New Lea
Elections invariably offer an opportunity to assess the health and quality of the democratic process in the countries where they are held. When they occur in neighboring states over roughly the same time period, however, observers are given a rare chance to move beyond isolated snapshots and assess the state of democracy in an entire region. Such an opportunity occurred from 2005 to 2006, when Latin America experienced 12 presidential elections, many of them closely fought, over a 14-month period. It was the first time the electoral calendars of so many Latin countries coincided, and analysts lost little time in seizing that historic moment to draw a variety of conclusions—many of them dire.

By the time Hugo Chávez’s anticipated re-election in Venezuela closed the 2006 election cycle, many commentators were already warning that the region’s democracies faced difficult times ahead. Some analysts saw potential turmoil in the growing tension between a “good” and a “bad” political left, while others underlined the dangers of a resurgent populism. Still others warned about the impact of the continuing strains in relations between the U.S. and Latin America on the region’s political landscape.
As new leaders across the continent were sworn into office in early 2007, there were good historical reasons for concern about stability. Since September 11, 2001, three Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador) have seen their presidents abruptly forced out of office. Odds are that some of the leaders elected in 2006 will face similar situations. For decades, fragile Latin American democracies have been abruptly ended by military coups. In recent years, economic crises combined with social mobilization have toppled democratically elected leaders. Though the economy is doing well in most of Latin America, social discontent will revive if there is a global economic downturn. At that moment, the stability of some of the recently elected governments will be tested.

But such concerns reflect only part of the post-election Latin American reality. A closer study of the results reveals several characteristics that we think have not received sufficient attention so far. Some tend to bear out the bleaker scenarios, but others underline what may seem surprising signals of health in a region where democracy has had a checkered history.

Among the more notable observations of our study is the fact that economics and politics are linked as tightly in Latin America as they are in more stable democracies. During the election “fiesta” of 2006, as some in the region called it, countries with thriving economies were more likely to keep incumbents in power. Not coincidentally, the second—perhaps counterintuitive conclusion—is that the supposedly embattled neoliberal model in Latin America is far from dead. Even many of the self-described leftists and anti-globalization candidates who achieved victory last year owed their success to their acceptance of at least part of the pro-trade, free-market agenda. But equally crucial to their electoral fortunes was a kind of neo-populism that acknowledged the rising demand of Latin Americans for broader participation in the democratic process. The key to retaining popular support appeared to be a commitment to greater spending on social services, such as health, welfare, and education, that would reduce the long-entrenched inequities across the region.

Achieving a fair balance between free-market policies and socially responsible government intervention would be a challenge anywhere, but Latin Americans are particularly hamstrung by the lack of accountable, open, and competitive political systems. In fact, in many countries, the party system has deteriorated into exclusionary oligopolies or outright gridlock, both of which are ominous indications of future trouble. The solution, which we strongly advocate, is a widening of the political process that involves serious institutional reforms to Latin America’s party systems. Such reforms would probably get nowhere without an acknowledgment, both inside and outside the region, of one of the clearest lessons of the 2006 political season: vibrant left-wing parties are not only essential to Latin America’s political renewal, they are critical to ensuring the region’s future democratic stability.

Overall, the news from 2006 is good. An intense year of political campaigning and deal-making demonstrated that democracy is alive and thriving across the hemisphere, even as the particularities of each country’s electoral processes—and outcomes—highlighted the region’s diversity. An impressive 80 percent of the Latin American population went to the polls last year—approximately 250 million voters.

In addition to Brazil and Mexico, the two largest countries in the region, Honduras, Bolivia, Chile, Haiti, Costa Rica, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, chose new leaders or re-elected incumbents. Argentina was the only large country without an election in 2006. (It will have one in October 2007.)

Generally, self-identified leftist candidates tended to do better than right-wingers. [See map.] Based on

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their self-identification, candidates can be classified on a right-to-left continuum. These self-definitions oversimplify reality, but they provide a framework for classification.

