

LATIN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Contents

Postclassical Period
Early Modern Period
19th Century
20th Century

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Pre-Columbian Government in the Americas

Overview Many parts of the Americas did not have governments during the postclassical centuries, even in areas where some agriculture was practiced (often along with hunting). Most tribes in North America determined leadership through kinship relations (often, on a matrilineal basis; and women sometimes served as leaders directly). There was no settled state. Exceptions, of course, focus attention on the great civilizations of central America and the Andes. Here, important government structures developed. Because they were later almost literally decapitated by Spanish invasion and the ravages of epidemic disease, they did not leave a clear political legacy for the regions later on. And, on the whole, the governmental institutions were less impressive than the cultural and economic achievements of these regions, operating as they were with an essentially Neolithic technology. Key features of government recalled elements common in the Middle East and Egypt in the early civilization period, including the emphasis on the divine qualities of rulers.

Mayans Mayan government combined a belief in the god-like qualities of rulers (along with the important role for priests in the government hierarchy), substantial reliance on the aristocracy as the source of subordinate officials, and considerable decentralization. Mayan governments took shape as independent city states, ruling the surrounding countryside, rather than any overarching imperial structure. Rulers were usually drawn from a single family, with women occasionally taking the role on the basis of inheritance if the next king was not yet adult, or was away for war. After about 250 CE, or what is called the Classic period, there were as many as 72 separate city-states, though not necessarily at a single point in time. Governments concentrated on judicial functions and local public works (including roads and temple building); while there was no professional military, military service was required when necessary. Over time, while the lack of political unification did not prevent cultural cohesion and extensive internal and external trading, it almost certainly contributed to the decline of the Mayan system.

Aztecs Aztec rule, developing fully in the 15th century, continued the pattern of considerable decentralization. Conquered vassal states and their leaders were allowed to maintain operation, conditional on paying tribute to the Aztec rulers – a system that provoked a level of resentment that, later, contributed to the weakness of Aztec response to Spanish invasion. The city-state system essentially continued, with Aztec expectations simply an overlay, with local kings representing the ruling aristocratic dynasty. Villages under city-state rule chose their own headmen for local administration. After 1428 the Aztecs did apparently develop a small central bureaucracy – needed among other things to keep tribute records. The attribution of god-like status to the ruler continued in this system. The principal Aztec leader, or *Huey Tlatoani*, concentrated on external affairs – tribute, diplomacy and expansion – while another official, a close relative, handled the administration of the capital city. Both officials, though not priests, had important religious ritual tasks. A four-person aristocratic council provided advice. The central government also established some supervision – including military supervision – over the tribute states, mainly to assure the collection and storage of tribute. Because local nobles were exempt from tribute payments, they often collaborated with the system. Like the Mayans, the Aztecs emphasized a written law codes, which specified various types of crimes (including nudity and drunkenness) and the appropriate punishments, which were only to be administered by state officials. Appeals from local courts to more

centralized courts were possible. Ultimate judicial authority rested with the Huey Tlatoani, who was responsible for appointing lesser provincial judges.

Incas As with the Aztecs, the Inca empire was imposed by force, expanding rapidly from about 1000 CE onward. Inca government lacked a writing system, and kept tax records through an intricate system of knotted ropes, with decimal calculations. But this intriguing constraint did not prevent a variety of government functions – including even relocating some conquered populations to improve territorial integration. As in central America, tribute payments from conquered regions were required. But in return the Inca government facilitated food exchange and storage (vital in a mountainous terrain), state-sponsored religious feasts and rituals, and employment on public works (including an elaborate road network covering 40,000 kilometers). Kings were hereditary, and at points two may have shared rule; queens also had considerable powers, particularly in selecting the heir to the throne. The ruler, or *Sapa Inca*, was regarded as divine, and after death was mummified and “consulted” on affairs of state. However, conciliating the nobility was vital despite the emphasis on great power (a council of nobles provided advice), and occasionally a king was deposed and even assassinated. The ruler also provided charitable assistance to the populace, and maintained a second title as “Lover and Benefactor of the Poor”. Approximately 80 regional administrators oversaw locally-recruited governments, reporting in turn for four overall regional governors. Military garrisons were scattered through the vast empire to assure control. The government conducted annual censuses for tax purposes, and the officials involved were overseen by inspectors. This was, in sum, an impressive government system. But it was imposed by force, by a rather small Inca population ruling up to 10 million people. As with the Aztecs, the combination of compulsion and tribute antagonized many local groups, which in turn facilitated Spanish conquest and the surprisingly rapid collapse of the empire in the 16th century.

Study questions

1. What were the major characteristics of the decentralized political systems of central America?
2. What were the main functions of the central American state?
3. How did the Inca government system differ from its central American counterparts? What features were similar?

