and representation), or ones more directly rooted in the region itself (e.g., democratization, indigenous mobilizations, resource extraction), or other factors not mentioned here.

This first part of the country profile project should also include:

- **Concepts from class**
Identify a key concept from the syllabus and readings (NB: you should use the entirety of the syllabus, not just the material covered prior to the due date), the terms you will use to explore it in the context of your country, and a research question to guide your work for the rest of the semester.
- **Keywords**
Proper names, historical events, key concepts
- **Research Question(s)**
At least one question identifying what the research project seeks to identify, explore, or answer.
- **Annotated Bibliography**

In line with this work you should identify and annotate 5 peer reviewed (scholarly) articles, books, or chapters, in this part of the assignment you will refine your research question and continue your research. Please use the following guidelines in writing your annotations:

- An annotation **is not** an abstract
- Annotations should consist of 3-4 sentences and address:
 - The author's research question and thesis
 - The author's key findings
 - How, specifically, the author's research and findings relate to and address your research question

Part II: Country Profile (25 pts, 10 pages double spaced)

The Final Country Profile applies your concept, key terms, and annotated bibliography to your selected country. The writing should be streamlined, direct, precise, and concise. It should, *at a minimum*:

- Reintroduce your reader to your selected country, foregrounding aspects of significance for your chosen concept(s). This should be done in bullet-points and organized in order of importance for the concept and research question;
- Apply the concept to your country, providing a historical overview of its causes and consequences. This section should be written in prose and should be comprised of 3-5 paragraphs;
- Offer a historical or contemporary case study to illustrate specific instances of the concept and potential past, present, or future outcomes. This section should be written in prose and should be comprised of 5-7 paragraphs;
- Finalize and expand on your annotated bibliography of 7-10 scholarly sources, adding to those from Part III, or introducing new sources, depending on previous comments. Annotations should continue to follow the guidelines listed in Part III of this assignment.

Please note, it is nearly impossible to write any paper, no matter how short, without a significant amount of prewriting and revision. There will be many potential arguments to each prompt. Your task is to find the best argument you can make and to make care that your prose is the servant of your ideas – not vice versa.

Midterm and Final Quizzes (20 pts each)

Both the Midterm and Final will be comprised of identification terms and short answer prompts. A study guide will be provided to students the week before the midterm and, for the final, at the end of the semester.

Citations For all written work in this course, please use the Chicago Manual of Style's in-text author-date format as you cite your sources. You should also include a Works Cited list at the end of your work. The Works Cited section will not count in length/word count restrictions.

For a guide to the Chicago Manual of Style, please see:

https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html

Late Policy While it is our intention to be as understanding as possible, excessively late work hinders your progress and makes life difficult for the professor and TA. Barring *previously identified* extenuating circumstances, papers will be deducted 5% for each day late, effective immediately after the initial due date.

Paperless Classroom

All assignments for this course are to be submitted via Quercus.

Grading Rubric:

A: Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. The essay should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant flaws. An ‘A’ paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation.

B: Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate evidence, organized and interpreted logically. The ‘B’ paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an ‘A’; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.

C: Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The ‘C’ paper meets the basic requirements of a thesis supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but it needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient and appropriate, or the interpretation may have logical flaws. The essay may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The ‘C’ paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate but not noteworthy overall.

D: Barely passing work that shows effort but is so marred by serious problems that it cannot be considered a satisfactory paper. Papers without a readily identifiable thesis are liable to be graded ‘D’.

No Pass: Failing work—for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

Please Note: Poor mechanics detract from your grades, but good mechanics by themselves do not make a good paper. Sloppy grammar, punctuation, and spelling tax the goodwill of your reader, which all effective writing is careful to respect. These problems won’t be overlooked, since they affect the communication of thought— but thoughtful work is the most important.

