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Have Latin Americans Really Swung to the Left?

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Abstract:

The 1990s saw a shift to the left in Latin American politics. However, there no studies comprehensively analyze political ideology and its determinants in Latin America during and after this period. Using survey data from 1996-2010, this paper makes two contributions. First, it finds that political ideology is determined by subjective perceptions on the state of the economy and society. Second, it finds that the probability of being more leftist has not significantly increased. Two theories that argue that political outcomes do not necessarily reflect the political ideology of the median voter are reviewed to explain the findings.

Key words: Left-wing swings, Political ideology, Cross-country, democracy, populism, panel data analysis, Latin America.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s Latin American politics has seen a decisive shift toward more left-leaning leaders. Beginning with Hugo Chavez's election in Venezuela in 1998, the onset of the new millennium has seen left-wing leaders take office in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, while in Mexico left-wing leaders became major opposition candidates in recent elections. Never before in Latin American history have so many leftist parties or movements been in power at the same time (Madrid, 2010).

Much of the literature argues that two types of leftist movements have emerged in Latin America in recent years. A more liberal left (social democratic), which have embraced market-friendly policies, and a radical left, characterized by populism, expanded public expenditures and greater intervention in the economy (Castañeda, 2006; Weyland, 2009; Madrid, 2010). The extant literature on the rise of left-wing movements in Latin America has by and large focused on explaining these divergent paths through historical/geopolitical (Castañeda, 2006), resource-related economic (Weyland, 2009), socio-economic (Madrid, 2010), macroeconomic (Remmer, 2012) or institutional (Flores-Macías, 2010) factors. It is beyond the scope of this study to critically discuss these reasons; suffice to say that whatever the reason, it is often suggested that the rise of leftist movements in Latin America coincided with a left-ward shift in political ideology within the region since roughly 1998 (Arnson, 2007). This paper asks whether Latin Americans have gone to the left.

This proposition has not been adequately tested in academic literature. Instead, previous work has relied on limited observations and aggregate level data to question this proposition. For example, Seligson (2007) and Remmer (2012) use AmericasBarometer and LatinoBarómetro data from 2004 to 2006, respectively, to show that even though more "leftists" have gained power in the region, the median Latin American voter remains right of center by world standards. Similarly, in a study on revealed voter ideology based on electoral outcomes in 48 elections in Latin America in the period 1996-2008, Baker and Greene (2011) suggest that voters' policy opinions have shifted from mildly pro-market to a preference for centrism.

There are, however, a number of limitations with these studies. First, Seligson (2007) and Remmer (2012) only rely on data from 2004 to 2006, which does not accurately capture the possible shifts in political attitudes that supposedly started in the late-1990s within each nation. Moreover, that period of study also ignores the rise of radical leftist presidents in region, such as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina, 2007), Rafael Correa (Ecuador, 2007), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua, 2007), Álvaro Colom (Guatemala, 2008), and Fernando Lugo (Paraguay, 2008). Second, Baker and Greene (2011) assume that electoral outcomes reveal whether voters have become more left-wing. However, voting left does not necessarily imply a shift in political ideology to the left. For example, in theory, and possibly in Venezuela in 2005, voting left may reflect the fact that there were no suitable candidates on the right.¹ Baker and Greene (2011) also rely on solely 48 observations, which makes it impossible to account for within-country variations in political behavior.

This study revisits whether Latin Americans have indeed become more left-wing by addressing the aforementioned shortcomings in a variety of ways. It primarily uses a longer and more frequent time-span to study the possible transition in political attitudes from the mid-1990s until 2010. Additionally, it gathers over 100,000 individual-level observations from survey data from 18 countries. In turn, the use of better quality data has the following benefits. First, it allows for a robust calculation of the probability of being leftist within each country at each year. To accurately measure this probability, the paper first estimates a more comprehensive model of the key determinants of political ideology in Latin America. This model builds on Lewis-Beck and Ratto (2013) by accounting for not only perceptions of the countries' economic performance, but performance on social indicators, as well as a comprehensive set of individual-level characteristics. An additional benefit of the data is that it allows for the use of country-level fixed effects, which are used to study within, rather than between, country variations in political ideology over a decade and a half. Finally, the use of this data set also allows the study to focus on personalized political perceptions, rather than aggregate political outcomes. In other words, it makes no assumptions about the relationship between voting behavior and political ideology.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the data and methodology. Section 3 discusses the empirical results. Section 4 reviews two prominent hypotheses that explain the results. Section 5 concludes.

2. Data and methodology

LatinoBarómetro is chosen for this study over the World Values Survey (WVS) and the AmericasBarometer data set based on considerations of both country-coverage and time-span. The WVS starts in 1981 and ends in 2008, however its coverage of Latin America is limited to nine countries and most of these countries only have data for one or two years. The AmericasBarometer, on the other hand, covers 11 nations in 2004, 22 in 2006, 24 in 2008, and 26 in 2010. However, its year coverage does not allow for a more comprehensive investigation of changes in political ideology since before the onset of the new millennium.

This paper merges data from LatinoBarómetro surveys from 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010 in order to understand the components that explain political ideology in Latin America. LatinoBarómetro surveys are undertaken by a Chilean non-profit organization that annually interviews about 19,000 people about public opinion matters in 18 countries in Latin America. The country coverage includes data from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela—giving a total of 115,234 observations over the period. The survey years are chosen due to survey compatibility and data availability, however, these years pick up a major political transition in the region with leftist leaders gaining power throughout the period.

