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Governance Compared: Autocracy and Democracy in Latin America

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Introduction

The past several years have witnessed a dramatic democratic decline around the world. In both established democracies and hybrid regimes, anti-democratic and populist forces have challenged the notion that democracies are better for their citizens.¹ Leaving aside values-driven arguments, authoritarian and populist leaders have touted the narrative that they are better at delivering to their citizens' needs than democratic leaders. They then use such arguments to justify rolling back the rule of law and eroding checks and balances where they exist, while preventing either from taking root where they are not already present.²

While this narrative may hold weight with some citizens, its legitimacy has not been tested.³ That is, we do not know who is better at governing—autocrats or democrats. Repression and chilling environments for free expression, often found in autocracies, contribute to a lack of critical appraisals of governance deliverables. Thus, comparisons with democratic societies that permit vocal disdain for governance performance can be difficult.⁴ Additionally, lack of free access to information and limited pluralist deliberations about government policy enable autocracies to mystify their governance performance and hide their failings, thus manipulating the constrained political discussions that do occur among citizens.⁵

To critically evaluate claims that autocratic states are better at governance than democratic states, especially in the Global South, we designed a project comparing governance outputs in four regions of the world: the Middle East and North Africa; eastern, western, and southern Africa; Southeast Asia; and Latin America. To examine the diversity of governance models and the variance in performance across these regions, we focus on four country case studies from each region. The cases represent both democratic and authoritarian governments, and vary in terms of governance performance—ranging from high to low—in economic, social, and political outputs.

In this article, we evaluate the Latin American cases—Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Uruguay—to test whether autocracies or democracies in the region are better at delivering on governance for their citizens. Ultimately, we argue that democracies in Latin America outperform autocracies on governance metrics.

To assess how well countries in the Global South are delivering on governance outcomes, we defined four categories of governance indicators. The first includes socioeconomic indicators such as employment, poverty, income disparities, and access to services such as education, healthcare, and subsidies. An important aspect of this type of indicator is exclusion, meaning how access to services is distributed by gender, political group, social group, urban-rural location, and socioeconomic position.

A second category describes another important aspect of governance: access to information. This includes variables such as transparency, academic freedom, arrests for free speech and political content, social media use by the public and elites, government internet filtering capacity and practice, government capacity to regulate online content, and government involvement in the dissemination of false information.

A third category covers traditional political indicators including rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances, and control of corruption. This also includes political equality measures like educational equality, health equality, and power distribution by gender, sexual orientation, social group, and socioeconomic position.

The fourth category encompasses one of the more intangible aspects of governance—civil liberties, including access to justice, equality before the law, freedom of expression and association, freedom of domestic movement, freedom of foreign movement, freedom of religion, and property rights.

In Latin America, we selected two more democratic governments that differ significantly in governance outcomes: Uruguay, which demonstrates high performance, and Colombia, which continues to face economic and social shortcomings and is confronted with political challenges that threaten social cohesion and democratic stability. We also selected two more autocratic governments: Bolivia, which exhibits relatively coherent economic and social performance (when compared to other authoritarian countries in the region), and Cuba, where governance crises are persistent and unresolved. In all four governance categories discussed in this article, both democracies project stronger performance than both autocracies. Importantly, many countries do not neatly fall into one regime type category. Rather, some of our cases (most notably Bolivia in the Latin American context) represent a hybrid model between democracy and autocracy. The 2025 elections in Bolivia are one example. The Movement for Socialism (MAS) candidate—whose party had held power in Bolivia for nearly twenty years—did not advance to the second round of the presidential elections, and the party lost almost all its seats in the legislature, but MAS made clear that it would accept the final election results.

These four cases (Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Uruguay) were selected for their individual characteristics as well as their applicability to the wider region. In addition to their different regime types and governance outcomes, we selected the cases to ensure variety. The cases span the region, with a Caribbean case (Cuba) and northern (Colombia), central (Bolivia), and southern (Uruguay) South American cases. They represent large and small countries, in both population and land mass. They include some of the wealthiest (Uruguay) and poorest (Bolivia) in the region. They represent countries that have been ravaged by civil conflict and weak institution-building processes, and those that have experienced a more peaceful history and built strong institutions. Furthermore, they are countries that are underrepresented in the literature.

Latin America's Pink Tide and Changing Governance Realities

At the start of the twenty-first century, Latin America experienced a momentous shift toward left-leaning governments in a movement known as the Pink Tide, following decades of right-wing governments. The regimes brought to power by the Pink Tide were largely opposed to neoliberal economics, supporting instead moderate socialist agendas.⁶ Bolivia is a strong example of the impact of the Pink Tide, as Evo Morales rose to power in 2005 thanks to his leftist ideology. His presidency was characterized by the nationalization of several key industries as Morales attempted to engender social safety for his country and the indigenous population in particular. Morales's tenure came to a controversial end, however, when he tried to override term limits and manipulate institutions to perpetuate his power.⁷ Colombia is one of the few Latin American countries to have avoided the Pink Tide in the 2000s, but this shifted in 2022 when President Gustavo Petro, a former guerilla revolutionary, won the election and ascended to the presidency on promises of wide-ranging economic and social reforms as Colombia's first leftist president.

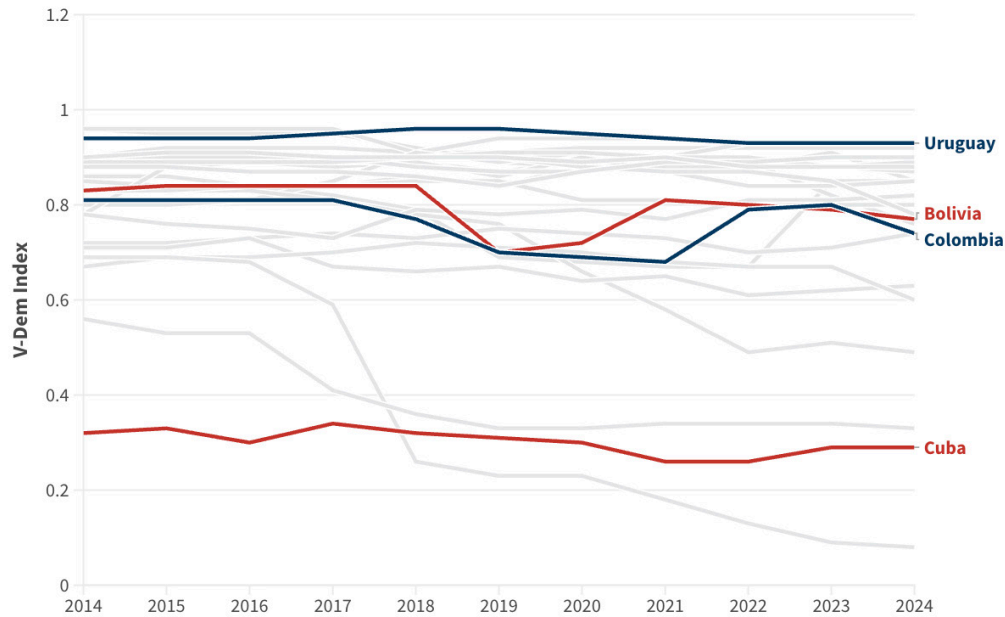
While Bolivia and Colombia have both vacillated politically in recent years and experienced seismic shifts in their approaches to governance, Cuba's and Uruguay's systems of government have remained relatively steady. Uruguay has been democratic since 1985, and Cuba has been autocratic since 1959. While both countries' forms of government have been constant, their governance outcomes have varied from each other. Cuba especially has continued to fail in its duty to provide for its citizens' basic needs. Uruguay's government, conversely, has delivered solid governance to its citizens, including free education and universal healthcare.