A Note on Decorum, Etiquette, and Ethics

As an instructor, I want nothing more than to encourage lively debate charged by principled and studied disagreement. These sorts of conflictual encounters are where we often find ourselves learning the most. It is imperative that the classroom, lecture hall, or zoom screen are safe spaces

where everyone feels comfortable and inspired to participate. I have a strict zero tolerance policy for discriminatory behaviour of any sort. Derogatory comments aimed at one's gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability are as repugnant as they are unhelpful and have no place in the classroom.

Students are strongly advised to keep rough and draft work and hard copies of their essays and assignments before handing them in to the instructor. These should be kept until the marked assignments have been returned and the grades posted to ROSI.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and will be dealt with accordingly. For further clarification and information on plagiarism please see Writing at the University of Toronto, <http://writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources>.

Information about the English Language Learning program (ELL) is available at <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell>. Students looking to build on their language strengths might also consider other opportunities, such as:

- the Communication Cafe, which meets weekly at four different times and locations for the first five weeks of each term for practice with oral skills like class discussion and presentations
- Reading eWriting, an online program that helps students engage course readings more effectively. You can also find further instructional advice files for students and for classroom instruction on this site.

For more information, please contact me either via email or directly, or feel free to contact the ELL Coordinator Leora Freedman at leora.freedman@utoronto.ca

University Guidelines on Illness and Absence:

The *Verification of Illness* (also known as a “doctor’s note”) is not required.

Students who are absent from academic participation for any reason (e.g., COVID, cold, flu and other illness or injury, family situation) and who require consideration for missed academic work should **report their absence through the online absence declaration**. The declaration is available to students through ACORN under the Profile and Settings menu. For updates, please reference the [University policy for absence declaration](#).

Students should also advise their instructor of their absence. Instructors will not be automatically alerted when a student declares an absence. It is a student’s responsibility to let instructors know that they have used the Absence Declaration and to discuss any needed consideration, where appropriate.

Email Policy

For the purposes of this course, the primary use of email will be to share information such as announcements of events of note or news stories relevant to the course material and to schedule

meetings for more individualized questions. Email is a poor medium for discussing or clarifying substantive matters that come up in lectures or reading. Face to face interactions are much better for this sort of work. Please ask these sorts of questions in class or during office hours.

I do my best to respond in a timely fashion (usually within 48 hours) to all student emails. Please do not expect an immediate response, especially on evenings and weekends. Please be sure that any questions you have are not already answered in the syllabus. I reserve the right to neither respond to nor acknowledge questions that can be answered in the syllabus.

Required Readings

Daniel Hellinger (2015) *The Comparative Politics of Latin America: Democracy at Last?* Routledge. Available online at the University of Toronto Library:

https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106888466906196

All other readings can be located either via the link in the syllabus or through the University of Toronto Library Website: <https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/>

Current Events and Further Reading

Coverage of Latin American Political, Economic, and Social happenings in the US and Canada are often poor at best, and usually absent from the news cycle entirely. I encourage students to do their best to keep abreast of regional happenings by following local newspapers, language skills permitting, or by periodically checking in with the work of think tanks, development agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations, and scholarly associations. For example:

Links including everything from online newspapers to government ministries is The Latin America Network Information Center. <http://lanic.utexas.edu>

The Washington Office on Latin America is a policy lobbying organization focusing on issues of human rights, security and justice. <http://www.wola.org>

NACLA Report offers analysis of Latin American conditions from a critical perspective. <http://www.nacla.org>

Good analysis on regional trends in crime and public insecurity. <http://www.insightcrime.org>

Inter-American Dialogue (analysis of political and economic trends) <http://thedialogue.org>

The United States Institute of Peace (conflict resolution, includes database of peace accord documents) <http://www.usip.org>

Among Latin American based research centers, for wide-ranging and timely scholarship see FLACSO (with sites in several LA countries) <http://www.flacso.org>

Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean is a United Nations agency dedicated to studying and promoting development in the region. <https://www.cepal.org/en>

Schedule of Readings and Themes

1.