Outcomes aside, Latin America’s year-long “festival of democracy” is notable for the widespread respect for the election results and the consolidation of independent and autonomous electoral institutions. Latin America’s election process is now better organized, more transparent, and, as a result, more legitimate than when the transitions to democracy began in the 1980s and 1990s. Last year’s peaceful transitions of power demonstrated that, though under attack by the resurgence of populist leaders, representative democracy is the mechanism of choice to select leaders in Latin America.

Although a number of races were extremely close, with the exception of Mexico, losing candidates accepted defeat, and winning candidates duly took office. The election in Costa Rica was decided by a razor-thin margin of 0.3 percent. Yet former president Oscar Arias, a social democratic Nobel Peace Prize laureate who governed from 1986-1990, was sworn in when losing candidate Otton Solís formally accepted the results.

In Peru, the first-round election also produced a very close result for runner-up Christian Democrat Lourdes Flores Nano, who came within 0.5 percent of former left-wing populist president Alan Garcia (1985-1990). After a partial recount, Garcia was declared the winner and went on to conquer the presidency in the June 4 runoff election. Mexico was the only country where official results were disputed. Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the leftist former mayor of Mexico City, refused to accept the official results which put him just 0.06 percent behind Felipe Calderón, claiming to have been robbed of an electoral victory. After AMLO called on his supporters to march and camp out in Mexico City to press for a vote recount, legislators from his political party, the PRD, attempted to block the inauguration ceremony of President-elect Calderón. At one point, the social and political protests appeared to threaten the stability of Mexico’s democracy. Nevertheless, Calderón, a moderate politician from the right-of-center PAN party, assumed power on December 1, 2006, even

The supposedly embattled neoliberal model in Latin America is far from dead

New Presidents

Evo Morales Age 47

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>ELECTED</th>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>PARTY</th>
<th>VOTE TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>Dec 18, ’05</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>MAS Movimiento al Socialismo</td>
<td>53.7% - 28.6% First Round</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TRADE STAND** Evo is skeptical of an FTA with the U.S. He supports regional integration.

Michelle Bachelet Age 55

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>ELECTED</th>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>PARTY</th>
<th>VOTE TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Jan 15, ’06</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>PS-Concertación Partido Socialista-Concertación</td>
<td>53.5% - 46.5% Second Round</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TRADE STAND** Fully supports trade. Under her government, Chile has signed FTAs with Peru and Panama and has re-joined the CAN as an associate member.
as López Obrador continues to call himself the “legitimate president” and denounce Calderón as merely the “legal” one.

With the region experiencing its fourth consecutive year of economic growth, incumbent governments in Latin America could hardly have found a more convenient time to face elections. Between 1995 and 2003, the region grew at a modest annual average of 2.2 percent. But in 2004, its economic output increased by an outstanding 5.7 percent. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC or CEpal), growth in 2005 was 4.5 percent, despite lower figures for Brazil (2.3 percent) and Mexico (3 percent). The same report predicted growth for 2006 to be at 4.8 percent, with Mexico (4.4 percent) and Brazil (3.2 percent) again underperforming. In a region where economic performance in the last 25 years has been mediocre at best, the 2004-2006 period is a notable—and welcome—exception. (Recent economic results released by the Mexican government indicate that Mexico’s growth in 2006 was 4.8 percent; for consistency’s sake, however, we relied on the CEpal estimates for all the countries.)

Incumbent candidates and parties did fairly well. In six countries, the incumbent candidate—or the candidate from the incumbent party—won. In three other cases, the outgoing president abstained from supporting a candidate. Only two incumbent parties were defeated: the scandal-ridden Social Christian Party in Costa Rica and the divided, centrist Alliance for the Republic in Nicaragua. The conclusion we draw is that the good economic performance of most countries helped incumbents retain power. But incumbency strength should also be understood as an endorsement of the policies implemented by the outgoing leaders, most of whom were committed to free trade.

However, the return to the 1990s pattern of presidential re-election produced an ambivalent result. It may well be that given the region’s traditions and weaknesses, no incumbent can be thrown out of office at the ballot box. All incumbents who sought re-election in 2006 were successful. It remains to be seen whether incumbents in the future—especially if economic conditions are less positive—will enjoy equal success. But, with constitutions that grant them strong powers, Latin American presidential systems tend to make it difficult to unseat an incumbent leader seeking re-election.

