



Giving Citizens a Voice

How can Latin Americans gain a voice in government?

A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE From the late 1970s through the early 1980s, the Argentine military waged a campaign of terror against those who supported political reform. As many as 30,000 people mysteriously disappeared. People accused of being terrorists and revolutionaries were kidnapped and questioned. Some were tortured, and then killed or “disappeared”—their bodies were never found. In an effort to learn the truth about their loved ones, a group of women, calling themselves the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, staged weekly protests in the plaza in Buenos Aires. Their protests were part of the larger attempt by citizens of the region to gain a voice in how their governments were being run.

A Struggle to Be Heard

Latin Americans today seek more democratic governments. Democracy depends on free and fair elections, citizen participation, majority rule with minority rights, and guaranteed freedoms. However, Latin America has shown little support for democratic rule until recently.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM After the Spanish conquest of the region in the 16th century, Native Americans in Central and South America were ruled by governors who took their orders from the king and queen of Spain. Even when Latin American countries won their independence during the 1800s, they continued to be governed mainly by small groups of Spanish colonists.

This government by the few, known as **oligarchy** (AHL•ih•GAHR•kee), was not democratic. The government censored the press, limited free speech, and punished dissent. It also discriminated against all who were not part of the Spanish ruling class. Elections were held, but there was never any doubt who was in charge. If the government was unable to control the people, the military would step in, seize power, and form a new, harsher government known as a **junta** (HOON•tah), which was run by the generals.

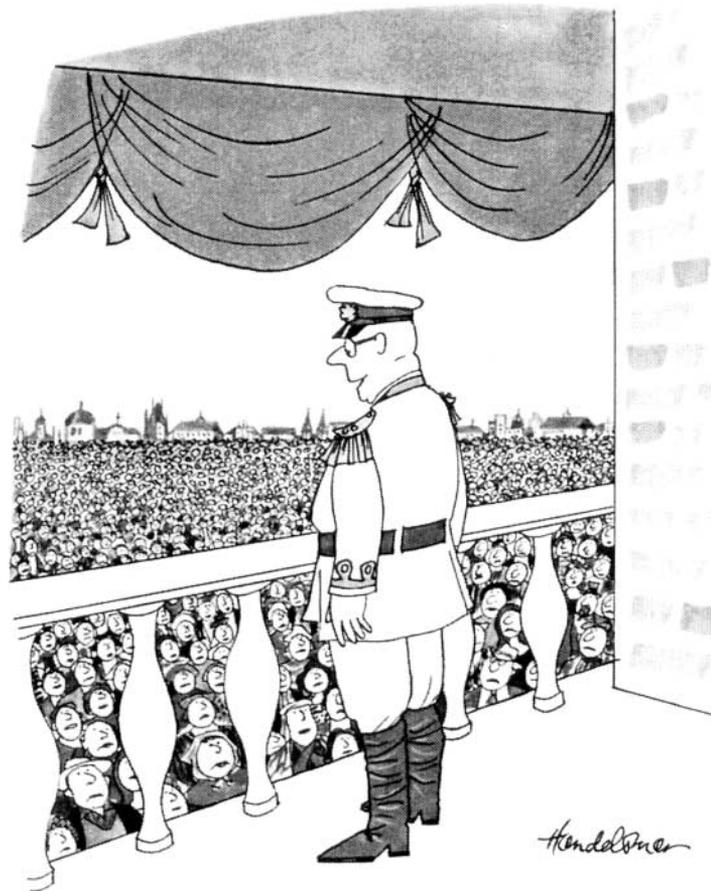
THE RULE OF THE CAUDILLO Throughout the 20th century, many Latin American countries were ruled by a **caudillo** (kow•DEE•yoh), a military dictator or political boss, such as Juan Perón in Argentina. The caudillo’s

Main Ideas

- Despite obstacles, democracy is beginning to succeed in Latin America.
- The success of Latin American democracies depends on political, economic, and social reforms.

Places & Terms

oligarchy **caudillo**
junta **land reform**



“My goodness, if I’d known how badly you wanted democracy I’d have given it to you ages ago.”

support came from the military and the wealthy. Surprisingly, the caudillo was sometimes elected directly by the people.