Further reading

Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: imperial expansion and political control* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1988)

Michael Smith, *The Aztecs* (2nd ed, Blackwell, 2009)

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Early Modern Government in the Americas

Overall Spain’s rather rapid conquest of much of Latin America and the Caribbean posed an obvious challenge for government, after a few decades in which conquerors like Columbus had a fairly free hand. The Spanish began to organize a response by the first decade of the 16th century, and ultimately laid out a rather comprehensive administrative framework (Portugal did similarly in Brazil, somewhat later). But the colonial government was plagued by the problem of finding enough bureaucratic personnel. It also suffered from the concentration on turning a profit (and the related temptation of local officials to enrich themselves). The Spanish did bring government to many regions that had lacked the structure previously, and they introduced some new efforts at justice. Their efforts also left an important legacy for the region even later on, when independence was achieved.

Structure As soon as the Spanish crown realized the potential wealth of the Americas, it began to trip to tighten its grip. A new Chamber of Commerce (House of Trade) was established in 1504, along with other regulations designed to make sure that Spain controlled all trade to the from the new colonies (though piracy and smuggling complicated this effort over time). The Chamber also tried to make sure that Spaniards who emigrated were Christians of long standing, organized taxation on trade, keeping elaborate records. Governors for each region were appointed directly by the monarchy, with some

subordinate officials for particular tasks; they had military as well as civil powers. Quickly also, from 1511, the Spanish set up a network of judicial courts (*audiencias*), taking this function very seriously. By mid-century two viceroyalties were set up (in Mexico and Peru), though this was expanded in the 18th century. Various officials were also dispatched to oversee taxation. Finally, as revenues expanded, other officials were hired to administer subregions within the viceroyalties. Administrative responsibilities deliberately overlapped, as the monarchy sought to avoid too much concentration of power in any one office. And inspectors were periodically dispatched to check on colonial officials as well.

Personnel While major officials were drawn from the Spanish nobility (care was taken not to create a privileged nobility in the Americas), staffing beneath that level could be a problem. The Spanish expanded their universities to generate more personnel. Over time, colonials of Spanish origin were also appointed to mid-level posts. But from the outset clergy were widely used as well, sometimes doubling up in their functions. And key functions were largely handled by the church in any event. Thus a series of universities were established in the Americas, with royal authorization but run by (often rivalrous) religious orders. At the local level many new cities replicated administrative structures from Spain, including a town council. But where indigenous local institutions existed they were also utilized, staffed by the indigenous noble class – though these units declined in importance as disease decimated the local population. Finally, by the 17th century fiscal constraints prompted the government to put a number of positions up for sale, which obviously weakened the quality and independence of government and created greater changes for nepotism and self-interest. Even the Peruvian vice-royalty was up for sale at one point.

Justice and rights Spanish monarchs took the task of governing the indigenous population seriously, at least in principle. Conversion to Christianity was an explicit function of the colonial state, but neither the state nor the church pressed too hard – relatively few trials for heresy occurred, for example. Peaceful conversion was the key goal, with some latitude for a fusion between traditional beliefs and the Catholic faith. From key missionaries came reports of mistreatment of the native population by early conquerors, including effective enslavement, and the state began to move against this with the Law of Burgos, 1512-3, which forbade indigenous slavery. A variety of laws sought to follow this up, and in 1550-1 a formal debate (in Valladolid) was conducted about the rights of colonial peoples, the first of its kind in Europe and, according to some historians, an early milestone in generating ideas of human rights. The worst abuses were curbed, prompting a settler revolt which was put down.

Limits on authority The effective authority of the state was limited in many ways, beginning with the issues of personnel. Missions established by various religious orders had sweeping powers in their region, including control over labor. While the most exploitative estate system was tamed, colonial landowners continued to run the haciendas with little oversight into their treatment of local labor. Indigenous people did sometimes take complaints to courts, but their success was limited and only a handful of abuses were directly contested at all.

Bourbon reforms In the mid-18th century, under a new royal dynasty in Spain, the government sought to regain greater state control. Creoles, or locals of European origins, were largely removed from administrative posts, replaced by officials from Spain. The state also sought to restrict the powers of the Church, with somewhat less effect – this would be a lingering issue in Latin American politics. (Similar moves occurred in Portuguese Brazil.) These reforms improved administrative quality and also promoted economic growth, but also created massive grievances among the Creoles, the setting from which independence movements would ultimately emerge.

British North America The British government took a far lighter role in the administration of its colonies than Spain did. Several colonies were established and administered by trading companies. Settlers themselves set up local governments, often with a legislative assembly. This provided some colonists with a more consistent political experience than was true in Latin America by the 18th century. At the same time, as in Latin America, actual government functions were often quite limited, giving great power to groups such as the slaveholding planters in the South.