The dependent variable in this study is similar to those used in previous studies that rely on public-opinion questionnaires. The surveys asked the following question: 'In politics, people normally speak of left and right. On a scale where 0 is left and 10 right, where would you place yourself?'.² Ideally, to test whether Latin Americans have experienced a significant swing to the left in recent years, we would use this variable to estimate the following equation,

$$PS_{i,j,t} = \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}, \quad (1)$$

where $PS_{i,j,t}$ is the political ideology (ranging from 0 to 10) of individual i of country j in period t and γ_t is a vector of time dummies used to determine whether $PS_{i,j,t}$ has changed through time. However, LatinoBarómetro does not survey the same individual every year. That is, the sample of people, as well as the number of people, surveyed in each country varies from year to year. As a result, it is possible that changes in political ideology between years may be evident solely because a larger sample of left or right wing people were surveyed in a given year, rather than because political values have really changed. In order to correct for this potential problem, this study estimates the following equation,

$$PS_{i,j,t} = \gamma_t + \theta_j + \beta X_{i,j,t} + \varepsilon_{i,j,t}, \quad (2)$$

where $X_{i,j,t}$ is a vector of individual characteristics, such as age, gender, occupation, and level of education, which control for different individual-types being surveyed each year. Additionally, community-level characteristics are also included in the models. Moreover, some models also include θ_j , which is a vector of country fixed effects used to control for time-invariant unobserved country-level characteristics, such as persistently high levels of inequality, poverty or labor market rigidities, which could potentially influence political outcomes. Furthermore, country-level fixed effects allow for the interpretation of the regression coefficients as *within* country changes, meaning that the coefficients capture changes in political ideology within each country and summarize them for the entire region.³ Finally, $\varepsilon_{i,j,t}$ is an idiosyncratic error term. Given the ordinal nature of the responses to political ideology, Equation (2) is estimated using ordered probit techniques. This provides a simple way of interpreting the results by calculating the probability of lying somewhere within PS using marginal effects.

The following control variables make up vector $X_{i,j,t}$ in Equation (2). These reflect what most scholars agree are important determinants of political outcomes internationally (see for example Leigh, 2005). In the absence of income data, the empirical analysis uses subjective income, which asks respondents if they make sufficient money to meet

their basic needs using a scale of 1-4. Additionally, the regressions use a control variable that asks respondents to rank their family financial situation from poor (1) to excellent (5). In a similar fashion, respondents are asked to rank the economic situation of their country.

A number of demographic indicators are also employed as individual-level control variables. A dummy variable equal to one is used if a respondent identifies themselves as Catholic. A Gender (male) variable is employed to capture the gender gap in political ideology. The respondents' age and marital status is also identified, as well as their years of education. Using LatinoBarómetro classifications, labor market indicators are also employed. For example, if a person is a doctor, a lawyer, an executive, etc. then he or she is identified as a professional. Additionally, given that the last decade has seen an increase in the number of informal workers in most Latin American nations (Weller, 2012), the regression analysis also controls for whether a person works in the informal economy as, for instance, an ambulant seller or hawker. Furthermore, the regression analysis controls for individuals that are classified as students (usually more radical and leftist), unemployed, stay-at-home workers, small business owners or farmers. In addition to country fixed effects, the regressions control for whether a person lives in a capital city or another urban center. These latter controls are particularly important given that the sampling design employed by the LatinoBarómetro has changed over time – early on, the design was heavily urban, and only in later years has the survey tried to develop more nationally-representative samples. The proportion of urban dwellers within each sample-year go some way toward correcting for this bias.⁴

The regressions also include a dummy variable equal to 1 if the respondent has access to the internet. It is hypothesized that in some societies the rise of free social media is likely to lead to increased awareness of wrongful acts and possibly political radicalization (Posso and Elkins, 2014). Finally, 'rule of law' and victim of crime are employed in order to control for people's perception of safety as well as the quality of institutions in their country, which has been suggested as an important determinant of political ideology in Latin America (Selingson, 2007). Victim of crime is a dummy variable equal to one if the respondent or their families have been victims of any crime. Rule of law is a composite index of five questions, including (1) people's opinion on whether there is equality before the law, (2) if the respondent believes that people comply with laws, (3) if the respondent thinks that people demand their rights, (4) if the respondent believes that people are aware of their obligations and rights, and (5) if the respondent thinks that people in their country are honest. Each question is then converted into an ordinal indicator ranging from 1 (excellent) to 5 (nothing) and then summarized to create a composite index. Table 1 presents the summary statistics.

Table 1: Summary statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Right to left scale (0-10)	115,234	5.37	2.76	0	10
Male	115,234	0.51	0.50	0	1
Subjective income	115,234	2.56	0.85	1	4
Country, economic situation	115,234	3.46	0.93	1	5
Family financial situation	115,234	2.96	0.80	1	5
Catholic	115,234	0.74	0.44	0	1
Age	115,234	38.66	15.80	15	98
Married	115,234	0.58	0.49	0	1
Years of education	115,234	9.04	4.48	0	15
Professional	115,234	0.07	0.26	0	1
Student	115,234	0.08	0.28	0	1
Unemployed	115,234	0.06	0.24	0	1
Stay-at-home	115,234	0.20	0.40	0	1
Informal worker	115,234	0.14	0.35	0	1
Small business owner	115,234	0.07	0.25	0	1
Farmer	115,234	0.03	0.17	0	1
Has internet	115,234	0.92	0.27	0	1

Capital city dweller	115,234	0.15	0.36	0	1
Urban dweller	115,234	0.51	0.50	0	1
Victim of crime	90,113	0.38	0.49	0	1
Rule of law	85,220	2.49	0.63	1	4.4

Source: Calculations based on data from LatinoBarómetro (various years).

3. Results

The purpose of this section is twofold. First, it presents the results of Equation (2) in order to discuss the determinants of political ideology in Latin America. Second, it presents a probabilistic analysis in order to analyze whether the average Latin American in each of the 18 countries that are included in this study has become more likely to identify themselves as left-wing during the period from 1996 to 2010.

