South America's Turn to the Right

31 JANUARY 2026

Kuzey Tunguz and Arianna Vicinanza



The Shift Towards the Right in South America

Introduction

In recent years, South America has witnessed a notable political reorientation, marked by the electoral rise of right-wing and centre-right governments across the region. The rise in right-wing political rhetoric follows the gradual decline of left-wing and centre-left governments that dominated Latin America in the 1990s and 2000s, a period commonly referred to as

the Pink Tide, characterised by expansive welfare policies, state-led development strategies, and resource nationalism (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). The shift towards the right in South America doesn't represent a common ideological change, but it is rather a response to the ongoing economic crises, rising crime, and governance failure associated with lengthy leftist rule (Luna & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). The 2025 presidential elections in four South American countries resulted in victories for conservative-leaning and right-wing political actors. Taken together, these elections provide further empirical evidence of South America's recent political shift, as conservative and centre-right forces consolidated power in Ecuador and Bolivia, while Javier Milei secured a decisive midterm victory in Argentina. Similarly, the tightly contested electoral process in Honduras, despite procedural delays and allegations of irregularities, ultimately resulted in a conservative presidential outcome, underscoring both the consolidation and the contested nature of the region's contemporary ideological realignment (Anadolu Agency, 2025). This essay examines whether South America's recent shift to the right represents a lasting ideological transformation or a cyclical response stemming from economic and political distress.

Conceptualising the Right in Latin America

This spectacular shift to the right wing is not necessarily considered as a rise in conservatism. In contrast to Europe, the North American understanding of right politics typically refers to market-oriented reforms, fiscal discipline, privatisation, and stronger security policies, often accompanied by social conservatism and scepticism toward expansive statism (Weyland, 2018). Furthermore, in Latin America, regional trauma, political weakness, and political history shaped the right wing (Reid, 2025). Right-wing movements in South American countries are often a reaction to the Pink Tide of centre-left governments, which controlled the region from the early 2000s to the 2010s (Ali, 2025). With these governments, the majority of Latin American countries suffered poverty, increased criminality, and political mismanagement (Ali, 2025), and, as a consequence, the right-wing leaders positioned themselves as defenders of the economic order and the solution to the region's problems (Fernandez, 2023).

Drivers of the Rightward Shift

Economic Drivers

Increased momentum for the right-wing parties in Latin America might be associated with reactions against the Pink Tide governments, as their policies emphasised redistribution, social inclusion, and the expansion of state capacity in various sectors (Roberts, 2014). Although initial left-wing

reforms seemed to succeed, their economic sustainability remained limited (Ocampo, 2017).

In the span of nine years, from 2016 to 2025, economic growth in the region has been lower than in the 1980s, at just 1.2% (Vattuone, 2025). The latest 2025 records of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC, projected a low growth for the new year as well, this is because of several internal and external factors. Internally, the report lists low employment and falling domestic consumption of households on goods and services within the national economy. Externally, the region is highly dependent on foreign direct investment and external debts, increasing the region's fragile internal development (Vattuone 2025). European and US slowdowns, including tariffs and geopolitical tensions, further worsened the volatile state of Latin America's economy (Vattuone, 2025).

Political Drivers

Apart from the economic factors, socio-political instability further disrupted Latin America. Chile, Bolivia, Honduras, and Ecuador all held elections in 2025. Parties' fragmentation, divided governments, and social issues increased the pressure on the political landscape of the area (Freidenberg, 2025). In Ecuador, voters' mobilisation was not guaranteed, and the assassination of the presidential candidate Villa Vicencio sparked further chaos between armed forces and organised crime (Gangotena, 2025). The rise of authoritarian leaders with a decreased trust in democratic institutions shows clear signs of democratic backsliding (Gangotena, 2025). After the latest elections in Honduras, in November 2025, protests erupted for the delayed ballot recount, followed by corruption allegations (CNN España, Internazionale Magazine, 2025). After days of delays and confusion, Asfura became the new president, backed by Donald Trump (Internazionale Magazine, 2025).

Apart from the economic and political drivers, it is important to point out that the excessive crime rates in the area prompted citizens to demand real change as well, generating a need for increased security among South Americans (Ali 2025).

Security Drivers

The presence of drug cartels in Latin America has long influenced the political landscape of the region. Lately, the internationalisation of drug cartels enabled them to enforce major control, especially at the political level (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024). These organisations are active throughout the entire American continent and expand into Europe as well. This expansion has caused political fractures within South American countries and the US, Canada, and others (International Institute

for Strategic Studies, 2024). Additionally, the rivalry between various cartels equals more suffering for citizens. It is not only about drugs; these organisations are responsible for human trafficking, murder, and migration routes (Carpenter, 2025). Nonetheless, drug cartels are a dramatic representation of South America's current political trajectory, as these organisations' involvement in politics further disrupted society. Additionally, the presence and importance of criminal organisations have increased tensions with the US, especially under the current Trump administration.

