Latin America: socio-economic perspectives post Covid-19 and "súper ciclo electoral"

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Introduction

2022 finds Latin America (Latam) still struggling with the sanitary, economic, political, and psychological effects of the Covid-19 world pandemic, which deepened the numerous difficulties faced by the already troubled region. Foxley Rioseco & Derpich Araya (2020: 11) report a cease in 2013 of the 10-years process of convergence between most Latin American countries and advanced economies GDP, in per capita PPP terms. In just six years, the former lost most of their gains of the precedent decade when convergence rose from 29.5% to 35% in the 2003-2013 period, to end in 30.5% by 2019. The pandemic was still to worsen the global scenario with millions of deaths. No less than 1.699 million persons died from Covid-19 in Latam as of July 19, 2022 (Statista). Besides, problems like the aggravation of security and human rights issues (Zovatto, 2021: 50) have contributed to feed the political stress.

An electoral super cycle is taking place during 2021-2024 in Latam, "where all countries, with the exception of Bolivia, will renew their presidents and congresses by direct vote […] in a context marked by an unprecedented shock of economic paralysis with dramatic social consequences, a profound crisis of confidence and discontent against the institutions and the elites, added to an uncertain international scenario, all of which constitutes a true litmus test for regional democratic stability" (Zovatto, 2021: 46). This cycle comes after two major series of events. The most salient because of its multiple effects and extension is the covid pandemic that arrived in the Western hemisphere in 2020. A second condition that might be influencing already the electoral results of the super cycle is the historical *pink tide* occurring in Latam since 2018 in several countries now governed by left or center left presidents. Both subjects are analyzed next, in two respective sections.

The multiple costs and political opportunities of Covid-19 for Latin America

The pandemic tested the soundness of institutions and the adequacy of public resources to deal with the worldwide health emergency and the economic downturn on the one hand, as well as the quality of Globalization and connectedness, on the other. The more restrictive conditions in the African continent to respond to the external threat could have resulted in a major disaster, but its low physical connectivity played a role in containing the spread of the virus. In the region, it proved to be a disaster: "Although COVID-19 arrived late in Latin America (the first cases were detected at the end of February 2020), already in May 2020 the region was declared the epicenter of the pandemic" (Bianculli, 2021: 65). Not far from it, the United States showed equivalent results in the relative number of deaths (ECLAC, 2022: 18), caused by its own social arrangements and cultural profile.

Crisis resulted to be multidimensional and to have many implications. Only one of them was the sanitary. The emergency demanded States to limit economic contraction in order to revive the economic activity, to act as the last resort of personal income for the mitigation of the decline of population's well-being, and to guarantee universal public social services to contribute to sustainable development with rights (ECLAC, 2022: 28).

Every government had to decide how to channel efforts in such a way that its response was a political decision. This is illustrated by Mexico's case: when its Secretary of the Treasury announced the economy partial lockdown, he indicated that the crisis to come would be "by design" and that conditions were solid to finance enterprises and households (Escobedo & Becerra, 2022: 9, 10). Against the international trend and the criticism/opportunism of the opposition, president López Obrador decided not to compromise his macroeconomic objectives and not acquire any debt. Only fiscal money was allocated to the economy, so GDP had an 8.2% contraction in 2020 (Expansión, 2020a) but public debt also reduced in real terms (Expansión, 2020b). The official narrative said that this would avoid allocation to the sectors that least required it, charged to the country's prospects at the expenses of the poor. Domestic lockdown was not forced. Instead, population was called to responsibility and solidarity to face the multidimensional crisis. The expected results in saving lives were not obtained, due to structural problems and, probably in some measure, also due to *infodemy* (term coined by McGrath, 1997 and Davison, 1997), circulated

either by political interests or ignorance. According to *The covid conspiracy* survey (p. 10), 47% of Mexicans (N=1054, ages 18-65) admit difficulties to distinguish among true and fake news on covid (Freiheit.org, 2020, cited in Escobedo & Becerra, 2022: 10). All in all, the structural economic conditions of Mexico remained relatively healthy both to resume growth and to celebrate presidential elections in 2024 with high possibilities for the governing party to remain in power.