Neoliberalism Lives
The 2006 electoral record shows that there is hope for the embattled neoliberal economic model in Latin America. Many candidates who advocated neoliberal policies won—albeit with a slim margin. That reflects the fact that many Latin American voters—in some cases a solid majority—support free market-oriented policies in favor of the OECD countries further opening their markets (especially for agricultural products) and eliminating subsidies and quotas.
economic policies. In Chile, Michelle Bachelet, a Socialist who pledged to continue the neoliberalism promoted by her left-wing predecessor Ricardo Lagos, won in a runoff to become that country’s first woman president. Although her election represented a radical change in terms of gender, it also constituted a strong signal of continuity in terms of economic policies.

In Peru, the most free-market-friendly candidate (Lourdes Flores) finished third in the first round, but the new president, Alan Garcia, had campaigned for the adoption of several market-friendly economic policies, including a free-trade agreement with the U.S. Clearly playing on Peru’s historic rivalry with Chile, Garcia pledged to emulate Santiago’s aggressive pursuit of foreign markets with the goal of replacing its southern neighbor as the leading trade power on South America’s Pacific rim. Peruvian voters in effect rejected the anti-globalization candidate, nationalist and populist Ollanta Humala, as a symbol of frustration rather than hope.

In Mexico, the candidate most closely associated with neoliberal policies came from behind to rob the anti-globalization candidate of an electoral victory. Calderón’s strong defense of neoliberalism was only comparable to that of Álvaro Uribe, the incumbent president of Colombia, who also easily cruised to re-election.

In Costa Rica, Oscar Arias won despite his promise to ratify the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA). Anti-globalization advocate Ottón Solís failed to transform his opposition into a successful electoral appeal.

In Brazil, although President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has not been a committed champion of neoliberal policies, there was little that separated President Lula’s economic positions from those of his main and more conservative opponent, Geraldo Alckmin. Lula himself expressed bluntly the change in his own views in an interview: “I think it is part of the human species’ evolution: if you’re on the Right you move a bit towards the Left; and whoever belongs to the Left gradually becomes a Social-Democrat… and there’s no other possible explanation: if an older adult considers himself belonging to the Left, it’s because he has problems.”

Lula’s shift to the center, while slow, reflects the growing consensus over economic policy across Brazil’s political parties.

In contrast, the winning candidates in Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Ecuador were self-declared anti-neoliberals. Yet even these candidates refused to jettison key elements of market reforms. Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa promised not to reverse the country’s dollarized economy. Former Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega’s successful campaign for a return to office was marked by his open courtship of the foreign investment badly needed by his country’s ailing economy.

Aside from Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan champion

### New Presidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Elected Term</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oscar Arias</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Feb 5, ’06</td>
<td>PLN Partido Liberación Nacional</td>
<td>40.9% - 39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Réne Préval</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>Feb 7, ’06</td>
<td>LESPWA Front of Hope</td>
<td>51.2% - 12.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trade Stand**
- Full support for CAFTA and free trade.
- Recently rejoined CARICOM and supports U.S.-sponsored, free trade HOPE Act with Haiti.
of anti-neoliberalism, Bolivian President Evo Morales went the farthest in advocating an expansion of the state into the private sector. Yet, ironically, Bolivia’s reduced state capacity might well justify building a state apparatus capable of delivering the market incentives neoliberal policies recommend.

Several newly elected Latin American presidents have publicly expressed their discontent with neoliberal policies, but the policies they implement will prove more telling than the speeches they give at regional summits and improvised press conferences, or their campaign rhetoric. The best example of this is socialist neoliberalism in Chile or, as the Concertación leaders in Chile call it, the “social free-market economy.”

The important lesson, perhaps, is that anti-globalization candidates should not run away from free market policies, if they can build strong but selective government intervention and an effective and dynamic regulatory framework. Instead, they should seek to demonstrate how, when implemented correctly, free trade and market reforms have promoted growth and prosperity. In the process, they will strengthen democracy and build a case for a sustainable, socially responsible approach to globalization.