To investigate the workings of the four categories of governance in our Latin American cases, we conducted field work in Miami, Bogotá, and Montevideo in June 2025.⁸ In each city we met with a variety of civil society activists, academics, journalists, and political

Comparative Governance Indicators for Select Latin American Countries

Civil Liberties Index

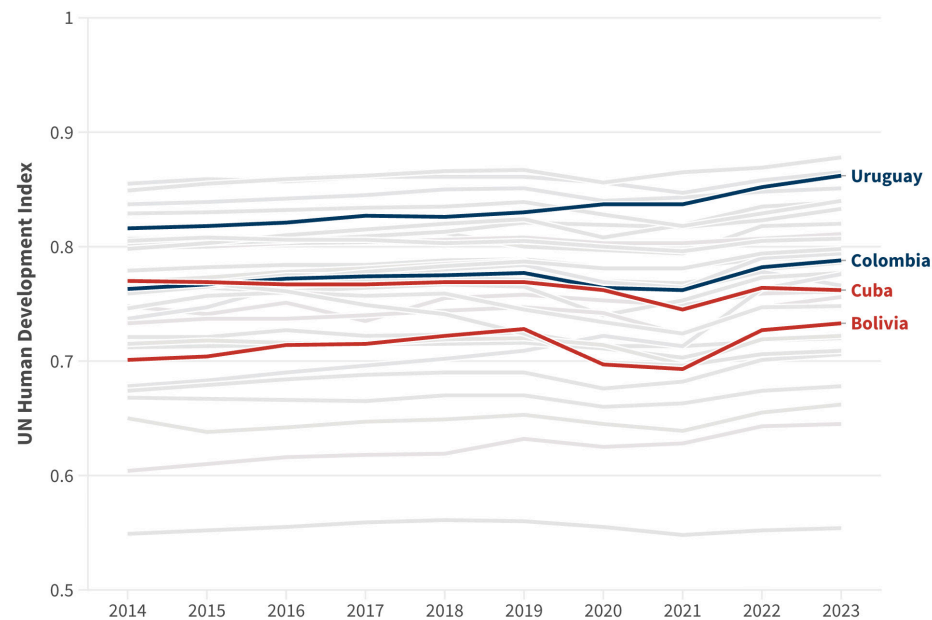
Type of Government: — Democratic — Autocratic



Source: "Country Graph," V-Dem, accessed November 17, 2025, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

Human Development Index

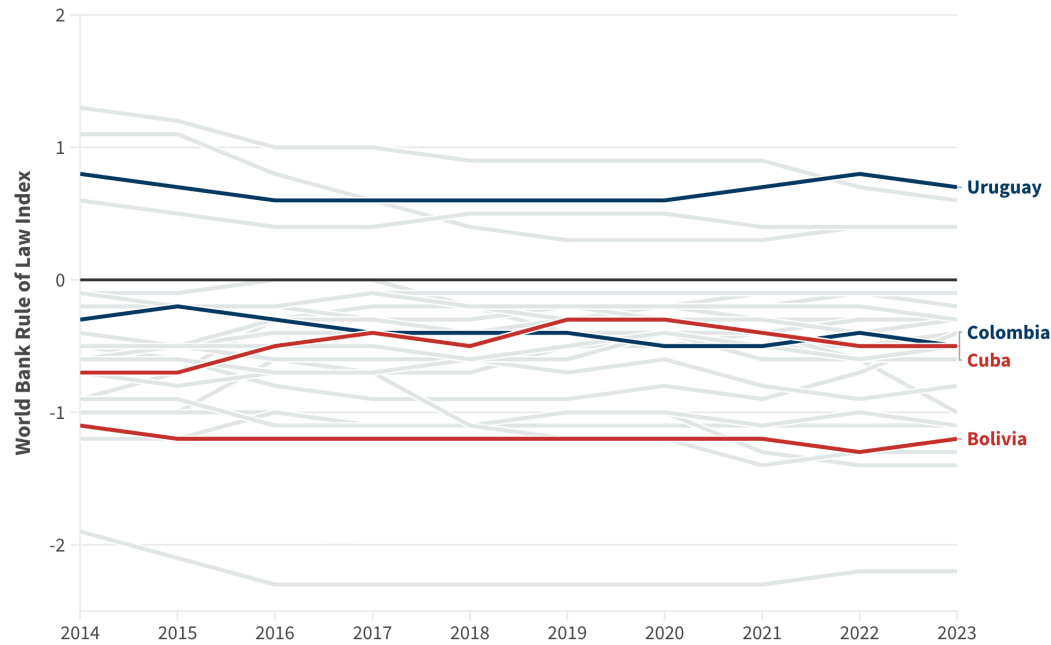
Type of Government: — Democratic — Autocratic



Source: "Human Development Reports," United Nations Development Programme, accessed November 17, 2025, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

Rule of Law Index

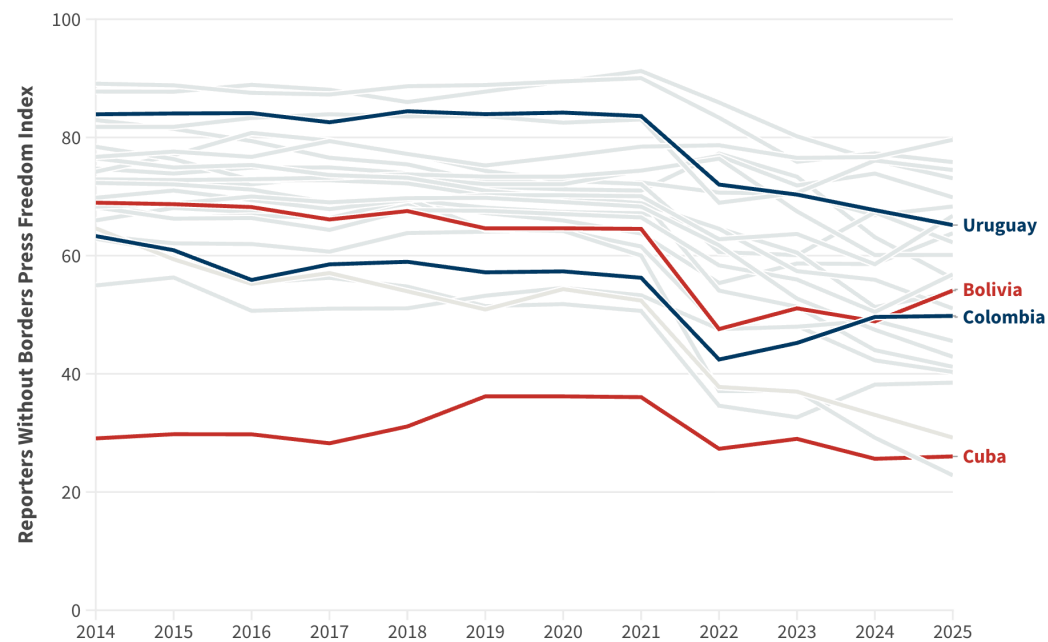
Type of Government: — Democratic — Autocratic