The Mexican strategy was not the same as that of the region, but it is one that make it possible to clearly observe that State decisions on health issues are always and everywhere a matter of politics, national projects and, in some cases, business. It will be the assessment of the results of each government in all dimensions, which constitutes the perceived reference for decision-making at the electoral polls.

The electoral super cycle and the *pink tide*

Even though the pandemic remains active as of July 2022 and is present in Latam in its fourth or fifth wave, its morbidity and mortality rates have lowered due to the massive vaccination of population. Around the first quarter of 2021 most economies reopened worldwide and started a rapid recovery, even if as a bounce response. Specifically, Latam and the Caribbean zone have resumed economic growth to 6.9% GDP in 2021. These figures are expected to continue to 2.3% and 2.2% in the next two years (Banco Mundial, 2022). However, new crises loom or already occupy the world scenario, so cooperation is considered a necessity not yet attended (Bianculli, 2021; Deciancio & Quiliconi, 2022; Zovatto, 2021). Interregional cooperation would produce better conditions for the countries to resist emergencies and even benefit from the opportunities they might bring along. Also, it could conform a continental identity at least in the political imaginary where national realities and symbolic arrangements meet. For a region of the size, community of problems and cultural affinities present in Latam, the super cycle might host or even impulse a "package of electoral decisions" the way it has happened in previous cycles.

Before the pandemic outbreak, the Latin American political map started a new swing in the electoral pendulum to the left of the spectrum, electing nine *progressive* governments in recent years, in a trend called *pink tide*. In the 2018 – 2022 period, a total of 17 presidents

took office in the continental Latam countries, as shown in Table 1. In most cases it is the president who makes his political position explicit since lobbying and campaigning. In a couple of cases their election platforms, government programs and actions take key elements of both sides of the spectrum in such a proportion that presidents must be considered in the center, just not to be called hybrids.

TABLE 1. GOVERNMENTS' POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND SHARE IN LATAM SUPERCYCLE, JULY 2022

COUNTRY	PERIOD	PRESIDENT	GDP PPP *	LATAM SHARE %	POPULATION **	LATAM SHARE %
CENTER						
Costa Rica	2022-2026	Rodrigo Chaves	128,134	1	5,154	1
Panama	2019-2024	Laurentino Cortizo	158,608	1	4,351	1
PARTIAL			286,742	3	9,505	2
RIGHT WING						
Brazil	2019-2023	Jair Bolsonaro	3,680,942	33	214,326	35
Ecuador	2021-2025	Guillermo Lasso	228,025	2	17,798	3
El Salvador	2019-2024	Nayib Bukele	69,314	1	6,314	1
Guatemala	2020-2024	Alejandro Giammattei	185,473	2	17,608	3
Paraguay	2018-2023	Mario Abdo Benítez	107,554	1	6,704	1
Uruguay	2020-2025	Luis Lacalle	94,783	1	3,429	1
PARTIAL			4,366,091	39	266,179	44
LEFT WING						
Argentina	2019-2023	Alberto Fernández	1,195,581	11	45,277	7
Bolivia	2020-2025	Luis Arce	117,877	1	12,079	2
Chile	2022-2026	Gabriel Boric	568,319	5	19,493	3
Colombia	2022-2026	Gustavo Petro	940,589	8	51,517	8
Honduras	2022-2026	Xiomara Castro	69,388	1	10,278	2
Mexico	2018-2024	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	2,890,685	26	126,705	21
Nicaragua	2022-2027	Daniel Ortega	46,757	0	6,851	1
Peru	2021-2026	Pedro Castillo	513,715	5	33,715	6
Venezuela	2019-2025	Nicolás Maduro	160,132	1	28,200	5
PARTIAL			6,503,043	58	334,115	55
LATAM			11,155,876	100	609,799	100

*Gross Domestic Product based on Purchasing Power Parity calculated in international dollars as of April 2022.

