



Populism's Threat to Reproductive Rights – Lessons from Latin America

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Populist political movements, right and left, are on the rise across the globe. Debates rage about the roots and consequences of these movements, but little attention has been paid to the consequences of populist governments, including those on the left, for gender equality and reproductive rights. Our recent study of abortion politics in Latin America demonstrates that populism presents a clear challenge to feminist claims for reproductive rights.

We set out to study the effects, if any, of the “left-turn” in Latin America for abortion policy – focusing on the period from roughly 2000 to 2017 when eleven of eighteen countries were led by leftist presidents. We define “left” governments as those with declared objectives to reduce economic inequalities, close social status gaps, and enhance the political participation of underprivileged groups. During this same era, there was a flurry of legislative activity on abortion policy – in sharp contrast to previous decades of policy stasis, when restrictive laws remained on the books amid high rates of clandestine abortions. In the early 2000s, Latin American legislatures and courts have revised abortion policies on eleven separate occasions in eight countries. Even in countries where legal reforms did not go through, legislatures debated bills more frequently than before.

Leftist Governments Diverge on Abortion Policy

Research on Europe and the United States has shown that left governments are more likely to support reproductive rights legislation. And in Latin America, the region with the highest socioeconomic inequalities in the world, total abortion bans and proliferating clandestine abortions have been especially harmful to low-income women. Consequently, we might expect left governments, as advocates for this constituency, to give strong support to abortion rights. But we actually see tremendous variation. Two types of left parties have recently come to power in Latin America – variously termed “institutionalized” versus “populist” or “moderate” versus “radical.” Institutionalized left parties are characterized by robust party organizations, strong networks and identity, and dispersed political authority governing according to platforms that represent constituents. Populist parties, on the other hand, are characterized by a concentration of power in a charismatic leader who does not feel constrained by institutional rules.

During Latin America’s early twenty-first-century left-turn, institutionalized left governments have liberalized abortion policies in response to public opinion and social mobilization. In August 2017, for example, the Chilean Supreme Court upheld the liberalization of abortion law – by the national Congress, allowing for abortion under three circumstances (threat to the pregnant woman’s life, fatal fetal defect, or pregnancy resulting from rape). This change overturned the absolute prohibition that had been in effect since the last days of the Pinochet military regime in 1989. Some other left governments went even further: Uruguay legalized abortion in 2012, and Mexico did so in 2007. Meanwhile, no conservative government in Latin America has pursued liberalization.

But not all Latin American left governments are unequivocally liberal on the abortion question. Some left-populist governments have actively supported conservative laws – even absolute prohibitions. In 2006, the Sandinista Party in Nicaragua reversed course, supporting an absolute prohibition instead of allowing abortions in cases of serious fetal defects or risk of harm to the pregnant woman. In 2013, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa rejected a provision allowing abortion in the case of rape.

Abortion liberalization has faced obstacles in both types of Latin American left regimes:

- Institutionalized left parties – like those in Chile and Uruguay – have channels in place for civil society organizations, including feminist ones, to exert influence. But given their respect for abiding by political norms, institutionalized left governments are also likely to face well-organized conservative opposition, which can slow down reform, influence final legislation, or even veto it altogether. In Uruguay and Chile, feminist advocates linked to the party base had voice and influence, but conservatives were also able to exert influence through institutional channels. That is why Uruguayan abortion reform took so long and why in both countries the final legislation became less liberal than the original proposals.
- Left populist governments like Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega and Ecuador under Rafael Correa, often see advocates for liberalization as politically threatening – particularly feminists who more generally push for individual autonomy and pluralism. Moreover, populist leaders can use stances on abortion to bargain with well-organized religious forces, because the costs of restrictions fall almost exclusively by low-income women.

Broader Implications

Beyond abortion politics, we learned that policies about sex education, contraceptive access, and other reproductive health questions have followed similar dynamics in Latin America. For example, the Uruguayan government expanded sex education, while in Ecuador appointed bureaucrats sought to reduce access to publicly provided reproductive health services. Nicaragua, on the other hand, has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies outside sub-Saharan Africa.

As Latin America's left turn comes to a close, the region's recent experience with reproductive rights offers lessons to other parts of the world where populism is on the rise.

- Regardless of ideological leanings, institutionalized parties and political norms matter for contentious reproductive issues. Institutionalized parties respond to public opinion and social mobilization, while populist leaders try to amass power regardless of issues or social effects.
- Even left populism threatens reproductive rights, because “us versus them” rhetoric is antithetical to the individual autonomy on which reproductive rights are premised.
- Social movements matter. In Latin America's institutionalized left governments, no changes would have occurred without strong and persistent women's movements.

Read more in Merike Blofield and Christina Ewig, “The Left Turn and Abortion Politics in Latin America” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 24, no. 4 (2017): 481–510.