Source: "DataBank: Worldwide Governance Indicators," World Bank, accessed November 17, 2025, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators/preview/on>.

Access to Information Index

Type of Government: — Democratic — Autocratic



Source: "2024 Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, accessed November 17, 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2024>.

figures to understand the key governance challenges facing each country and the impact of regime type on governance. We also investigated, using the results and insights of public opinion surveys (see Annex 1), the popular perception of governance issues in each case. We conducted virtual interviews with experts on Bolivia as well as in-person interviews with Washington, DC–based experts on the four countries chosen.

Governance in Latin America is an amalgamation of strong and weak institutions, entrenched elitism, corruption, and a lack of integration between rural and urban areas, but also features strong civil society organizations. These four cases—Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Uruguay—highlight the complex interplay of government type and governance outcomes that we seek to better understand.

The Relationship Between Regime Type and Governance: A Literature Review

There is no clear consensus in the literature as to whether democracies or autocracies are better at governing nor whether regime type contributes to economic growth. There is, however, a generally accepted hypothesis that democracies tend to perform better on socioeconomic welfare because democracies, by design, represent the will of the people writ large, and are therefore more likely to respond to the demands and concerns of the people. Furthermore, because democrats must win elections to stay in power, they need to deliver. And democracies tend to have lower levels of corruption, making them more efficient in providing services. Autocrats, in contrast, are not at risk of being voted out for lack of performance and therefore are, generally, less concerned about effective or efficient service delivery. A competing hypothesis, however, argues that autocracies are more easily able to push through policies, whereas democratic leaders must work in coalitions and compromise, and autocrats can therefore impose economic reforms, provide social services, and distribute goods as they see fit, in a more efficient manner than democrats.⁹

Many studies attest to the unique advantages offered by democratic governments. Several large-N studies have found a clear connection between increasing levels of democracy and increasing access to public goods, such as healthcare and education.¹⁰ Scholars have also noted that democracies are more stable than autocracies. Dani Rodrik finds that democracies produce less economic volatility and are better at handling shocks than autocracies.¹¹ Meanwhile, Carl Henrik Knutsen notes that while democracies are not likely to experience very high rates of economic growth, they also are not likely to experience “the extreme growth disasters that are historically fairly common in autocracies.”¹²

There is also a clear connection between democracy and access to information. Autocracies, almost by definition, operate in an environment that limits transparency and access to information. Media is often restricted or controlled by the state in an autocracy, and autocrats tend to punish their citizens for political activity to a far greater extent than do democrats. Eric Neumayer and Thomas Plümper point to an important distinction when examining autocratic performance—autocracies are more likely to falsify data because of their restrictive media environment and lack of civil society oversight.¹³

Thanks to greater transparency, democracies enjoy longer lifespans and greater stability. Scholars have found that transparency “stabilizes democratic rule” as it is correlated with a lower likelihood of democratic collapse or “irregular” removal of democratic leaders. Transparency builds trust between the public and the government, lessens calls for radical change of the political system, and increases the likelihood of regular constitutional turnover.¹⁴ Certainly, democracies are not perfect. Many do suffer from a lack of transparency at the national and local levels, and leaders in a democracy can be complicit in restricting academic freedom and regulating online content. But generally, democracy and transparency form a virtuous feedback loop whereby greater democracy leads to greater transparency and vice versa.

While literature has established the superiority of democracies in engendering better conditions for citizens, these theories are now contested. Simone Dietrich and Michael Bernhard argue that while democracy can be better at improving certain conditions for citizens, like education, other government deliverables are not impacted by regime type, but by state efficacy.¹⁵ Our research attempts to account for such conditions by drawing the distinction between high- and low-performing governments within each type of regime: autocratic and democratic.

Cuba: Low-Performing Autocracy

Governance in Cuba is in a state of rapid decline. Cubans are suffering because of mismanagement, corruption, state violence, and reliance on the diaspora for money. The first decade of Cuba’s governance outcomes under the Castro regime is often characterized as having been widely successful at providing goods and services such as healthcare and education for Cuban people, but once the state spent all of its money and turned corrupt, it slowly reneged on its contract: more authoritarianism for more services provided. Today, that contract is obsolete.

Socioeconomics

Cuba's socioeconomics have been rapidly declining for most of the population over the course of the past decade. Raúl Castro became president in 2008 following a series of health issues faced by his brother Fidel Castro, Cuba's president for nearly forty years.¹⁶ The political change altered the dynamic of Cuba's bureaucracy, as the military began to play a more significant role in government affairs at the behest of Raúl, who had served for decades as minister of the armed forces. While Fidel maintained great authority over Cuban institutions and the Communist Party until his death in 2016, the military's increased importance changed Cuban finances, a central subject of state control in a communist system.¹⁷

Grupo de Administración Empresarial SA (GAESA) is a military-run enterprise that controls nearly all industry in Cuba, especially remittances and hotels.¹⁸ Since GAESA controls the industry, it controls the money. When money is earned in Cuba through GAESA-managed companies, it is immediately sent to banks abroad, which precludes money from being spent on governance. While GAESA predates the presidencies of Raúl Castro and his successor, Miguel Díaz-Canel, its influence has proliferated in the two decades since Fidel Castro left office.¹⁹

As the financial system dominated by GAESA has grown more brazen, the daily conditions of Cubans have grown progressively worse. Although Cuba does not publish data about socioeconomic indicators, evidence suggests that the income gap and poverty levels are both increasing.²⁰ The country's GDP in 2023 was 10.1 percent lower than in 2018.²¹ Since 2016, Cuba's food production has been in decline. Consequently, estimates find that 12.8 percent of Cuba's population in 2023 experienced food insecurity.²² This food insecurity persists today. The island has also seen an uptick in blackouts as the country grapples with a severe energy crisis.²³ In June 2025, the state-owned-telecommunications company, Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba SA, set a 6 GB limit on cellphone data purchased per month in Cuban pesos. To get more than 6 GB, Cubans must pay exorbitant prices in U.S. dollars.²⁴ In making daily needs like electricity, data, and food inaccessible, the Cuban government fails to meet its basic responsibility to its citizens.

