POL 321: Politics of Latin America

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Course Description

For nearly two decades, nearly all of Latin America has been governed by regimes that have at least some democratic institutions and norms. Never before have many of the states in the region experienced such a significant and long-lasting absence of dictators and military juntas. While many countries in Latin America hold free and regular elections, there is immense variation in the stability, style, and performance of these systems.

Course Goals

The course aims to provide a theoretical understanding of the politics and development of Latin America, along with grounding in the history, structures, economics, and political cultures of the region. In various sections of the course we will examine: concepts of democracy and how they apply to Latin America; the role of the military in the government; how political institutions affect the quality of governance in the region; old and new actors in the political arena; neoliberal economic and political development; resurgence of the left in Latin America. We will also take in-depth looks at several of the region’s more influential nations. Students should take from the class both an understanding of the broad forces shaping the region and detailed knowledge about the politics and conditions in various countries.

Course Requirements

Participation: This is not strictly a lecture course. While lecture will be an important aspect, participation in class discussions is required. Students are expected to complete readings by the class for which they are assigned and be prepared to discuss them. Often, class will be structured around discussion of the material assigned for that and previous classes. It is important to the success of the class (and performance on exams) that you come prepared to talk about the material.

The second aspect of the participation grade is a short current events presentation made by you. During the second week of class, you will sign up for a date when you will give a 5-10 minute presentation regarding current events in Latin America and how they fit into a broader picture of democracy in the region. These presentations should be clear, succinct, and tied to politics. Useful sources for researching current events in the region:
New York Times, The Economist, Christen Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times, Times of London, BBC Latin America Service, Miami Herald, or newspapers in the region (usually in Spanish). The library staff will be more than happy to show you how to access these resources. You need to provide me with copies of some of the articles on which your presentation is based.

Exams & Quiz: Knowing where a country is and the essential ‘facts on the ground’ are necessary to understand the political development of any region, including Latin America. To get the course started off, there is a quiz on the geography and basic political information about Latin America. This is not a midterm, but a short quiz.

There is a midterm. It is about midway through the course. Like the final, it will likely involve a mixture of short-answer/ID questions and essay questions. More details about the exam will be given in class prior to the exam.

To finish up, there is a final. It is cumulative in nature with a heavy focus on the second half of the course.

Paper: This course requires you to write a research paper focusing on the democratic development and performance in a Latin American country. Further details about the paper will be handed out in the first couple weeks of class. However, note that a portion of the paper grade is based on turning in a paper topic and preliminary bibliography (4 sources) in the 5th week of class. Also, the quality of the writing in the paper will count toward your grade on the assignment. If you need to improve your writing skills, the writing center in the library is more than happy to help you.

Course Readings

There are two required reading materials for the course. The first is Democracy in Latin America by Peter Smith (Oxford University Press) and is available at the bookstore. The second is a course packet that can be purchased at Sir Speedy on W. Jackson. Readings with only page numbers are from the Smith book, all other are in the course packet.

Grading

For calculating the final course grade, the assignments will be given the following weights:

Participation/Current Events: 10%
Map & Info Quiz: 10%
Paper Topic & Bibliography: 10%
Midterm: 25%
Paper: 20%
Final: 25%
Some notes on grading and related class policies:

- Students are expected to attend scheduled exams and complete assignments by their due date and time. Exceptions to this are only granted in the most unusual of cases with appropriate documentation. If seeking such an exception, the student must contact me in advance. For written assignments, late papers are penalized 5 points per day beginning immediately after the class in which the paper is due. No assignment will be accepted more than 5 days late without documentation of a medical or other emergency.

- Requests for incompletes must contain 1) a written explanation of the need for the incomplete and 2) a medical report, establishing the need for the request.

- You need to use your university email. I will send email messages to the course list which will automatically reach your university email account. You are responsible for making sure you receive and read the messages.

- While I too check email regularly, my preferred method of helping students is in person. My office hours are on Monday and Wednesday (2-3:30) and I am more than happy to meet with a student at another time that we can arrange. It is difficult to give good answers to complex questions (like many we study in this course) over email; thus, I prefer to keep email usage to notifications of illness, absence, arranging a meeting, or other organizational or simple questions.

- The course is graded on a curve. Individual assignments are not adjusted; the final course grades are curved. Assignments are graded using a points system that is roughly equivalent to: A+=96.7-100, A = 93.4-96.6, A- = 90-93.3, B+ = 86.7-89.9, B = 83.4-86.6, B- = 80-83.3, and so on.

- Note that plagiarizing is not just “borrowing” words, but also includes using ideas without a citation and many instances in between. Suspected violations will be subject to disciplinary action according to University policy. If you have questions, please consult the University’s M Book.

- **Political Science Grade Policy**
  Grades lower than “C” in political science courses will not be counted toward the political science major.

See the course schedule (on blackboard) for reading assignments.