The results from the estimation of Equation (2) are presented in Table 2. The coefficient estimates in the table are interpreted as changes in the probability of self-classifying as more right-wing (or less left-wing) as measured by the 0-10 ordinal scale and not be interpreted as magnitude changes. Each Column in Table 2 considers a slightly varied specification. For instance, while all columns employ year fixed effects, only Columns 1, 3 and 5 also include country-fixed effects. Additionally, rule of law and victim of crime are excluded from Columns 1 and 2 in order to maximize the number of available observations. Overall, the preferred specification is given by Column 1, as it has the largest number of observations while the coefficient estimates from the other columns are consistent with those results. Finally, the Chi-squared p-value presented at the bottom of each column provides a measure of goodness of fit for the models.

Table 2 indicates that individuals with a higher subjective income or individuals whose family has a strong financial situation are more likely to self-classify as right-wing. Similarly, individuals who believe that their country is doing well economically are more likely to be toward the right of the ordinal scale. On that note, previous studies have found that a country's economic condition given by, for example, GDP growth rates and inflation do not determine political preferences (Roberts, 2012). These results, however, show that personalized perspectives on economic variables—that is personal perceptions on the state of the economy as well as personal finances—, rather than macroeconomic variables, can determine political ideology.

Turning to the demographic variables, older respondents as well as those that identify themselves as Catholic are more likely to be on the right of the political scale. However, married individuals and more educated people are more likely to place themselves toward the left of the scale. Similarly, those who live in capital cities are more likely to be left-wing than right-wing, although those who live in other urban centers are more likely to be right-wing than left-wing. It is not surprising that those in large urban-centers are more right-wing since these centers are usually large business hubs. However, the finding that people that live in capital cities are more likely to be on the left-side of the political scale is new. Perhaps, this stems from the fact capital cities are most often the focus of mass protest and political rallies, which could result in more political debates, more political activity and greater radicalization. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon may be present in the virtual world. Table 2 shows that people with access to the internet are more likely to be toward the left of the political scale. This is consistent with recent findings in political science that note that the internet is increasingly used as a tool for protest by mainly leftist movements (Illia, 2003; Carty and Onyett, 2006; Posso and Elkins, 2014).

Turning to labor market variables, Table 2 shows that professionals, those that stay at home, small business owners and farmers are all relatively more right wing. The majority of people that stay at home are likely to be care-givers, in turn, these types of people have traditionally been found to be more conservative (Inglehart and Norris, 2000). Professionals, small business owners, and farmers are also traditionally more intertwined with right-wing, business-focused, neo-liberal politics. The remaining labor market variables are found to be statistically insignificant.

Overall, Table 2 finds that demographic, labor market variables, and personalized perspectives on economic performance all influence political ideology. Therefore, changes in these variables are likely to lead to changes in political outcomes in the region. For instance, the region's recent spell of high economic growth is likely to lead to a left-ward shift in political ideology. However, the analysis presented below shows that the probability of being left and the distribution of political ideology in the region does not characterize a swing to the left. For instance, the time dummy variables presented in Table 2 highlight that the probability of being right-wing increased in 1998 and 2002, relative to 1996. However, the coefficient estimates attached to the years 2004-2010 indicate a swing to the left. Overall, during the period the table shows small changes in political ideology, with the shift to the left in later years counteracting a previous shift-to the right in the late 1990s. In other words, there is no overall change in political ideology after 1996 because by the late 1990s people swung to the right, but by 2006 people swung back to the left by the same amount. Therefore, although there are significant changes in ideology, these oscillate toward the right and back again, without people becoming more left-wing than in 1996. Furthermore, the marginal effect of a time trend estimated using Equation (2) without time fixed effects (available upon request) shows an overall positive effect of time on the probability of self-classifying as right-wing, *ceteris paribus*. The analysis that follows builds on these findings with the use marginal effects

from the results of Column 1 in Table 2 to estimate predictions or probabilities of lying somewhere in the political ideology scale at fixed values of the covariates presented in Table 2.⁵