Access to Information

Cuba also has poor transparency. Political violence is a tool the state employs to control access to information. The country is estimated to hold over 1,000 political prisoners (the number is hard to know given lack of transparency), of whom several are journalists, as of early 2025.²⁵ The state exerts control over academia by demanding allegiance to the Communist Party and the ideals of the Cuban Revolution from teachers, with the threat of expulsion from employment for non-compliance.²⁶

The state also controls information by putting false narratives into popular media. After major protests in 2021, the Cuban state produced a television show called *Con Filo* that used humor, irony, mockery, and exaggeration—all tools for spreading disinformation,

Cosette Celecia Pérez and Julio Juárez Gámiz argue—to mock political dissidents and reinforce the party’s false narrative of popular support and a unified populace.²⁷ Although television and radio are mediated by the government, the one space where access to information has democratized gradually over time is the internet. Since 2008 (when Cubans were allowed to get cell phones), dissent online has proliferated. While citizens can access previously obscure information, the category of governance remains poor-performing as it is not the state providing such access, but individuals in the country and in the diaspora.

Cuba fails almost entirely at effective rule of law, limits on executive authority, and separation of powers.

Rule of Law

Cuba fails almost entirely at effective rule of law, limits on executive authority, and separation of powers. In 1959, Fidel Castro assumed power over Cuba after emerging victorious from the five-year Cuban Revolution. Castro acted quickly to change the regime type of Cuba from a military dictatorship to a Marxist-Leninist one-party state. When Castro established the government, his cabinet had nineteen members, but within one year, only five remained, evidencing Castro’s consolidation of power.²⁸ The central power held by the Castro family and by the Communist Party has not diminished.

For decades, Cuba adhered to the 1976 constitution that placed executive powers in the hands of the Consejo de Estado and the Consejo de Ministros. Both councils are led by the same person—the president. Members of the councils are elected by the National Assembly of People’s Power. The president, however, proposes the members to the parliament.²⁹ The structures of government were created with significant overlap between one another and with ultimate control and oversight by the president. Importantly, the government is constitutionally a one-party system under the Communist Party of Cuba. In 2019, Cuba had a constitutional referendum that resulted in the adoption of a new constitution. One of the biggest changes to the role of the executive is that for the first time in Cuba, the president has term limits. Article 126 dictates that the president may only serve two consecutive five-year terms.³⁰ Beyond Article 126, there is little substantive change to the political architecture of Cuba.

Civil Liberties

Civil liberties are severely hampered by the Cuban state. In 2023, Cuba passed the Social Communication Law, which constrains freedom of expression by restricting content the state deems slanderous against Cuba and by making news the property of the state, unobtainable by independent press.³¹ Random arrests, harassment of dissidents, prisoner abuse, threats of violence against journalists, and restriction of religious freedom are common occurrences in Cuba.

In 2021, there was an unprecedented protest movement against the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the dire economic scenario the country was facing. Repression was the primary response to the protests. The state arrested more than 1,000 protesters and charged hundreds with sedition. A majority of those charged were found guilty and subsequently were given disproportionately long prison sentences.³² Although the protests were primarily peaceful, the state exaggerated evidence of rock-throwing and destruction of property. The state's aggressive and repressive response to the 2021 protests evidences the state of civil liberties in the country.

One notable exception to the lack of civil liberties is LGBTQ+ rights. The 2019 constitution made it illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation. In 2022, Cuba legalized same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption.³³ In 2025, the parliament passed a law making it legal for transgender Cubans to change their gender on legal documents.

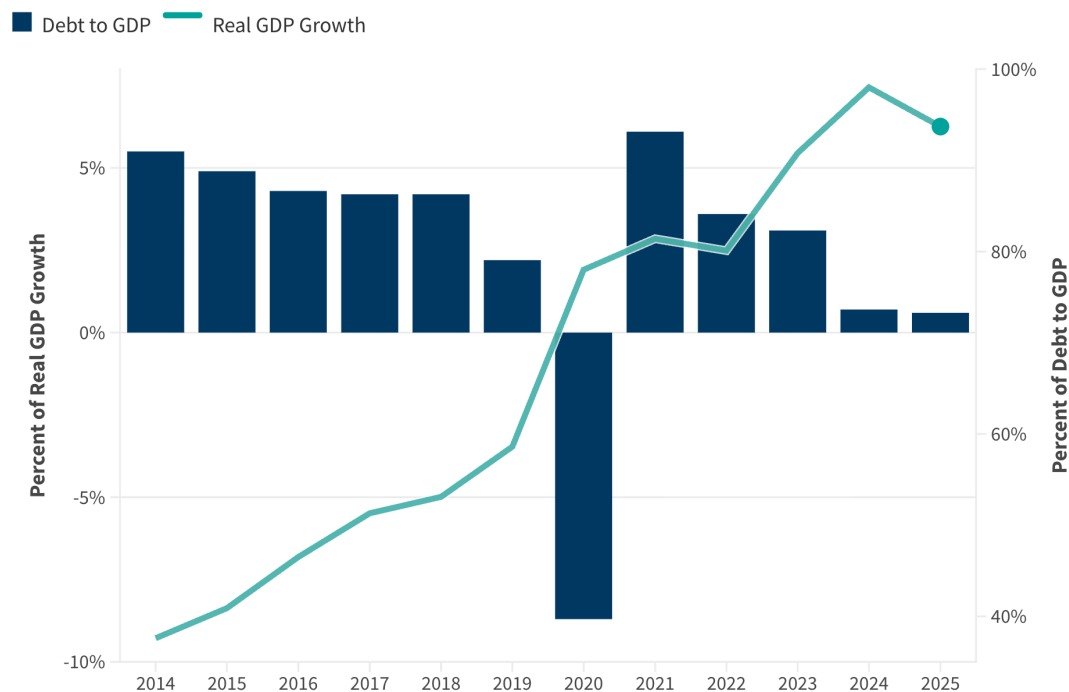
Bolivia: Higher-Performing Autocracy

Bolivia represents a higher level of governance performance within an autocracy. Bolivia today faces both economic and political challenges, which reinforce each other at times. The country has a highly centralized political system in which the president wields significant power. While some efforts have been made to decentralize power, the repeated abuse of power by previous president Evo Morales makes clear the limitations of those efforts.