Study questions

1. What were the main challenges the Spanish faced in establishing colonial administration?
2. What were the principal purposes and effects of the Bourbon reforms?

3. How did the Spanish government seek to deal with the indigenous population? What were the constraints involved?

Further reading

John Lynch, "The Institutional Framework of Colonial Spanish America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24 (1992)

J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America* (Yale University Press, 2007)

James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz, *Early Latin America: a history of colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge University Press, 1983)

Roger Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire in the Old World and the New* (4v, Macmillan, 2018)

19TH CENTURY

19th Century Latin America

Independence Most Latin American nations gained independence from Spain in the second decade of the 19th century. Independence wars were led by Creoles, who in turn were inspired by the revolutionary ideals and examples of France and the United States as well as their own grievances at being shut out of government posts during the later 18th century. For its part Spain was distracted by the Napoleonic invasions and unable to respond forcibly. Brazilian independence took a more convoluted path but began to take shape soon afterward. Most Caribbean countries remained colonies, but Haiti strikingly rebelled both against French control and slavery, winning independence and emancipation around 1800.

Goals Most independence leaders, like Simon Bolivar, hoped not only for independence but for a liberal, constitutional and parliamentary state that would guarantee the basic freedoms, including religion. A few of the new nations briefly considered monarchy but all became republics. There was no appetite for democracy – Latin American liberals lacked confidence in the masses – but they did support voting with property qualifications.

New nations problems Political reality complicated the intentions of the founders. New Latin American states encountered several problems that would prove characteristic of many new nations. First, few leaders had political experience – here, colonial exclusion proved costly. Disagreements broke out over boundaries. Bolivar, for example, had hoped for a large state extending from Colombia into the Andes, but he soon had to accept fragmentation; the same disappointment occurred in central America. Economies were hard hit, for with independence British industrial goods began to flood the market, displacing domestic manufacturing. Bitter disputes also occurred over specific issues. Liberal leaders intended to restrict the power of the Church, for example in education, but they were confronted by a conservative coalition of Church authorities, landlords and military leaders. The result was a series of policy disagreements and frequent instability.

Forms of government Through the 19th century and beyond, many Latin American countries experienced frequent changes of regime. Periodically, authoritarian leaders, or *caudillos*, seized the reins, sometimes with popular support, sometimes backed by the conservative coalition; *caudillismo* was a recurrent pattern in a number of countries, including Mexico. At the same time, periods of liberal leadership were important as well, which meant that issues such as church-state relations tended to fluctuate. Few states attempted major social or economic reforms, leaving landlord power largely unchecked.

Functions Given resource constraints and political instability, Latin American governments did not venture the kind of functional expansion that occurred in Western Europe. However, there were some important developments, particularly in the second half of the 19th century. A number of governments expanded public works commitments, most obviously in railroad development. Several took a lead in encouraging greater industrialization, though the assignment was difficult given continued Western pressure to exploit natural resources and the need to borrow capital from Western banks. However some societies, such as Argentina, made some progress. A number of government initiatives centered on efforts to reform certain

aspects of popular culture – often through legal changes. Thus in Mexico, courts of law began to impose stricter penalties for infanticide, in contrast to earlier courts that often recognized how frequently women fell victim to sexual violence. Around 1900, several societies began to attempt a new crackdown on prostitution, in part in reaction to global concerns about Latin American involvement in what was called the “white slave trade”. Though somewhat quietly, major changes occurred in education – despite frequent tensions between liberals and the Church. Mexico City for example set up compulsory primary schools for both boys and girls after 1842, and by the end of the century almost a third of all Mexicans were literate, and almost as many women and men – quite a high figure compared to most nonindustrial societies.

Foreign policy Though independent, Latin American governments faced continued pressure from Western Europe, particularly in matters of trade and finance. Interference from the United States, particularly in Mexico and Central America, increased. On the other hand, relations among the Latin American nations themselves were largely peaceful, with the major exception of a war between Paraguay and its neighbors between 1864 and 1870. This aside, Latin American militaries tended to concentrate on internal politics, where they sometimes had an outsize role. War or preparations for war did not figure strongly in government functions – another contrast with a number of other regions during the long 19th century.

Study questions

1. What are characteristic “new nations” problems, and what are their common political results?
2. How did the Latin American independence wars compare to revolutionary movements in Western Europe?
3. What were the main goals of Latin American liberals?
4. What were the main similarities and differences between Latin American governments and their European counterparts?

