

Who Is Left to Credibly Judge Latin America's Elections?

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Opinion

SANTIAGO, Chile — Throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, people have lost confidence in elections and politicians. And just as voters are questioning the democratic process, the traditional watchdogs of electoral integrity — multilateral groups like the United Nations and the Organization of American States and others — are being undermined by governments throughout the hemisphere on both sides of the ideological spectrum.

The twin pressures of declining trust in elections and support for those who guarantee voting integrity create a problem: Who is left to credibly judge what may be controversial elections in the coming months in two of the region's biggest countries, Mexico and Brazil?

Over the past 30 years, election observer groups have helped establish internationally respected standards for free and fair elections, protected voters' rights in those elections and defused political upheaval when sore losers have tried to steal elections or contested results. This happened in the Dominican Republic in 1994, Peru in 2000, Mexico in 2006 and Ecuador in 2017.

The power of neutral observers to defend free elections rests on a commitment from a government holding an election to the idea that these organizations have the right and authority to determine whether the voting was fair. That commitment is under assault.

In November of last year, the Trump administration rushed to embrace the contested re-election of President Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras, an American ally, even after observers from the European Union and the Organization of American States raised concerns about the integrity of the vote counting.

And last month, when President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela invited the United Nations to observe presidential elections, it was widely viewed as a farce. The election was denounced by the European Union and 14 countries in the hemisphere as a sham, rigged to re-elect Mr. Maduro. Knowing that election monitors would not have independence, the United Nations stayed away.

Instead, Mr. Maduro invited bogus election monitoring groups like those from the Union of South American Nations and the Latin American Council of Electoral Experts — groups that have been called “zombie election monitors” — to “accompany” or certify the process but with no pretense of objectivity.

Organizations like these were created and supported by authoritarians like former President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua to give their elections a veneer of legitimacy and to counter the power of legitimate, internationally recognized election observers.

The silence of many Latin American heads of state as authoritarians have undermined election observers or stolen elections has compounded the problem. In one glaring example, President Evo Morales of Bolivia rejected the results of a referendum that denied him standing to run for a fourth term even though international observers had certified the integrity of the vote. The region’s governments failed to call out Mr. Morales’s efforts to distort the results.

Just as electoral standards are fraying, citizens’ trust in elections and their outcomes is plummeting. According to Vanderbilt University’s AmericasBarometer, from Canada to Argentina, citizens’ confidence in their electoral processes has dropped to 39 percent in 2016-17 from 61 percent in 2004, and trust in political parties has sunk to about 17 percent from a high of about 24 percent in 2010.

The lack of trust in electoral systems is stark in Brazil and Mexico.

Mexicans will elect a new president on July 1, yet only some 26 percent of its citizens trust elections. In Brazil, which will have its first round of presidential elections on Oct. 7 — and, if no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, — which looks likely, a second round on Oct. 28 — only 23 percent of its citizens trust the electoral process.

In Mexico, the populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has a sizable lead in the polls, will make a third attempt at the presidency next month after his loss in 2006 ended in street protests in which he had himself sworn in as the legitimate president. And Brazil is confronting one of its most fractious and polarized elections in its 33-year democracy.

Who will be in Mexico and Brazil to help calm political chaos should any candidate contest the results in these deeply polarized countries?

To reverse this dangerous slide of trust of independent election observers, multilateral institutions and governments in the region must stop turning a blind eye to the illegitimate groups that lack basic professionalism and objectivity and denounce their efforts to hijack the professional, standards-driven field of election observation.

The international community — including the European Union and the United Nations — should put pressure on Latin American countries facing elections this year to support the efforts of legitimate international election observers.

Legitimate monitors must be invited into Latin American countries. Candidates and governments, including the United States, should pledge ahead of balloting to respect the judgments of these groups. Unless candidates and governments are willing to take these steps, electoral standards and voters' rights will continue to decline and with them citizens' confidence in the most basic of democratic processes: voting.