Socioeconomics

Socioeconomic governance outcomes in Bolivia were relatively strong at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but have declined in the past decade. The election in 2005 of Evo Morales, the first indigenous Aymara president of Bolivia, and his party MAS, signaled a shift in Bolivian politics, but did not deliver the economic growth and reduction in inequality that many Bolivians were looking for.³⁴ Initially, Morales succeeded in both the social and the economic goals he set: recognizing the plurinational character of the Bolivian state through the 2009 Constitution, and nationalizing the hydrocarbon sector, which led to economic growth and poverty reduction. The Morales government replaced the neoliberal model with “twenty-first century socialism,” which sought to improve public infrastructure and delivery of basic services.³⁵ However, when hydrocarbon prices fell in the mid-2010s, Bolivia's economy suffered. Furthermore, despite the discovery of natural gas in Bolivia in the 1970s, the country today has very little natural gas exploration and imports most of its energy.³⁶

Bolivia's Debt Climbs While Economic Growth Stagnates



Source: "General Government Gross Debt (Bolivia)," International Monetary Fund, accessed November 17, 2025, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/GGXWDG_NGDP@WEO/BOL?zoom=BOL&highlight=BOL.

Luis Arce, Morales's successor (also from the MAS party), failed to resolve Bolivia's financial issues. Bolivia remains one of the poorest countries in Latin America, with widespread economic inequality.³⁷ Arce, while a socialist like Morales, has sought to stabilize the Bolivian economy during his term, focusing on import substitution and heavy use of subsidies, but has very little to show after five years, according to one Bolivia expert we interviewed.³⁸

Arce has focused on social spending to address inequality; however, he came to office in 2020 in the midst of a political crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which had lasting negative economic implications for the country. And Arce's attempts to rein in inflation have been unsuccessful, with the price of foodstuffs particularly impacted and contributing to an approval rating for Arce of just 3 percent, giving him the nickname "the margin of error president."³⁹

Access to Information

Access to information has grown increasingly restrictive under the era of MAS governance. Omar Sánchez-Sibony evaluates the primary ways the contemporary Bolivian state embodies authoritarian tendencies in its relationship to media and public information, finding that the state deploys economic resources (ownership of news), legislative tools (bills), and state institutions (regulatory institutions) to repress media.⁴⁰ In 2009, Morales's administration launched Supreme Decree 181, through which journalists who are perceived to "lie" or align with political parties are denied income from state advertising, forcing journalists to comply with state expectations and rendering the press unfree. The Bolivian government owns and operates the most popular news sources in the country, which leads to self-censorship.⁴¹

Rule of Law

Rule of law has grown increasingly weak in Bolivia in the past decade. Morales oversaw a restrictive environment for civil society and the political opposition. Most notably, despite a constitutional prohibition against Morales running for a third term, his administration's judiciary allowed him to run for president in 2014.⁴² In 2019, when Morales sought once again to extend his presidency, he faced a public that questioned his extraconstitutional behavior. Although he did secure a fourth term, he had to result to more overtly illegal measures, in the face of a referendum that saw a narrow majority reject his ability to run in the election and unleashed protests that eventually forced his resignation.⁴³ This period of social unrest revealed deep-seated fractures in Bolivian society. The MAS continues to rule Bolivia under Arce, but Arce continues to face the shadow of Morales and his authoritarian policies.

One of the biggest challenges facing Bolivia post-Morales is the politicized judiciary, which was used by Morales to go after his political opponents and whose weaponization has continued under Arce. The Arce government has also been accused of corruption, particularly in the hydrocarbons industry and land allocation.⁴⁴

One of the biggest challenges facing Bolivia post-Morales is the politicized judiciary, which was used by Morales to go after his political opponents and whose weaponization has continued under Arce.

Bolivia recently held general elections, with the first round completed in August and second round in October, and the pre-election environment highlighted the ongoing institutional crises in the country. While Arce was constitutionally allowed to run for reelection, his approval rating was so low that he could not reasonably expect to win and publicly declared that he would not seek reelection.⁴⁵ Arce, a former Morales ally, also ensured Morales was prohibited from running, despite rumors that Arce and Morales had made a deal for Morales to return to power in this cycle.⁴⁶ In the run-up to the election, the fight between the two camps within the MAS led to violence in the streets and the execution of four police officers.⁴⁷ The two candidates who made it past the first round,

Senator Rodrigo Paz Pereira of the Christian Democrats (and son of former president Jaime Paz Zamora), and former president Jorge “Tuto” Quiroga, of the Libre alliance, squared off on October 19 in the country’s first-ever presidential run-off, which saw Paz win with 54.5 percent of the vote.⁴⁸ This marks the end of the decades-long MAS hold on the country.

When it comes to monopoly on the use of force, there are dramatic differences between the urban centers and rural, remote areas. Bolivia does not have the same problem with structured guerrilla groups as Colombia, but in some remote areas narcotraffickers and landowners “are de facto the most important authorities.”⁴⁹ Bolivia is also considered a major hub of transnational organized crime.

Civil Liberties

One area of governance in Bolivia that has improved for some of the population in recent years is civil liberties. Under the authority of MAS, the status of indigenous Bolivians, who make up an estimated 41–48 percent of the population, has improved as a result of government efforts.⁵⁰ Bolivia’s history is marked by tension between indigenous and non-native Bolivians, with the latter typically composing the economic and political elite in the country and the former being subject to discrimination.

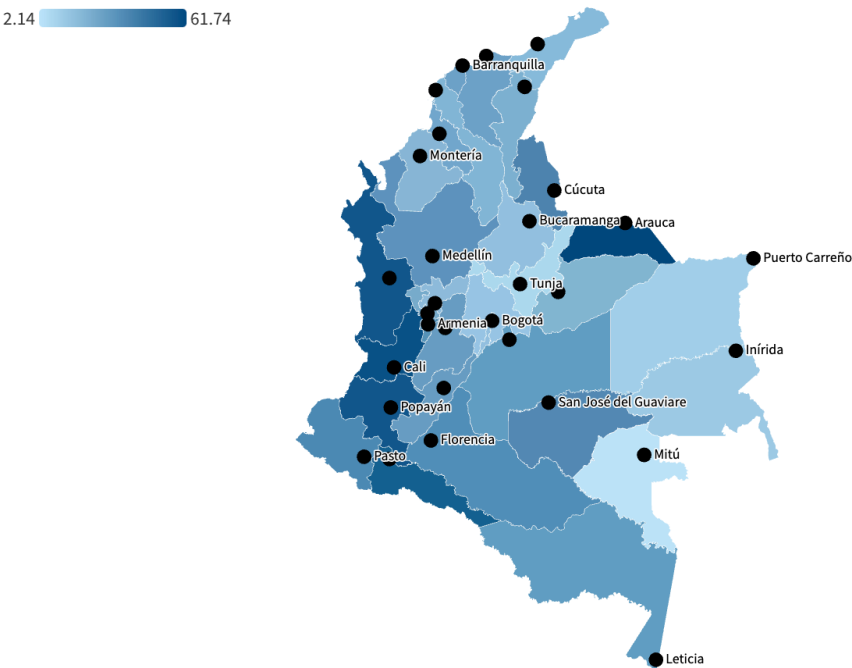
Spain colonized Bolivia until 1825, following the Bolivian War of Independence. Since then, Bolivia has experienced coups, military regimes, presidential systems, and since 1982, democratic transitions. Robert Albrow argues that until the era of Evo, the non-indigenous elite used indigenous leaders as clients in a “vertical national system of political patronage.”⁵¹ While the system of democratic transition has decayed under MAS rule, Morales prioritized improving the civil liberties of the historically excluded and ill-treated indigenous population. The legislative branch has guaranteed representation for indigenous people within the Chamber of Deputies since the 2009 constitution was passed.