Table 2: Determinants of political ideology in Latin America

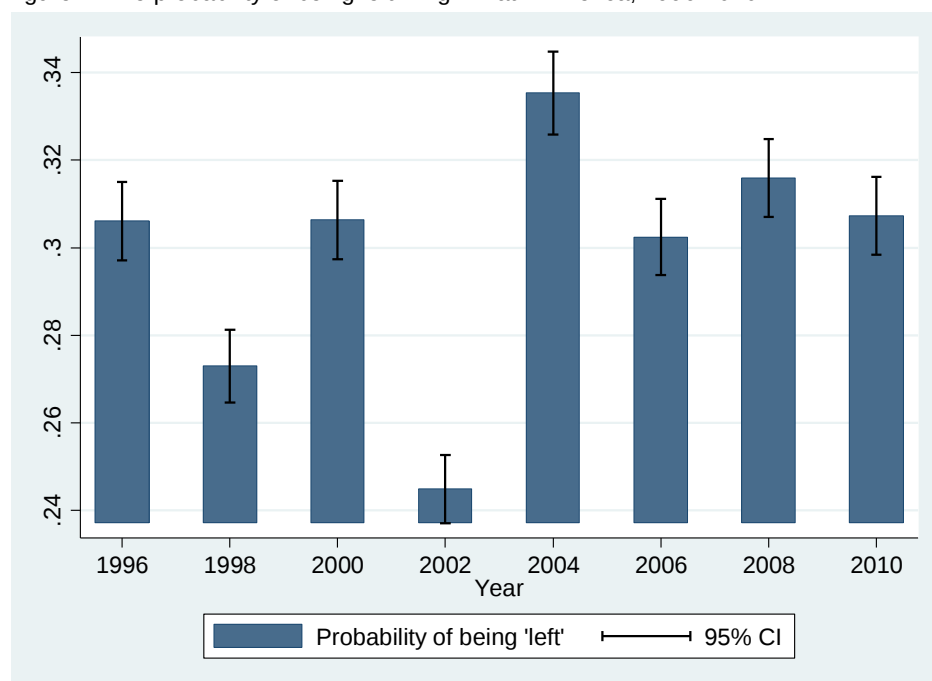
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Male	-0.0068 [-1.00]	-0.016** [-2.39]	-0.012 [-1.49]	-0.021*** [-2.70]	-0.01 [-1.09]	-0.020** [-2.17]
Subjective income	0.0082** [1.98]	0.0094** [2.24]	0.0090* [1.86]	0.0076 [1.55]	0.0077 [1.34]	0.0099* [1.70]
Country, economic situation	0.025*** [6.58]	0.039*** [10.1]	0.024*** [5.46]	0.039*** [8.64]	0.023*** [4.35]	0.040*** [7.53]
Family financial situation	0.035*** [7.71]	0.031*** [6.65]	0.034*** [6.59]	0.029*** [5.35]	0.027*** [4.28]	0.020*** [3.11]
Catholic	0.099*** [14.0]	0.098*** [13.4]	0.12*** [14.4]	0.11*** [13.2]	0.11*** [11.2]	0.11*** [10.5]
Age	0.0035*** [16.0]	0.004*** [18.5]	0.0032*** [12.2]	0.004*** [14.2]	0.003*** [8.64]	0.004*** [11.0]
Married	-0.026*** [-3.89]	-0.013* [-1.89]	-0.021*** [-2.66]	-0.0077 [-0.98]	-0.028*** [-3.00]	-0.013 [-1.42]
Years of education	-0.007*** [-8.71]	-0.004*** [-4.60]	-0.004*** [-4.34]	-0.0012 [-1.26]	-0.005*** [-4.31]	-0.00045 [-0.39]
Professional	0.023* [1.83]	-0.0017 [-0.14]	0.024* [1.68]	-0.0035 [-0.24]	0.061*** [3.65]	0.023 [1.34]
Student	-0.014 [-1.14]	-0.0047 [-0.38]	-0.021 [-1.47]	-0.0089 [-0.62]	-0.01 [-0.60]	0.0045 [0.26]
Unemployed	-0.0093 [-0.68]	-0.023* [-1.73]	0.0022 [0.14]	-0.014 [-0.86]	-0.011 [-0.61]	-0.024 [-1.31]
Stay-at-home	0.053*** [5.47]	0.033*** [3.44]	0.058*** [5.20]	0.040*** [3.53]	0.062*** [4.60]	0.043*** [3.19]
Informal worker	-0.0041 [-0.41]	-0.0089 [-0.87]	-0.00079 [-0.063]	-0.0033 [-0.26]	0.013 [0.93]	0.015 [1.05]
Small business owner	0.037*** [2.89]	0.015 [1.11]	0.050*** [3.30]	0.027* [1.73]	0.055*** [3.20]	0.035** [1.99]
Farmer	0.075*** [3.60]	0.073*** [3.50]	0.052* [1.90]	0.052* [1.90]	0.071** [2.41]	0.066** [2.22]
Has internet	-0.24*** [-11.2]	-0.22*** [-10.2]	-0.24*** [-11.4]	-0.22*** [-10.3]	-0.24*** [-11.2]	-0.21*** [-9.90]
Capital city dweller	-0.12*** [-10.7]	-0.10*** [-9.26]	-0.11*** [-8.26]	-0.073*** [-5.33]	-0.085*** [-5.82]	-0.062*** [-4.04]
Urban dweller	0.032*** [3.56]	0.018** [2.00]	0.040*** [3.69]	0.035*** [3.14]	0.056*** [4.62]	0.041*** [3.19]
Rule of law		-0.067***	-0.069***	-0.075***	-0.071***	-0.071***
Victim of crime					-0.053***	-0.056***
Year Dummies						
1998	0.098*** [7.96]	0.097*** [7.36]	0.062*** [4.52]	0.093*** [6.68]		
2000	-0.0015 [-0.12]	-0.010 [-0.82]	-0.021* [-1.69]			
2002	0.19*** [15.5]	0.050** [2.49]	0.045** [2.21]	0.038* [1.79]	-0.093*** [-4.47]	-0.091*** [-4.37]
2004	-0.11*** [-8.71]	-0.10*** [-7.51]				
2006	-0.0058 [-0.48]	-0.035*** [-2.58]				
2008	-0.051*** [-4.31]	-0.085*** [-6.13]	-0.081*** [-5.49]	-0.094*** [-6.03]	-0.21*** [-14.9]	-0.22*** [-15.1]
2010	-0.029** [-2.41]	-0.057*** [-4.05]	-0.057*** [-3.80]	-0.043** [-2.05]	-0.17*** [-8.48]	-0.18*** [-8.54]

Country FE?	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Observations	115,234	115,234	85,220	85,220	60,258	60,258
Chi-squared p-value	0	0	0	0	0	0

Notes: Robust z-statistics in brackets, ***, **, and * denote statistical significance at the 1, 5 and 10 per cent levels, respectively.

Figure 1 shows that the probability of being left-wing, as classified as those individuals that score strictly below 5 in the political scale, has not significantly changed in Latin America from 1996 to 2010 after controlling for the range of variables summarized in Table 2. Overall, the figure shows that the probability of Latin Americans being toward the left of the political scale is approximately 29 per cent. This probability peaked in 2004, at approximately 34 per cent, although this peak was short-lived with probabilities returning to around 30 per cent (pre-2004 levels) after 2006. This suggests that there was a small swing to the left in 2004, which was followed by swing to the right.