Further reading

Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton University Press, 2009)

David Bushnell and Neil MacAuley, *The Emergence of Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (2nd ed., University of Michigan Press, 1995)

20TH CENTURY

Latin America

Overview Generalizations about political patterns in recent Latin American history are quite difficult; different countries have had different experiences. On the whole the first half of the 20th century tended to highlight authoritarian rule, often populist in tone, though there were major exceptions. Since the 1970s more democratic, parliamentary forms have prevailed, though again with exceptions. Through the century Latin American governments (under various regimes) tended to expand their functions, particularly in adding new welfare efforts and greater involvement in economic development. Despite the frequent importance of the military in politics, aggressive policies were rare, and a number of regional trade and human rights agreements emerged from the interwar period onward. United States interference in Latin America was an important political constraint, involving direct intervention against a number of leftist governments.

Particular episodes A number of small revolutions occurred, in a variety of Latin American countries (Brazil, the Andes). The Mexican revolution of 1910 was a particularly important rising, featuring liberal protests against a longstanding authoritarian regime along with considerable peasant and urban worker unrest. By 1917, a partial compromise was reached with reduction of the power of the Church and partial but not nationwide land reforms. In 1920 a single political party, the National Revolutionary Party, gained control: independent political activity was repressed, but a single six-year term limit on the president avoided the drawbacks of more traditional one-man rule. The new regime highlighted popular culture, including indigenous culture. The revolution had some influence on political movements in other Latin

American countries. The Cuban revolution in the late 1950s, again against a dictator, ultimately led to a communist regime that emphasized education and public health advance, across racial lines, while repressing political dissent. Some linkage developed with Marxist protest efforts in the Andes region and later in Venezuela. A somewhat different transformation occurred in Costa Rica in 1948. After a brief civil war the government abolished the military and declared a policy of peace. This led to decades of stable civilian rule and a leading role in global human rights discussions, along with considerable economic development.

Major populist regimes A number of Latin American countries expanded their manhood suffrage in the period between the wars, though property or literacy requirements remained in some cases, and there was a certain amount of oscillation. Several stable parliamentary governments emerged, for example in Uruguay. But there was a strong tendency to form authoritarian, populist regimes, often after a period of instability or radical protest. In Brazil Getulio Vargas served as president for most of the period 1930-1951, seizing power as a provisional president and then holding on either through elections or simple assertion of authority. Opponents were handled through a mixture of negotiation and imprisonments. Under Vargas a host of new social measures included child labor laws, pension support for the elderly plus disability insurance, and regulations on workers' vacations –all giving him a reputation as the “father of the poor”. The state began to take a more active economic role, supporting coffee prices and agricultural diversification; introducing a policy of “import substitution”, where tariffs protected local manufacturing operations; and promoting a major steel industry. In Argentina Juan Peron, an army officer, held power frequently in the 1940s and 1950s, sometimes by fiat, sometimes through popular election. Here too, new measures sought to tackle poverty and protect workers, while opponents were violently suppressed amid severe limits on freedom of expression. Several industries were nationalized, and the regime also sought to update the nation's infrastructure. At the same time the Peronist political movement (which would outlast Peron himself) took on some fascist trappings.

Democratization From the 1970s through the 1990s, the vast majority of Latin American countries became multi-party democracies, in many cases replacing previous military regimes. Mexico abandoned its one-party system in the 1990s. Support from the European Union and the United States contributed to the trend, which was also based on a belief that liberal regimes would promote economic growth. Several governments experimented with Truth and Reconciliation commissions, to call earlier regimes to account and promote national healing. On the whole the liberal-democratic trend continued into the 21st century, but more authoritarian regimes returned in a few cases, most notably Venezuela. And governments in some parts of Central America experienced new problems in controlling criminal gangs and cartels, many associated with drug trafficking. The overall political influence of the Church continued to decline – a few nations even legalized abortion, despite Catholic opposition; and a more socially-conscious movement emerged within the Church itself. State-run education systems brought nearly universal literacy, while governments successfully sponsored other movements, for example to promote birth control.

Women's political role Postwar Latin American government also began to include strong participation by women. A few countries had granted women's suffrage between the wars, as with Ecuador in 1929, but now it became standard. Several countries, including Mexico, added provisions requiring that a certain proportion of elected officials be female. A number of women gained top political office (Chile, Nicaragua, Brazil, Argentina). Even more impressive was the high rate of officeholding in legislatures and local governments. By the 21st century women were holding over a quarter of all political positions, well above the global average and easily surpassing levels in the United States.

Study questions

1. What were the characteristics of populist authoritarian regimes.
2. How did the Mexican revolution compare to revolutions in China and Russia in the same period?
3. What were the main functions of the Latin American state in the 20th century?

Further reading

Thomas Skidmore, Peter Smith and James Green, *Modern Latin America* (8th ed., Oxford University Press, 2013)

Peter Winn, *Americas: the changing face of Latin America and the Caribbean* (3rd ed., Pantheon. 2006)

Kurt Weyland, Raul Madrid and Wendy Hunter, eds., *Leftist Governments in Latin America: successes and shortcomings* (Cambridge University Press, 2011)