Colombia: Low-Performing Democracy

Colombia is a functioning democracy facing challenges that, so far, existing institutions and authorities have been able to address. Our visit to Bogotá coincided with two examples of such challenges. First, on June 3, Petro, who came to power in 2022, circumvented normal, constitutionally-mandated legislative processes and pushed his labor reform bill to a popular consultation, eliciting pushback from several political camps who accused him of undemocratic action.⁵² Second, on June 7, presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay was shot at a rally, exposing the threat of political violence and high polarization that continues to flare in Colombia.⁵³

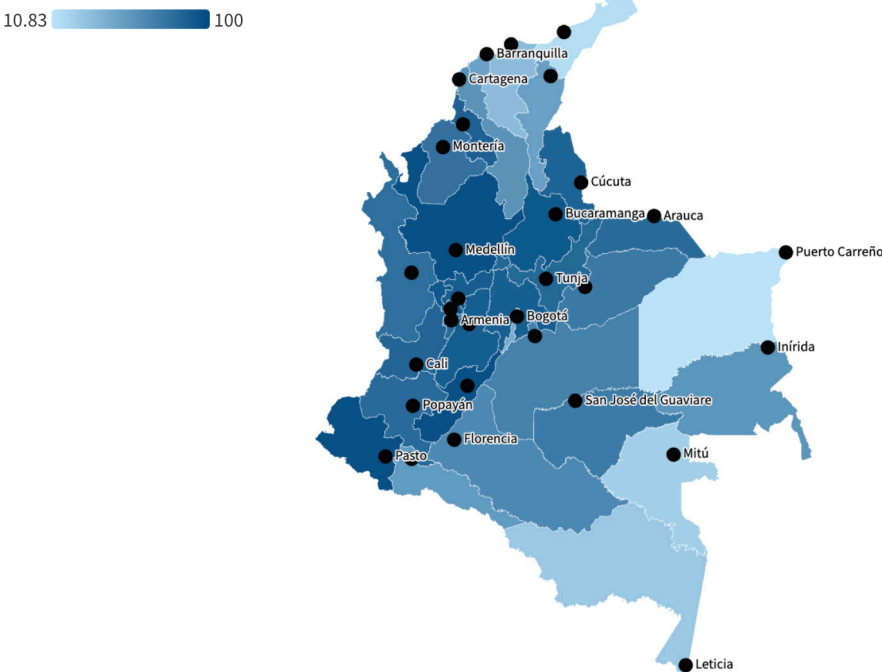
Rural-Urban Governance Disparities in Colombia

Rate of Homicides per 100,000 Inhabitants



Source: “TerriData,” Departamento Nacional de Planación (Colombia), accessed November 17, 2025, <https://terridata.dnp.gov.co/>.

Colombia Rural Electrical Coverage



Source: “TerriData,” Departamento Nacional de Planación (Colombia), accessed November 17, 2025, <https://terridata.dnp.gov.co/>.

While these actions are signals to many that democracy is in danger, civil society in Colombia is much more active than in Cuba or Bolivia, the public is engaged in political debates, and institutions are prepared to push back against threats. In discussions with Colombian civil society and political actors, it is clear that threats to democracy in Colombia are both noticed and taken seriously. While several of our interlocutors expressed fear over perceived antidemocratic acts by Petro, Colombian democracy appears resilient, with strong democratic institutions. Notably, on July 28, former president Alvaro Uribe was convicted of corruption—the country’s first former president to be found guilty at trial.⁵⁴ Colombia does, however, face several ongoing governance challenges that have the potential to threaten democracy.⁵⁵

Socioeconomics

The country has made tremendous progress on socioeconomic governance since the early 2000s, when 50 percent of the overall population (and over 60 percent of youth) experienced poverty, health care only covered around 60 percent of the population, and violence and kidnapping were common with more than ten kidnappings a day.⁵⁶

Like the election of Morales in Bolivia, Petro’s election as the first leftist president of Colombia was monumental. Petro promised socioeconomic reforms to address rampant inequality, but he has largely failed to make progress on his goals. Expectations for Petro were extremely high, particularly from the left (which had traditionally been excluded from the highest level of politics) and from marginalized groups. As one civil society activist told us, Petro’s aspirations were “noble” but were not being implemented.⁵⁷ For example, Petro defined a lengthy legislative agenda including reforms on labor, pensions, mining, public service, and taxes, along with a national development plan—but by June 2025, he had only been able to pass the pension reform and part of the tax reform. Furthermore, because Petro represented such a break with the political status quo, there has been “no continuity” between ministers, leading to negative impacts on governance.⁵⁸

Access to Information

In Colombia, access to information is a weak area of governance. As interlocutors in Bogotá told us, the government controls all media, from newspaper to television, and uses that access to improve its own image. For those media outlets not owned by the government, the executive branch uses threats to manipulate information. This trend is not party- or president-specific, but freedom of the press has declined over the recent administrations. Beyond the government, drug trafficking organizations and armed groups also threaten the safety of journalists. These threats are region-specific. Catatumbo, an area controlled by armed groups in a decades-long conflict, is one of the most dangerous places for reporters and for citizens seeking to access information.⁵⁹ Reporters Without Borders ranked Colombia 119 out of 180 countries for press freedom in 2024.⁶⁰

Rule of Law

Rule of law and political equality measures are a sector of governance that is seeing both success and challenge in Colombia. Like Bolivia's, Colombia's rural areas experience markedly different levels of governance from its urban centers, a phenomenon that one of our interlocutors referred to as "many Colombias."⁶¹ One troubling statistic is that nearly one-third of municipalities lack a mayor.⁶²

The absence of government oversight in rural areas is exacerbated by a large informal sector, which reduces the government's tax revenues. Furthermore, the lack of responsive and effective governance in far-flung regions contributes to the strength of narcotraffickers and paramilitaries such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), who can take advantage of the lack of oversight in their territories and bolster their credibility by providing basic services that the regional governments cannot. While the 2016 peace deal between the government and the FARC is holding, its implementation has been slow and incomplete.⁶³ As one expert explained to us, the retreat of the FARC from rural areas was meant to lead to state takeover to replace the FARC's control of resources and services. However, that has not yet materialized. Furthermore, Petro's connections to the M-19 guerrilla group came up repeatedly in our conversations, with some interviewees questioning his commitment to eradicating the group through his policy of "Total Peace," which seeks to negotiate with and secure the surrender of all non-state armed groups.⁶⁴

Some of our interlocutors—including a former Petro supporter—expressed real fear that Petro's power grab would continue and could jeopardize the legitimacy of the 2026 elections. Petro has "lost the street" and is running out of ways to hold on to power, according to one member of the opposition.