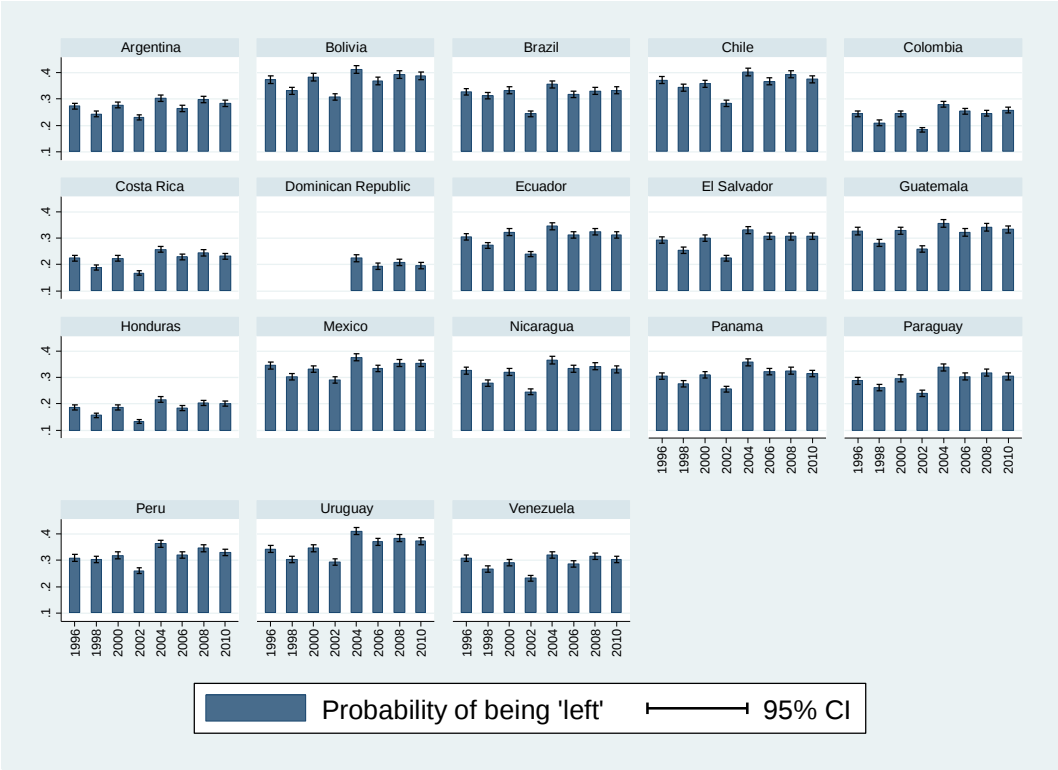
Figure 1: The probability of being left-wing in Latin America, 1996-2010



Note: Calculations are based on the results of Column 1 in Table 2. Calculations using results from the estimation of Equation (1) and other columns in Table 2 give similar results. Left-wing is defined as anyone who scores strictly below 5.

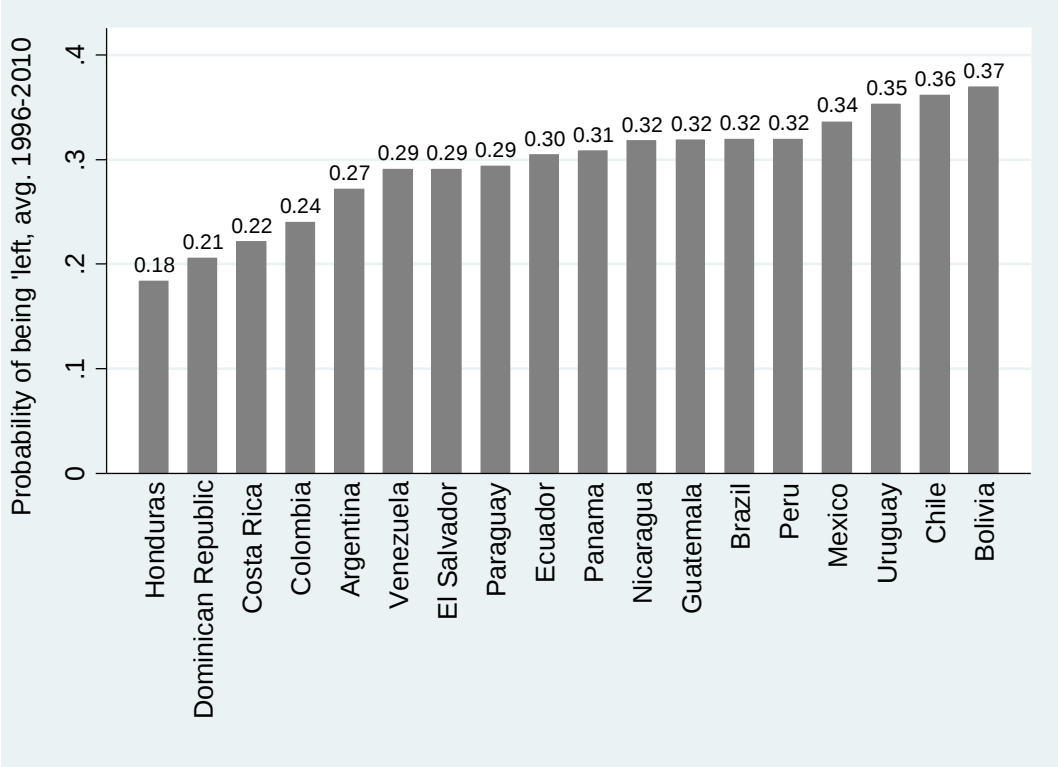
Figure 2 replicates the exercise in Figure 1 for each country individually. The figure reveals that there is generally no clear swing to the left within any country in the sample. In fact, most countries exhibit a probability of being classified as left-wing at around 30 per cent with a standard deviation of around 3 per cent. Further, the figure shows that some countries are on average more 'left-wing' through the entirety of the period. Figure 3 summarizes that information by showing the probability of being 'left' by country. The figure shows that the probability of being left-wing in Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica and Colombia is on average less than 25 per cent throughout the period. On the other hand, the probability of being left-wing is above 35 per cent in Uruguay, Chile and Bolivia. It is important to reiterate that although variations in probabilities exist between countries, there is no evidence of changes in probabilities within countries.