For example, from the 1920s until the end of the 20th century, Mexico was governed by caudillos who were members of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), or the Institutional Revolutionary Party. For 71 years the PRI dominated Mexican politics.

Opposition parties were legal, but the PRI used fraud and corruption to win elections. Opposition parties made big gains in the 1997 congressional elections. In 2000, Vicente Fox became the first non-PRI president since the adoption of Mexico's constitution in 1917. Finally, it seemed Mexico was ready to fully accept democracy.

BACKGROUND
Caudillo is a Spanish word that means "leader" or "chief."

Establishing Stable Democracies

Creating democracies in Latin America requires political, economic, and land reforms.

THE GOALS OF REFORM One goal of political reform is to establish constitutional government. A freely elected government that respects the law is the basis of democracy. Participation of citizens in political affairs is also critical. This requires that people be well educated and provided with economic security.

Political and economic stability are two sides of the same coin. A lack of prosperity is usually accompanied by social and political unrest. **A**

Argentina in the 1980s was one example of how economic problems damaged a developing democracy. In 1983, Raúl Alfonsín was elected president of Argentina in that nation's first free election in many years. He was faced with a ruined economy after years of military rule.

Argentina suffered from inflation—a rise in the prices of goods and services. To fight inflation, the newly-elected president froze all wages and prices. He issued a new currency to replace the peso. (Later, the peso was brought back.) At first these measures seemed successful, but by 1989, inflation was severe again. In 1989, Argentina elected a new president, Carlos Menem. He introduced a number of capitalist reforms. These included reducing government spending and selling off state-controlled industries and utilities.

Another goal of reform is to recognize and increase the role of women in politics. Throughout the region, women are running for office and taking an active role in government. For example, Marta Suplicy was elected mayor of São Paulo, Brazil, in 2000.

LAND REFORM Latin American countries had been ruled by a wealthy elite. Economic power, as well as land, was in the hands of the few. To spread the wealth more fairly, some governments set up a program of **land reform**, the process of breaking up large landholdings and giving portions of the land to land-poor peasant farmers.



Attitudes on Democracy

Latinobarometro, a Chilean organization, conducts polls asking Latin Americans from a number of countries what they think about different political issues. Recently, the organization asked residents of various countries the following question:

Is democracy the best system of government?

Brazil	50% agree
Central America	49%
Ecuador	41%
Mexico	45%
Paraguay	44%
Peru	21%
Uruguay	86%

SOURCE: Latinobarometro, 1998



Seeing Patterns
A What effect might the income gap have on political stability in a democracy?



In Mexico, for example, the process of land reform began with Benito Juarez. He was a Zapotec Indian from a small farm who was elected Mexico's president in 1858. One of his main reform goals was to redistribute the land so that rich landowners could not keep other Mexicans in a cycle of poverty. After the Mexican Revolution in the early part of the 20th century, there was another attempt at land reform. This gave people a better chance at economic equality.

All of these reforms have been aimed at creating stability. With a sound foundation, democracy has a better chance of taking root.



REGION Marta Suplicy holds a press conference after being elected mayor of São Paulo, Brazil, in 2000. **What does her election suggest about the role of women in politics in Brazil?**

SECTION 2 Assessment

1 Places & Terms

Identify and explain the following places and terms.

- oligarchy
- junta
- caudillo
- land reform

2 Taking Notes

HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION Review your notes.

	Causes	Effects
Issue 2: Democracy		

- What problems has democracy faced in Latin America?
- What are some of the effects of political reform in the region?

3 Main Ideas

- How did colonialism affect the development of democracy?
- What are some of the goals of political reform in the region?
- Why was land reform necessary, and what was its purpose?

4 Geographic Thinking

Drawing Conclusions

What are the prospects of democracy in the region?

Think about:

- political reforms
- economic reforms



RESEARCH LINKS
CLASSZONE.COM

GeoActivity

SEEING PATTERNS Pair with a partner and choose a country in Latin America to research on the Internet. Then prepare a **report** on the condition of democracy in that country and present your report to the class. Discuss what kind of government the country has, the number and names of political parties, and the nature of its legislative and executive functions.