**Bridging The Populist Gap**

Policymakers ignore economic inequality today at their own political peril. The persistent income gaps accompanying Latin America’s long run of economic expansion resurfaced as populist-style campaign rallying slogans last year. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret this simply as a resurgence of populism. In fact, the victories of many supposed populist candidates reflected a broadening of popular participation in the political process around the hemisphere—what political scientists call social inclusion.

Populism, on the other hand, is the mechanism through which leaders channel demand for social inclusion into the concentration of presidential power. But since populist candidates build their support on the demand for social inclusion, broadening social participation within strong, institutionalized democracy will actually undermine populism.

The historic election of Michelle Bachelet in Chile best illustrates why simplistic populist slogans have a diminishing appeal, particularly in countries with strong functioning democratic institutions. Chile’s political system has been broadening since the male-dominated, top-down, and technocratic system of the Pinochet era. Bachelet’s win further accelerated Chile’s transition to more inclusive politics. A pediatrician by training, she often declared during her campaign that no medical treatment could be successful without fully involving patients. Her focus on building a stronger civil society and facilitating “bottom-up politics” through popular participation was a large factor in her success.
It is usually easier for traditional populists to win if the alternative candidate belongs to the landed traditional oligarchy, as in Ecuador, Chile, Nicaragua, and Bolivia. Or in countries where social inequities have been poorly addressed, such as Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Yet even in Mexico, where inequality remains a big problem, Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s populist rhetoric got him only 35 percent of the vote. The fact that Felipe Calderón was a mestizo with a convincing middle-class background helped him embody the message of social inclusion in Mexico. Ecuadorian left-wing candidate Rafael Correa won, in part, because he was closer to ordinary voters than banana magnate Álvaro Noboa, who also happened to be Ecuador’s wealthiest individual. Had Correa, a Ph.D. in economics who shares the darker skin of most of Ecuador’s population, been the advocate of free-market policies, he might still have won by campaigning as the people’s candidate against the candidate of the elites.

The era of pacts between the elite, even for the sponsorship of democratic change, is now over. Latin Americans want to elect leaders who look like them and share their experiences, or at least can obviously relate to their own lives. We should welcome this development as evidence of the strengthening of democracy rather than a sign of trouble. Democracy requires that people be—and feel—represented by their leaders.

Sharing The Wealth

Candidates from parties and coalitions that implemented effective social programs—usually targeted at the poor by subsidizing demand—did better than those who promoted trickle-down economics. Brazil’s Lula cruised to victory in 2002 with strong support from the industrial South, but the impoverished Northeast made the difference to his re-election in 2006. The Bolsa Familia program, aimed at subsidizing the poorest Brazilian families, allowed Lula to cultivate a strong electoral support base in the impoverished Northeast. In Mexico, the Progresa-Oportunidades program, first initiated in 1997 by President Ernesto Zedillo and expanded during the Fox administration, has been markedly successful at channeling education, health, and nutrition spending toward the poorest families. Similar programs in Chile and Colombia have helped incumbent parties and coalitions build an electoral support base among the marginalized poor.

Most countries have replaced broad supply-side subsidies with demand-side initiatives. For example, while supply-side subsidies lower the price of tortillas or other goods for the entire population, demand-side subsidies use targeted payments to help needy segments of the population buy tortillas at market value. Yet only those countries whose civil service is capable of implementing such programs have seen significant improvements in...
poverty reduction. In countries with ineffective bureaucracies, or without social networks that could compensate for inadequate delivery systems, the elimination of supply-side subsidies has actually ended up hurting the poor. Ecuador and Peru are two examples.