Civil Liberties

Colombia's performance on civil liberties, as in other areas, is regionally dependent. In Bogotá, civil society is vibrant, and organizations enjoy the freedom to have differing opinions from the government. Engagement in politics is common, as protests frequently crop up around the city, and are sometimes even called for by Petro.

Voting is a respected civil liberty in Colombia. It is noteworthy that voter turnout is consistently low in the country. During the 2022 election, more than 45 percent of eligible voters failed to cast their votes. This is attributed partially to governance failures. Jamie Shenk notes that voters in more than one-third of Colombia's municipalities must travel an average of 786 kilometers to vote.⁶⁵ Political violence also keeps voters at home, fearing for their safety during election season.

In the area of gender equality, while women are equal to men on paper and in educational attainment, they face barriers in other areas such as running for office and access to employment.⁶⁶

Uruguay: High-Performing Democracy

Uruguay exhibits a broad consensus across the political spectrum regarding democratic norms and the foundational principles of economic and social policy—namely, a market economy tempered by commitments to social justice. This consensus prevents the kind of acute political and societal polarization observed in Colombia.

Socioeconomics

In terms of governance quality across economic, social, and political sectors, Uruguay consistently ranks high by regional and international standards. While recent studies have highlighted a decline in the quality of primary, secondary, and tertiary education systems, and while some experts have raised concerns about irregular migration and public security, as well as macroeconomic risks such as inflation driven by high government spending, the broad consensus remains that Uruguay continues to demonstrate positive governance trajectories.⁶⁷ It stands out favorably compared to most other Latin American countries.

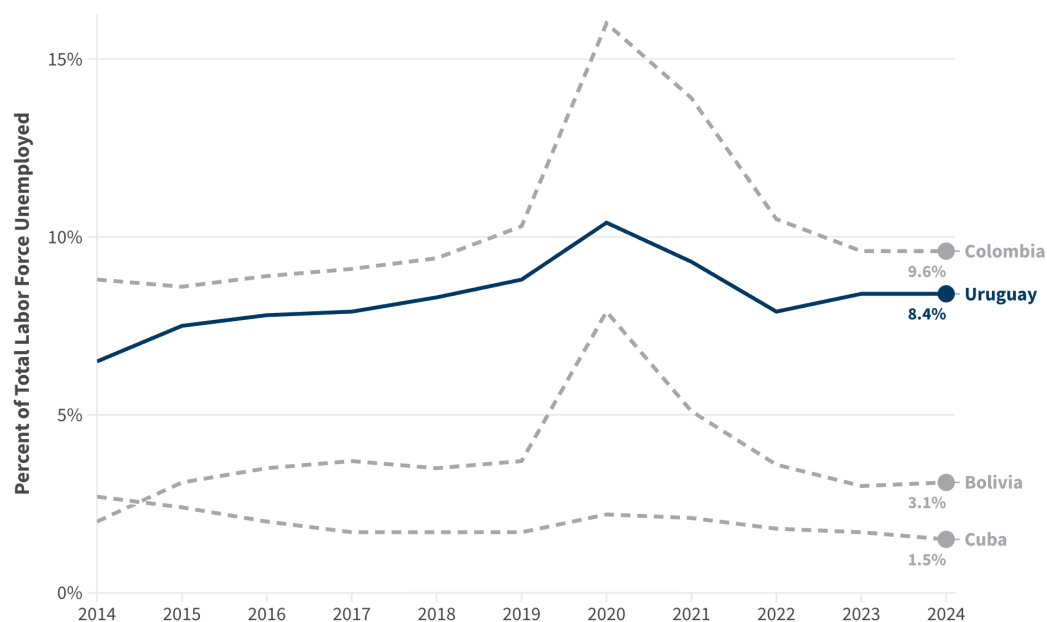
By the close of the twentieth century, Uruguay was a democratic republic that embraced market economy principles while pursuing privatization and modernization policies in the economic and social domains at a deliberately slow pace. This gradualism was led by political parties and designed to cultivate consensus among various sectors of society, including labor unions, civil society organizations, and the private sector. Despite the seemingly slow rhythm of reform, the resilience of Uruguay's democratic institutions, low levels of corruption, and commitment—from both the left and the right—to principles of social justice contributed to the emergence of Uruguay as a model of successful democratic governance with high levels of institutional performance and accountability. However, Uruguay faces some growing challenges, including economic stagnation, rising crime, and high youth unemployment, that tarnish its “model” image.

From the restoration of democracy in 1985 until 2020, Uruguay's political landscape was dominated by center-left governments, most notably under the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) coalition. These administrations implemented a wide array of social and economic welfare programs, including housing policies, labor protections, pension reforms, and subsidies for the poor and low-income populations. Overall, the center-left's policy agenda gave rise to a distinct Uruguayan model of social democracy that enjoyed broad popular support.⁶⁸

In 2020, power shifted to a center-right coalition, which implemented policies oriented toward economic privatization, tax reform, and increased allocations to public security. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the center-right government enacted an effective public health strategy that included preventive campaigns and rapid vaccination drives.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, it attempted to mitigate the

In terms of governance quality across economic, social, and political sectors, Uruguay consistently ranks high by regional and international standards.

Unemployment in Uruguay Belies Good Governance Outcomes



Source: "Unemployment, Total (% of Labor Force)(Modeled ILO Estimate) - Uruguay, 2014-2024," World Bank Data, accessed November 17, 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?end=2024&locations=UY&start=2014>.

pandemic's adverse economic and social effects while maintaining its fiscal conservatism and efforts to reduce public expenditure. One policy key to former president Luis Lacalle Pou's government was the Law of Urgent Consideration (LUC, Law No. 19.889), passed in 2020. It reshaped the dynamic between security forces and protesters, granting security agents greater authority to restrict protest. It also changed the dynamics between security forces and labor unions. The revised version of the law guarantees the right of non-strikers to enter the workplace amid a labor dispute.⁷⁰ Between 2020 and 2025, this approach sparked recurrent confrontations with labor unions and leftist segments of civil society, which viewed the government's policies as inadequate or detrimental to social protections.⁷¹ Nevertheless, in late 2024, the center-left successfully regained a parliamentary majority and returned to power. The peaceful and orderly transfer of authority underscored the durability and institutionalization of Uruguay's democratic norms.