September 3 – First Things First

Hayden King on Land Acknowledgements:

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/redrawing-the-lines-1.4973363/i-regret-it-hayden-king-on-writing-ryerson-university-s-territorial-acknowledgement-1.4973371>

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Introduction: Latin American Studies and the Comparative Study of Democracy, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*.

Backgrounder:

United Nations Development Program (2021) Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean.
Overview available at:

https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/library/human_development/regional-human-development-report-2021.html

2.

September 10 – Conceptualizing Democracy & Citizenship

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 1: Conceptions of Democracy, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*.

Camila Vergara (2021) “Burying Pinochet” *Sidecar*
<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/burying-pinochet>

Listen:

WOLA Podcast (2019) ‘The System’ versus Guatemalan Democracy
<https://www.wola.org/analysis/the-system-versus-guatemalan-democracy/>

Discuss:

1. Why is it important, or useful, to focus on democracy as a theme for studying comparative politics?
2. Do democracy and market-based economies compliment one another? Why or why not? How do markets reinforce or undermine notions of citizenship?

3. Are there other, potentially more useful, categories we can or should use to grasp the experience of politics in Latin America?
4. How do recent events in Guatemala and Chile highlight the promise and limits of democracy and citizenship in Latin American today?

Suggest a question! What did this week's readings make you think about? What would you like to discuss the class about democracy and citizenship in Latin America?

3. September 17 – Colonization and After: Latin America in the World

Read:

William M. Denevan (1992) "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82(3): 369-385.

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 3: Democratic and Autocratic Threads before Columbus and in Colonial America, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*.

Watch:

También la Lluvia/Even the Rain (Icíar Bollaín, 2010)

Available from U of T Library at:

<https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/f767d22dc7db884b948b18e8a72ae5f8>

Discuss:

1. How/does the 'The Pristine Myth' shape popular understandings of Latin America since colonization? Explore some of the consequences.
2. How has Latin America's position in the world shifted since the end of the colonial era? How are these changes reflected in the film *Even the Rain*?
3. Discuss some of the enduring legacies of colonization in Latin America. Have there been attempts to address these legacies? If so, have they been successful? Why or why not?
4. How does Latin America's postcolonial reality differ from Canada's? Why?

Is there something else we should be talking about? Suggest it!

4. September 24 – Development and Dependent Development

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 6: Development and Dependency: Theory and Practice in Latin America, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*.

NB: pages 174-189 are recommended but not required

Shirin M. Rai (2018) Gender and Development, in *Handbook on the International Political Economy of Gender*, Juanita Elias and Adrienne Roberts, eds. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishers, pp. 142-158.

(Available online at U of T library)

Eduardo Gudynas (2013) Debates on Development and its Alternatives in Latin America: A Brief Heterodox Guide, in *Beyond Development: Alternative Visions from Latin America*, M. Lang and D. Mokrani, eds. Quito: Fundación Rosa Luxemburg, pp.15-39

Available at: <http://www.rosalux.org.ec/pdfs/BeyondDevelopment.pdf#page=16>
(The entire collection is definitely worth checking out)

Discuss:

1. What are the key assumptions and assertions of Modernization Theory, Dependency Theory, and Institutionalism? How do they differ? How are they similar?
2. How (is) development gendered?
3. Development is often characterized and criticized for its “growthism” and Eurocentrism. What are these concerns, and are they merited?

5.

October 8 – The State, Populism, and Presidential Systems

****Country Profile Part I due before Class on Quercus****

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 5: Populism, Development, and Democracy in the Twentieth Century, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*

Donald Kingsbury, Teresa Kramarz, and Kyle Jacques (2019) “Populism or Petrostate?: The Afterlives of Ecuador’s Yasuni-ITT Initiative” *Society and Natural Resources* 32(5): 530-547.

Discuss:

1. Latin American states have often been described as particularly prone to populist disruptions. Why is this? Is this an accurate, fair, or incomplete assessment?
2. Is populism good or bad for democracy? Discuss examples to defend your point.

Any other questions?