In January 2025, President Trump and his administration designated the cartels as "Foreign Terrorist Organisations". Trump highlighted how the activities of these cartels undermined US national security (The White House, 2025). In one of its actions, Trump pressed on the US role in the elimination of these drug cartels (The White House, 2025). Later in 2025, President Trump launched attacks on alleged drug boats from Venezuela, widening the existing tensions between Trump and Maduro (Faguy, BBC, 2025). These tensions escalated at the beginning of this year, when on the 3rd of January 2026, US forces entered Venezuela, kidnapping President Maduro and the first lady. This action sparked disbelief within the international community, including South America. Through his official accounts, President Gustavo Petro from Colombia reiterated the importance of international law (Al Jazeera, 2026). In Cuba, President Miguel Diaz-Canel branded the attack as a "criminal act" and demanded international action (Al Jazeera, 2026). Mexican President Sheinbaum condemned the attack as well, alongside Brazil and Chile. On the other hand, the Argentinian leader, Milei, praised Trump's actions, thanking the US President for the demise of a "dictator" (Al Jazeera).

Conclusively, these divergent responses illustrate that South America's contemporary political divide is not solely the product of domestic ideological realignment but is also shaped by reactions to external security shocks. As such, the episode supports the interpretation of South America's recent rightward shift as, at least in part, a cyclical and context-driven response to political instability and security pressures.

Permanent Shift or Cyclical Backlash?

At first glance, the recent rise in conservatism across South America might appear as an ideological shift; however, the electorate's evident willingness to replace prolonged and underperforming left-wing governments instead points to a corrective and pragmatic response to economic stagnation, inflation, corruption, rising insecurity, and broader governance fatigue. Years of slow growth, rising inflation, ongoing corruption, and surging crime have profoundly broken chains between voters and political elites, particularly governing Pink Tide governments. Although right-wing political movements have benefitted from changing the status quo and voters

searching for better alternatives, right-wing governing philosophy seems to play a lesser role in convincing voters compared to the promises of change.

Furthermore, conservatism is conceptualised in South America under several kinds. For example, in El Salvador, the right is focused on enhanced security and executive governance. In comparison, in Argentina, which is suffering from harsh economic conditions, conservative parties are associated with radical market reforms and state retrenchment. These competing approaches reflect divergent national interests rather than general, ideologically laden trends, covering a framework of responses which are united under rejection of political movements against earlier incumbents. Recognising this pattern helps to understand the rise of right-wing parties' popularity, especially considering there is no single model of how the region understands conservatism.

Conclusion

The contemporary consolidation of power by right-wing political groups in South America does not primarily represent an ideological reorientation but rather a cyclical electoral reaction. In South America, the public decided to abandon support for prolonged Pink Tide governments, which failed to consolidate power and contributed to public exhaustion by economic stagnation, deteriorating security, both internally and externally, and institutional fatigue. Furthermore, diversity among conservative governments in South America shows that ideological foundations across the region are not uniform. The coexistence of these conservative doctrines points to the primacy of cyclical electoral reactions rather than a coherent, ideologically driven shift.

References

Anadolu Agency. (2025, December 25). YEAR-ENDER – 2025: How rising right-wing reshaped Latin America's political landscape. Anadolu Agency. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/year-ender-2025-how-rising-right-wing-reshaped-latin-america-s-political-landscape/3780734

Levitsky, S., & Roberts, K. M. (2011). The resurgence of the Latin American left. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Luna, J. P., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2014). The resilience of the Latin American right. Latin American Politics and Society, 56(2), 1–29.

Ocampo, J. A. (2017). Commodity-led development in Latin America. Oxford Handbook of Latin American Economics. Oxford University Press.

Roberts, K. M. (2014). Changing course in Latin America. Cambridge University Press.

Weyland, K. (2018). Populism in Latin America. Cambridge University Press.

Vattuone, X. R. (2025). A new lost decade for Latin America? Latinoamérica 21.

Freidenberg, F. (2025). Latin America 2025: protest voting amid fragmentation and democratic erosion. Latinoamérica 21.

Ali, R. (2025). YEAR-ENDER – 2025: How rising right-wing reshaped Latin America's political landscape. Americas Magazine.