Figure 2: The probability of being left-wing in 18 Latin American republics, 1996-2010



Note: Calculations are based on the results of Column 1 in Table 2. Calculations using results from the estimation of Equation (1) and other columns in Table 2 give similar results. Left-wing is defined as anyone who scores strictly below 5.

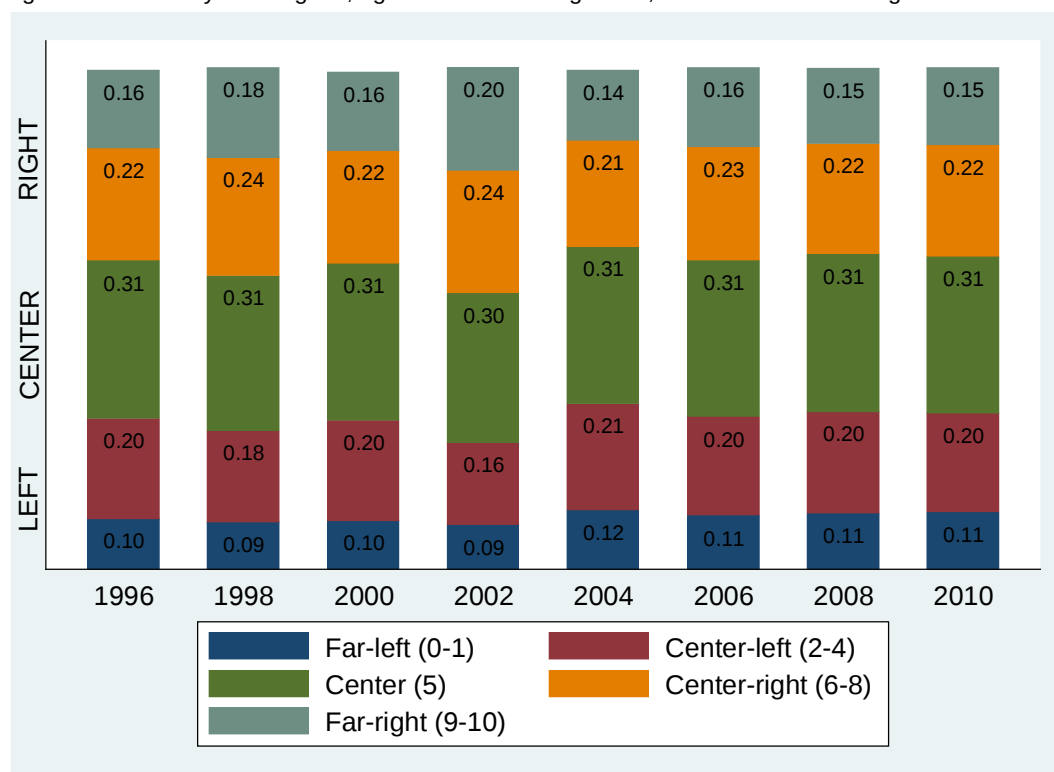
Figure 3: The probability of being left-wing in 18 Latin American republics, average over 1996-2010



Note: Calculations are based on the results of Column 1 in Table 2. Calculations using results from the estimation of Equation (1) and other columns in Table 2 give similar results. Left-wing is defined as anyone who scores strictly below 5.

Figure 4 summarizes the general findings discussed in Figures 1-3. As above, probabilities are calculated using the results of Column 1 in Table 2. Additionally, Figure 4 expands upon the previous analysis by introducing probabilities of being defined within 5 political categories— far-left (score of 0-1), center-left (score of 2-4), center (score of 5), center-right (score of 6-8), and far-right (score of 9-10). Moreover, the figure presents the estimated probabilities of lying within each category within each bar. As above, the figure shows very little variation in political ideology across time. For instance, the probability of being categorized as far-right always hovers around 15 to 20 per cent, similarly the probability of being center-right is, throughout this period, around 20 per cent. While the probability of being center-left or far-left is around 20 and 10 per cent, respectively. Finally, throughout 1996 to 2010 Latin Americans had a 30 per cent chance of self-classifying as centrist after controlling for a range of personal characteristics.

Figure 4: Probability of being left, right or center through time, Latin American average.



Note: Calculations are based on the results of Column 1 in Table 2. Calculations using results from the estimation of Equation (1) and other columns in Table 2 give similar results. Far-left respondents are those with scores of 0 and 1. Centre-left respondents are defined as having a score of 2-4. Centre respondents have a score of 5. Centre-right respondents have a score of 6-8. Far-right respondents have a score of 9-10. Estimated probabilities are depicted within each bar.