6.

October 22 – Midterm Quiz, in class

*****October 29 – Reading Week No Class*****

7.

November 5 – Militaries, Counter/Insurgencies, and Regional Politics

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 7: Democratic Breakdown and Military Rule, in
Comparative Politics of Latin America

Listen:

Greg Grandin, author of *Empire's Workshop*, on The Dig Podcast
<https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/empires-workshop-with-greg-grandin/>

Discuss:

1. To what extent were the counterinsurgencies, military dictatorships, and human rights abuses throughout Latin America in the 1960s-1990s the result of foreign (often, United States) interference? To what extent were they domestic disputes?
2. What were the major consequences of these insurgencies and counterinsurgencies?

8.

November 12 – Social Movements and Civil Society

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 11: Social Class and Social Movements in Latin
America in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*

Veronica Gago on Green Tide in AR

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29445/a-new-type-of-politics-argentina-s-pro-choice-movement>

Recommended:

Lucinda Grinnell (2019) "Taking Stock: A Hundred Years After Women's Suffrage in
Latin America. *NACLA Report on the Americas*

<https://nacla.org/news/2019/03/27/taking-stock-hundred-years-after-women%E2%80%99s-suffrage-latin-america>

Listen:

Forrest Hylton on 2021 Protests in Colombia

https://shout.lbo-talk.org/lbo/RadioArchive/2021/21_05_13.mp3

Discuss:

1. How does inequality influence democracy?
2. Why is the informal sector so large in much of Latin America?
3. How have social movements shaped politics in the region, both in and beyond the ballot box?
4. How has urbanization shaped politics and social movements in Latin America?

9.
November 19 –
In Class Peer Review Session

10.
November 26 – Neoliberalism and After

Read:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 6: Development and Dependency: Theory and Practice in Latin America, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*.

NB: pages 174-189 only.

Sarah Radcliffe (2012) “Development for a Postneoliberal Era?: *Sumak Kawsay*, Living Well, and the Limits to Decolonization in Ecuador” *Geoforum* 43(2): 240-249.

Alexander Main and Gustavo Codas (2016) “The End of a Progressive Cycle?” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 48(4): 381-384.

Recommended:

Daniel Hellinger (2015) Chapter 15: Democracy in Times of Globalization, in *Comparative Politics of Latin America*

Petra Costa (2019) *The Edge of Democracy*
(Netflix original film, available on www.netflix.com)

Discuss:

1. What were the main impacts of market reforms and structural adjustment in Latin America?
2. How did the Pink Tide respond to neoliberalization?
3. What does *Sumak Kawsay* offers as an alternative to development? What did *Sumak Kawsay* look like in practice in Ecuador?
4. Has the Pink Tide ebbed? Why?

11.

December 2 – Canada in Latin America

****Country Profile Final Draft due before class on Quercus****

Read:

Pablo Heidrich and Laura Macdonald (2022) Introduction: Canada's Past and Future in the Americas: Beyond the 'Americas Strategy.' In *Canada's Past and Future in Latin America*, Pablo Heidrich and Laura Macdonald, eds. University of Toronto Press, 3-28.

Justice and Corporate Accountability Project (2017) *Violence and Canadian Mining Companies in Latin America*. Toronto: Osgoode Hall Law School.

Available at:

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2886584

Simon Granovsky-Larsen and Larissa Santos (2020) From the War on Terror to a War on Territory: Corporate Counterinsurgency at the Escobal Mine and the Dakota Access Pipeline. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. 46(1): 121-145.

Listen:

Latino Media Collective (2019) Canada's Role in Venezuela Crisis

<https://latinomediacollecive.com/2019/05/03/may-3rd-2019-canadas-role-in-venezuela-crisis/>

Discuss:

1. How (has?) Canada's role in the Americas shifted in the twentieth and twenty first centuries?
2. To what extent is the Canadian government, or Canadian citizens, responsible for the actions of Canadian companies abroad?

Other questions? What else should we be discussing?