In Venezuela, a country with limited state capacity, President Chávez has developed a parallel state through mission programs (*misiones*) aimed at bringing social services to the poor. With the civil service still filled with machine politicians from the *ancién regime*, Chávez implemented a model social-service delivery system to impoverished urban and rural communities that was inspired by the Cuban Revolution. The *misiones* dole out health care, and subsidize road projects and even schools. According to the most recent CEPAL report—based on official government figures—the Venezuelan poverty rate declined from 49.4 percent in 1999 to 37.1 percent in 2005. Extreme poverty decreased from 21.7 percent to 15.9 percent in the same period. Although these figures are disputed and may in fact hide a mediocre performance in poverty reduction, Chávez’s confident electoral campaign was built on the accurate premise that the overwhelming majority of the Venezuelan poor who benefited from the *misiones* would vote him back into office.

Nations such as Peru or Bolivia that historically have lacked state capacity, have found it difficult to implement social programs through government bureaucracies. Despite the strong economic growth observed in Peru since 2000, poverty actually increased from 48.6 percent to 51.1 percent between 1999 and 2004. Another example is Bolivia, where, despite a 3.5 percent economic expansion during the 1995-2005 period, poverty increased from 60 percent to 64 percent.

But neoliberals who advocate reducing state involvement in the economy should learn lessons from the more successful countries in Latin America. Public spending can strengthen a free-market economy if it is targeted effectively. Traditionally, many governments have relied on party organizations to identify communities where social spending should be allocated. But that type of clientelistic mechanism rarely gets the money to the neediest communities. In many countries, if demand-side subsidies are to be effective, the state must first grow before it shrinks.

### Join The Party

Political parties in Latin America have sunk so low in popular esteem that many candidates in 2006 highlighted their personal qualities and minimized their party links. This was clearly the case with Lula in Brazil, AMLO in Mexico, and, to a lesser degree, Bachelet in Chile and Ortega in Nicaragua. Often, independent candidates find it easier to build anti-corruption and reform platforms precisely because they are not iden-

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>Nov 5, ’06</td>
<td>Second (’85-’90)</td>
<td>FSLN Frente Sandanista de Liberación Nacional</td>
<td>38.0% - 28.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Dec 3, ’06</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>MVR Movimiento Quinta República</td>
<td>62.8% - 36.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TRADE STAND** Announced support for CAFTA.

**TRADE STAND** Under Chávez, Venezuela joined the MERCOSUR. He quit the CAN but, after Correa’s presidential inauguration, said he was considering going back.
Where is Latin America Heading?

But countries with strong political party systems tend to have fewer conflicts over the legitimacy of elections. One lesson Latin American political parties should draw from 2006 is the need for a complete institutional overhaul. The popularity of outsiders—and the efforts by insiders to portray themselves as outsiders—reflects profound structural problems arising from the diminishing quality and reputation of political parties around the region. Competitive, transparent, and accountable party systems are not the automatic result of democracy. Colombia, Venezuela, and Costa Rica have seen their traditionally strong party systems deteriorate. In other countries—like Mexico and Brazil—existing parties have grown stronger but less accountable. The growth of *partidocracias* (political party oligopolies) has weakened and restricted democracy around the region.

Honest, efficient parties are as essential to the health of democracies as a well-performing hospital network. Yet, in Latin America we often see a party apparatus capturing the state and using social programs to boost clientelism. When parties stop representing their social and economic bases and instead evolve into interest groups whose goal is to capture the state to distribute pork among their militants, representative democracy becomes a farce.

In democratic institutional design, one size does not fit all. Nevertheless, some institutional features can be adopted to strengthen the party system and make it more transparent. Presidents who command minority support in the legislature must be able to form coalitions that will allow them to enjoy legislative majorities to advance their agendas. For that, institutional changes are necessary. One reform that has been proven to reduce party system fragmentation entails holding presidential elections concurrently with legislative elections—a basic tenet that is still not part of the electoral practice in several Central American countries, Colombia, and Venezuela. Another would be reducing the number of seats in districts. The state of São Paulo alone elects 70 at-large members to the 513-member Chamber of Deputies, for example.

Further steps can also be taken to foster greater accountability and transparency in political parties. In some countries like Mexico, dominant parties promote legislation that makes it difficult for their rivals to compete on an equal footing by, for example, limiting fund-raising activities, thus furthering the entrenchment of party oligopolies.