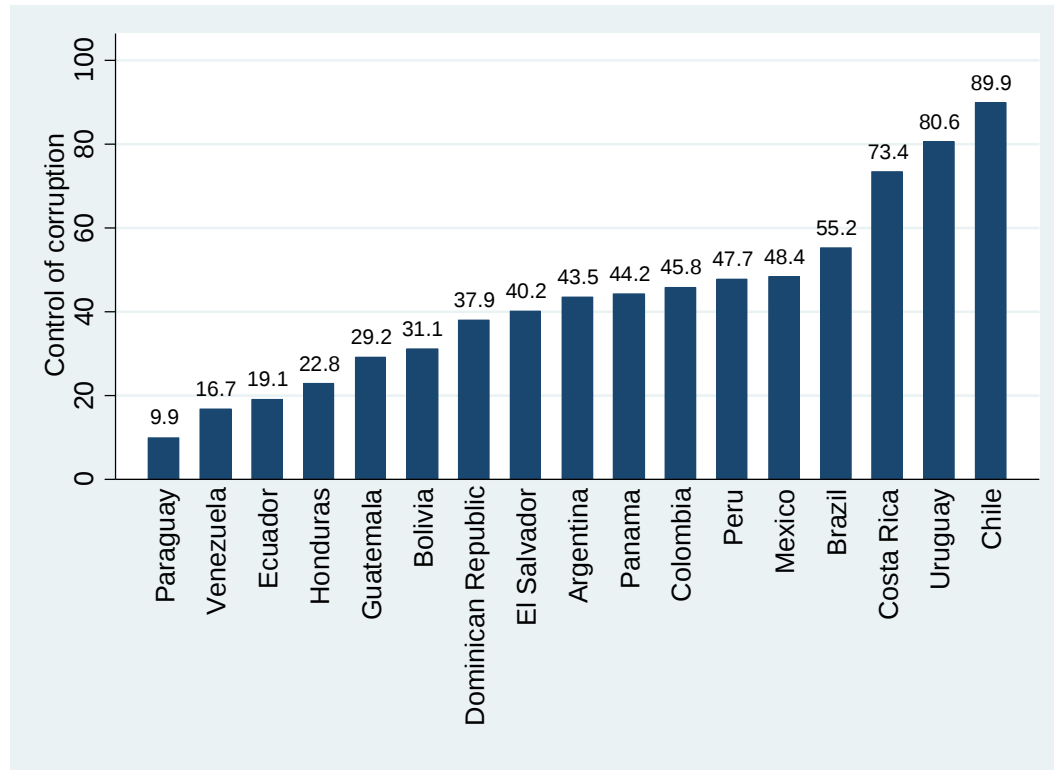
4. Reconciling the results with extant theory

Overall, the study finds that not only have Latin Americans not become more left-wing, but also that there is no evidence to suggest that political ideology has changed in the region in the last decade and a half. Proponents of the median voter theorem would therefore expect that elections in Latin America result in either center-left or center-right candidates gaining power. Even though this may explain the circumstances surrounding Chile, Colombia and Mexico, they definitely do not explain political outcomes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, where radical leftist (Chavista) regimes have gained power. There are at least two prominent theories that argue that political outcomes do not necessarily need to reflect the political ideology of the median voter. These theories could, therefore, explain how leftist leaders have come to power in the absence of a change in political ideology in the region.

First, Acemoglu et al. (2013) suggests that politicians choose rhetoric left of the median voter to signal that they are not beholden to traditional interests that are seen as more corrupt and are associated with persistent high levels of inequality. The authors argue that with higher levels of corruption and cronyism, politicians will have to adopt more radical rhetoric to make this signal more obvious. Figure 5 examines this proposition by plotting control of corruption data by country. ⁶ For ease of interpretation, the data is in percentile rank terms ranging from 0 to 100, where a higher

rank indicates that the country is perceived to be less corrupt. Overall, the figure is consistent with the proposition of Acemoglu et al. (2013). Mainly it shows why nations such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have adopted more radically left rhetoric compared to Costa Rica and Colombia. However, the figure fails to explain the rise of leftist, albeit not radical, regimes in Uruguay and Chile, where control of corruption has been highest.

Figure 5: Control of corruption in Latin America, average 1996-2009.

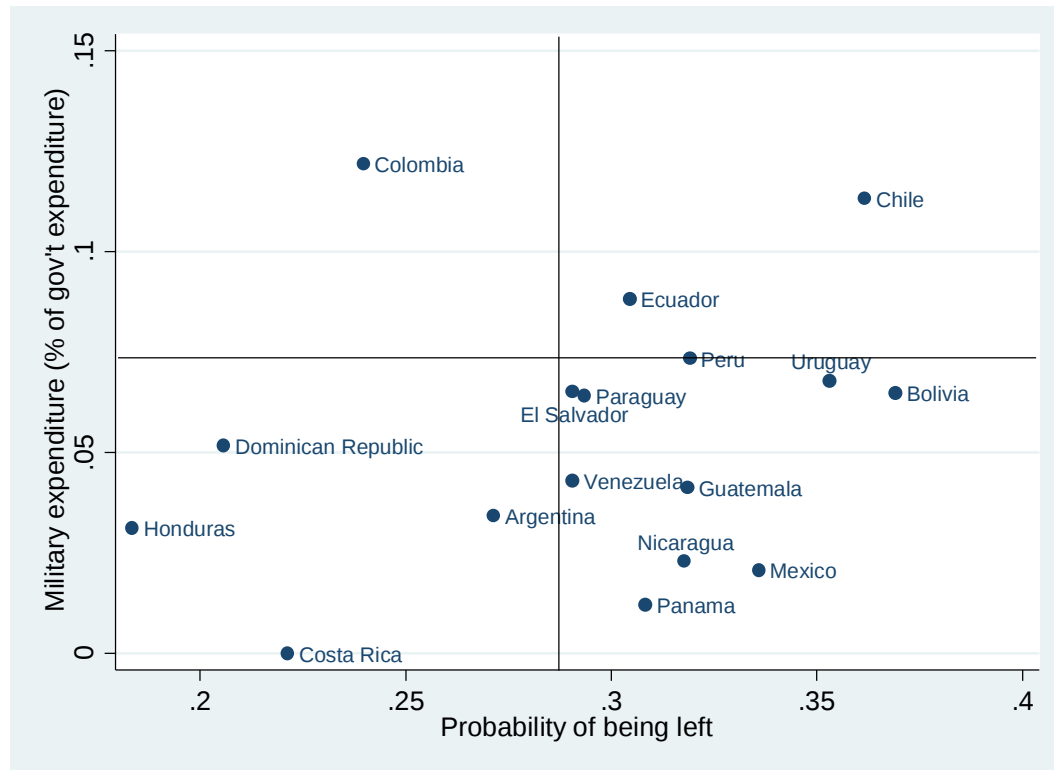


Source: Kaufman et al. (2009).