Access to Information

In Uruguay, access to information is enshrined in the constitutional and legislative framework and adhered to by state institutions, government actors, political parties, and civil society. Law No. 18.381, enacted in 2008, provides individuals with the right to access

information held by public bodies.⁷² In 2011, Uruguay initiated its open data policy, which requires all state institutions, government actors, and public bodies to publish their internal proceedings in open formats. According to Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, Uruguay is Latin America's most transparent country.⁷³

In its gradual push toward higher access to information and transparency standards, Uruguay has benefited from the growing social and political consensus that democracy requires informed citizens and transparent public entities. The country has also benefited from high internet penetration—almost 90 percent—that has enabled the population to enjoy high digital literacy rates—over 98 percent.⁷⁴

Rule of Law

Rule of law is extremely strong in Montevideo. Since the return to democracy in 1986, political power has alternated smoothly between the right and the left (the latter prevailing in recent years), without major disruption. Election campaigns and public debates are marked by relatively low levels of partisan conflict. Moreover, Uruguay has avoided the persistent institutional clashes among branches of government that characterize other Latin American democracies. As a result, the legitimacy of its democratic institutions appears both stable and widely accepted.

Our interviews with political scientists, civil society actors, and public opinion researchers in Montevideo revealed a notable absence of polarizing issues likely to dominate the upcoming 2026 parliamentary elections. Topics such as irregular migration—mainly from Venezuela—and localized concerns over public safety were mentioned, but official data suggests neither constitutes a national crisis.⁷⁵ In contrast to Colombia's entrenched polarization and institutional strain, Uruguay represents a case where democratic rules and institutions have stabilized, enjoy popular legitimacy, and operate in a low-conflict environment.

Civil Liberties

Uruguay's performance on civil liberties is among the highest in Latin America. A constitutional-legal framework that stipulates freedom of expression, a political system that is resolved to uphold civil liberties, and a functioning judiciary that is safeguarded from political influence have all contributed to the country becoming a model in Latin America.

That Uruguayan society has not had to endure long periods of wide-scale violence or civil strife, unlike many other Latin American countries, has meant that there have been minimal disparities with regard to civil liberties' safeguards between urban and rural areas, across different regions, or across socioeconomic groups. At the end of the day, Uruguay is (in comparison with the rest of Latin America) a geographically small country with a small population—less than four million inhabitants.⁷⁶

Much of Uruguay's success in democratic consolidation and institutional governance can be attributed to a constellation of demographic, geographic, and historical factors. Demographically, the country has a relatively small population with declining ethnic diversity over time, which, along with leadership, intuitional design and political culture, has contributed to greater social cohesion. Geographically, Uruguay is endowed with natural resources sufficient to ensure a degree of economic and social stability. Historically, the country achieved early independence and established a democratic republic in the nineteenth century, whose institutions and political traditions remained resilient despite interruptions from the 1960s through the 1980s. This historical continuity facilitated the post-authoritarian return to democratic rule.

Conclusion

An analytical examination of the governance realities in Cuba, Bolivia, Colombia, and Uruguay reveals the fundamental differences between the economic and social outcomes enjoyed by citizens in these countries, as well as the extent to which they are guaranteed rights and freedoms. While Cuba represents an example of an autocratic political system that undermines human rights and civil liberties and is unable to provide basic economic and social services to its citizens because of structural corruption and a lack of transparency and accountability, Bolivia presents a model of a political system devoid of democratic rules, where major economic and social decisions fluctuate between left and right, and where the regime is content with minimal services for citizens who have suffered for many years from widespread violence, poverty, and vast disparities between urban and rural areas and between different population groups.

The cases of Cuba and Bolivia demonstrate that the absence of democracy in Latin America is not accompanied by high levels of economic and social performance from governments—quite the opposite. In both countries, economic and social conditions are deteriorating, and guarantees of human rights and freedoms are absent, as are the rule of law and the right to information. In contrast, Colombia offers many signs of potential to maintain a democratic political system with cohesive constitutional, legal, and political institutions, despite a long history of civil violence and sharp polarization between the right and the left. Colombia has survived decades of war between the government and rebels, but the violence has not stopped completely. It has also survived the right's sole control of government, but the left's rise to power has not been without intense contestation and extreme polarization. The vitality and cohesion of Colombia's civil society, and the popular legitimacy that the judicial, legislative, and executive institutions continue to enjoy, have certainly helped ensure the continuation of democratic life without major collapses or setbacks. However, it is also certain that the poor quality of economic and social services provided to citizens and the wide disparities across the country's regions and across different population groups are all factors gradually diminishing this continuity and legitimacy.

In Uruguay, on the other hand, democracy coexists with outstanding economic and social performance in a country with the highest per capita income and the highest internet penetration rate on the continent. Its political institutions are stable, and citizens face few real issues for the right and the left to contend with. In Uruguay, a small country with a population of less than 4 million, democracy goes hand in hand with advanced governance, and civil peace is synonymous with the absence of political polarization.

Overall, this paper demonstrates the relative successes of democratic governments among the Latin American cases examined and analyzed in achieving outstanding rates of economic and social development (Uruguay) and in dealing with civil violence and polarization without institutional collapse (Colombia). It also demonstrates the relative failure of the autocratic governments assessed to achieve sustainable development (Bolivia) or provide even minimal economic and social services to their citizens (Cuba).

Annex 1: Methodology

To determine the level of democracy and governance in each state, we created a database comparing each country's democracy and governance scores, relying on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index scores to determine where a country falls on the spectrum of autocracy to democracy (<https://v-dem.net/>) and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index governance scores to determine a country's level of governance (<https://bti-project.org/en/?&cb=00000>). To categorize countries by region, we used the Pew Research Center's classifications (<https://pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/global-migration-countries-and-territories.pdf>). We calculated each country's mean democracy and mean governance scores over the 2010–2022 timeframe and then calculated the discrepancy between the governance and democracy scores for each country. A positive discrepancy indicates high governance relative to the country's democratic standing, while a negative discrepancy indicates low governance relative to the country's democratic standing.

To select each set of four country case studies, we consistently applied several qualitative and quantitative criteria. Where possible, our case studies included two autocracies and two democracies from each region. Variation in democracy and governance levels was necessary to ensure we did not select on the dependent variable.

For each region, if there was only one democracy present, we selected that democracy and chose the remaining three case studies from the autocracy category. If no democracies were listed, all four case studies were selected from the autocracy category. In both scenarios where we were compelled to choose more than two autocracies from a region, we prioritized variation in states' regime types (for example, monarchy or republic) and governance levels. In addition to these criteria, we selected case studies that reflected the geographic diversity

of each region. Undergirding all these criteria was the consideration of feasibility. Each case study had to be viable both from a literature perspective (that is, sufficient information was available for rigorous analysis) and a fieldwork perspective (meaning we had to be able to conduct focus groups or access local researchers). If a country was too understudied, too closed, or too dangerous, it was excluded as a case study.

To determine public opinion in Latin America, we relied on the Latinobarómetro survey instrument, which covers all of our cases except Cuba (<https://www.latinobarometro.org/data>).

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