**Population as of July 2021.

Source: Author's own calculations based on GDP PPP data from IMF (2022) and Demographic indicators from UN (2022). Also, Zovatto (2021) and diverse official sites.

Brazil's GDP PPP accounts for 33% of the region, and 35% of its population. Along with different surveys (Genial/Quaest for instance: América Economía, 2022), the former left-wing president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is a clear favorite over Jair Bolsonaro to win elections in October 2022 (Denvir, 2022). In the case of the president retaining power, proportions (Latam shares) remain as presented in table 1. However, if the ex-president's advantage is ratified at the polls, the regional composition of GDP PPP and demography would end as shown next.

TABLE 2. GOVERNMENTS' POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND SHARE
IN LATAM SUPERCYCLE, JANUARY 2023.
PRESIDENCY OF LUIZ INÁCIO LULA DA SILVA IN BRAZIL

COUNTRIES	GDP PPP*	LATAM SHARE %	POPULATION	LATAM SHARE %
CENTER 2 COUNTRIES	286,742	3	9,505	2
RIGHT WING 5 COUNTRIES	685,149	6	51,853	9
LEFT WING 10 COUNTRIES	10,183,985	91	548,441	90
LATAM TOTAL	11,155,876	100	609,799	100

*Gross Domestic Product based on Purchasing Power Parity calculated in international dollars as of April 2022.

**Population as of July 2021.

Source: Author's own calculations based on GDP PPP data from IMF (2022) and Demographic indicators from UN (2022).

As shown, the likely triumph of the left in Brazil in October 2022 would add to a *pink tsunami* rather than a mere tide in Latam. Partisanships or *voto duro* taken apart, decisions in ballot boxes are made in accordance with some variables, as perceived by the voters: 1. The prevalent conditions of the country and locality at the time of the elections. 2: The efficacy of governments and the formal/informal opposition associated to those conditions. 3:

Regional and global affairs, as well as institutional and markets arrangements. In this case, the Covid-19 aftermath may play an important role in the political configuration of the continent. Of course, the circumstances, the errors of the opposition and the ability to present an inclusive offer for masses and capital, in tune with geopolitical strategy, play an opportunity role for the regional swing voting, in this case, for the inclination to the left or center left.

Conclusions

It must be clear that political decisions in voters are a complex phenomenon. This means that there is no correspondence among the multiple fields where social facts occur, and the narratives that citizens construct to valuate and act upon their environment. Non-linear nature of human mind processes brings some consequences. First, responses are not necessarily proportional to the stimulus, meaning some of these may go unattended while others can be overreacted. Regular people will in some crucial cases perceive and contest States in unexpected ways. Second, even in the absence of interaction or media guidance, oftentimes responses synchronize and conform trends. Contrary to what hard partisans do, regular people can unite once they coincide in their perception and integrate civilian forces of thought and action.

While electoral super cycle is a convergence of processes in time, an objective fact that constitutes a framework to analyze a regional political arrangement, the pink tide (or tsunami) is a phenomenon of subjective nature, produced by countless causes, already in progress and uncontrollable in its major part. Neither mechanical explanations nor hypothesis of chance explains what is proper to social complexity (Becerra, 2017). However, regression analysis sheds some lights on the voting swings. Torrico and Solís (2020) inform:

> We found that positions for or against the United States and the ideology of voters are the main factors that explain it, although social class, trust in political institutions, the ideology of the government in office and gender are also important of the voter. Indigenous belonging favors voting for left-wing options when that division has previously been politicized. However, there are very large national variations with respect to regional trends, which shows the heterogeneity of the region.

It is necessary to observe the electoral pendulations in Latam as produced by like local processes and regional responses, and to propose the effective interaction in form of accompaniment and cooperation among governments and local forces to meet the complex and urgent challenges of the times. The probable vote for Lula da Silva would not only add to the biggest swing to the left in Latam; it might also constitute a chance for the region to come up as a more integrated, functional, and thus reliable and resilient one, for the benefit of its peoples.

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