Reforms that foster more competition and transparency and lower the entry barriers for new parties will strengthen the party system. Naturally there should still be an entry barrier. Quality control and accountability are more difficult to achieve if the party system changes dramatically from one election to the next. Moreover, establishing a level playing field improves the quality of legislation and adds legitimacy to the democratic process.

**A Stronger Left**

Latin America’s left-wing parties improved their electoral performance across the region in 2006. Even in elections where conservative candidates won, the Left increased its popular support. In Mexico, the PRD obtained 30 percent of the votes and seats in the Chamber of Deputies, a 10 percent increase from the 2003 midterm election. Despite having lost the presidency, the PRD got more votes and seats since its creation in 1989. In Colombia, the presidential candidate of the Alternative Democratic Pole, Carlos Gaviria, obtained a surprisingly high 22 percent of the vote. Although his loose coalition of progressives has yet to evolve into an institutional party, its electoral strength has boosted the democratic Left’s prospects and established it as a major challenger to the country’s two major parties.

After the Cold War, the Left faced a stark reality. As one of us argued in the early 1990s, the leftist utopia was now unarmed. It is more appropriate to understand today’s Left as a diverse, loosely linked group of parties rather than a unified international movement. The militant pro-Cuban revolutionary Left of the 1960s has evolved into a diverse set of leftovers. While those who identify as leftists have remained strong—in some cases stronger than the traditional Left was during the Cold War years—leftist parties since the 1990s have attempted different strategies to reinvent themselves and to attract electoral support.
For some leaders, such as Lagos and Bachelet in Chile and Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, the Left represents reform. For others, most notably Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia, the Left embodies state control of the means of production, a failed economic model. Some, such as García in Peru, have adopted a platform of more state intervention while running their economies according to principles of the Washington Consensus. For others, like Correa in Ecuador or Ortega in Nicaragua, it is too early to tell whether the left-leaning platforms they campaigned on will be adopted once in office.

However, because the Left is strong, there is no sense in hoping that the Left will never win. The Left has won in many countries and will govern for the next few years. Moreover, if democracy is to be consolidated, the leftist governments elected in 2006 should govern to the end of their constitutionally mandated terms.

As the renovated Left gains greater ascendancy in the region, those interested in promoting growth and development in Latin America should help foster the ideological renewal of left-wing parties. Leaders will be judged for what they do in office, not for how many campaign promises they fulfill. Presidents must be pragmatic in their approach to government. And analysts should be just as pragmatic in assessing their successes and failures. Just as voters will judge governments on what they do rather than on what they say, Washington should also pay more attention to the policies implemented than to fiery speeches at campaign rallies.

Latin America has had leftist leaders who successfully promoted economic growth and who embraced programs aimed at reducing poverty and lessening inequality. They have been so rewarded in elections. The successful experience of Chile, ruled by a center-left coalition since the 1990s, has already informed other left-wing parties. It is a lesson decisively learned by García in Peru. More surprising perhaps is that Correa, often associated with Chávez, used Chile as an example during the campaign to explain what he intended to do to promote growth and reduce poverty. Lula in Brazil, whose economic performance has not been stellar but whose social programs have helped reduce poverty, is widely admired around the world. Uruguay’s Tabaré Vázquez has also inspired left-wing leaders in other countries.

Many long-time observers of Latin America were gratified to see the region’s political differences fought with ballots rather than bullets in 2006. It is a tremendous accomplishment for the region to see elections as the only legitimate political game in town. Yet, we know that elections are the easy part of the democratic process.

As newly elected governments in Latin American countries implement their policies and attempt to expand economic growth, reduce poverty, and tackle their deep inequalities, democratic structures will be put to a further test. If they fail to address the lessons from the 2006 election cycle, the world will once again associate the region with fragile democracies characterized by social and political turmoil and with the abrupt removal of democratically elected leaders. However, if they and the international community learn the right lessons from 2006, the vision of stable, developed, and vigorous democracies across the region will draw closer to reality by the time that Latin America commemorates its independence bicentennial in 2010.

Uruguay’s Tabaré Vázquez has also inspired left-wing leaders in other countries.