Second, Leon (2014) proposes that the rise of the left is owed to a mixture of high levels of inequality and the political bias that the military takes within a country. Military institutions have been traditionally strong in Latin America and, according to Leon (2014), they tend to hold a balance of power, which can sway political outcomes using the constant threat of a *coup d'état*. Basically, if the military is more pro-poor than pro-rich, then right-wing governments have a greater chance of being deposed by force by the military. Therefore, leftist governments, in this case, have a greater chance of taking hold and maintaining power. Leon argues that the experience of Venezuela under Chavez and Peru under Alan Garcia fits this description. Unfortunately, data on the political ideology of military personnel in Latin America is not available. However, if it is assumed that the political ideology of military personnel mirrors that of the rest of the population, then countries with a larger military presence that are also more leftist could be more likely to have left-wing regimes.

Figure 6 undertakes a preliminary empirical test of this hypothesis. It proxies for the political strength of the military with military expenditure as proportion of GDP.⁷ The figure then plots this variable against the probability of being left-wing for each country. It then divides the data into four quadrants. The upper right-hand quadrant contains those countries with a political important military that are more leftist. According to the figure, Ecuador and Chile are more likely to have leftist governments than Costa Rica and Honduras. Importantly, Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela are not too far from this quadrant, indicating that the proposition in Leon (2014) can perhaps explain some of the disparities in political outcomes within the region.

Figure 6: Probability of being left versus military expenditure, Latin American average, 1996-2010



Note: Calculations using results from the estimation of Equation (1) and other columns in Table 2 give similar results. Left-wing is defined as anyone who scores strictly below 5. Military expenditure is expressed as a percentage of government expenditure.

Source: Authors calculations and Military Expenditure Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

5. Conclusion

This paper questions whether the rise to power of Hugo Chavez, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, and several other leftist leaders in Latin America is owed to a change in political ideology across the region. Using over 100,000 observations from LatinoBarómetro surveys held across 18 countries from 1996 to 2010, the panel data regression analysis finds that the probability of being more leftist has not significantly increased in Latin America. Instead, the paper finds that most people in the region are more likely to place themselves toward the center of the political scale.

According to the median voter theorem, this finding would suggest that elections in Latin America should have resulted in either center-left or center-right candidates gaining power, which does not explain electoral outcomes in a number of countries. Two prominent hypotheses are therefore used to explain how leftist governments could have come to power in the absence of an increase in leftist political ideology. The first theory suggests that politicians choose rhetoric left of the median voter to signal to voters that they are willing to fight traditional interests associated with high inequality and corruption. The second theory suggests that since the military remains an important political force in Latin America, when this institution is pro-poor, leftist governments have a greater chance of staying in power. Even though further research is needed to test these hypotheses, there is some preliminary support for both theories using cross-country data.

In order to accurately calculate changes in the probability of being left using survey data, this paper first controls for the determinants of political ideology in Latin America. This exercise, in itself, gives a series of interesting findings. For example, a number of demographic indicators, labor market characteristics, personalized perspectives on economic performance, as well as perceptions on the quality of institutions (such as rule of law) influence political ideology in Latin America. This suggests that the general state of the macro-economy is not necessarily what determines political outcomes— an assumption of previous studies. Instead, it is how people within each country perceive the state of the economy and society that potentially influences the way they vote. In particular, the interaction of individuals with their economies and society and how they and their families fare in the aftermath of macroeconomic shocks can better explain people’s political alignment. Additionally, the paper finds that capital-city dwellers are significantly more likely to self-identify as being left, even though other urbanites are more likely to classify themselves as right. It is argued that

capital cities experience more political interactions, such as protests, rallies, and debates, which may result in greater radicalization.

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Endnotes

¹ In fact, Lupu (2010) shows that Chavismo voters in Venezuela are increasingly characterized as middle class, rather than the traditionally leftist poor-working class. This may have occurred because Chavez successfully weakened the opposition in Venezuela to the extent that they boycotted the elections in the 2005.

² As in Remmer (2012), it is noted that the distinction between 'left' and 'right' is sufficiently meaningful in Latin America to allow individuals to identify themselves within an ordinal scale ranging from 0 to 10.

³ The use of country-fixed effects, which allows for coefficient estimates to be interpreted as within country changes is also important because sample sizes are different across countries, which could potentially overestimate the degree of change or stability among attitudes. Therefore, using within country estimators makes this problem negligible. Additionally, as robustness test year-country (combined) dummy variables were included into the regressions for each country in each wave. The results of this exercise are consistent with the general model.

⁴ The author is thankful to an anonymous referee for making this point.

⁵ Similar calculations were undertaken using results from the estimation of Equation (1) and the other columns in Table 2. The results, available upon request, are similar to those presented in the figures in this section.

⁶ Control of corruption is sourced from Kaufman et al. (2009) and defined as the extent to which public power is perceived to be exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as "capture" of the state by elites and private interests.

⁷ The data is sourced from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.