Image of Power
Bimonthly report on presidential approval ratings in Latin America
At the end of the first two months of the year, the five presidents leading the approval metrics are Nayib Bukele - who just won the elections with 84.6% of the votes - Daniel Noboa with 82%, Luis Abinader with 66%, AMLO with 65% and Rodrigo Chaves with 59%. Lula da Silva and Javier Milei are halfway with 51% and 50%, respectively. Gustavo Petro rebounded after a year and a half of sustained decline, while Luis Lacalle Pou faces the last year of his mandate with 42% support.

Javier Milei and Daniel Noboa completed their first 100 days in office. The former has managed to sustain the level of support with which he started his government despite the rigors of the economic policy and the stumbling of his two flagships in Congress, where La Libertad Avanza is in minority. The decidedly electioneering tone of the presidential discourse and the speed of his first measures have perplexed the opponents who have not yet managed to readjust themselves in this disruptive scenario.

Noboa surpassed 80 points of approval after having taken an unprecedented decision, the declaration of the internal armed conflict in the face of the unusual security crisis that occurred in January. However, it is still too early to anticipate whether the government will be able to sustain this social support over time, and even more so if it advances in less popular measures.

Will it be the hand of the candidates of the ruling party, after two years of electoral failures, as some recent analyses suggest?

Maybe. For now we can only say that they are ahead in countries with majority governments and high or very high approval levels. This is not the case of Panama where Laurentino Cortizo closes his administration with less than 10% approval.

Some details of this new electoral round. Claudia Sheinbaum has an 89% chance of becoming the next president of Mexico according to El País predictor. At sub-national level, at least 2 of the 9 governorships in dispute could change hands. The favorite for Panama’s elections was disqualified by the electoral justice due to a corruption conviction. His running mate will replace him but polls suggest that he has failed to capture all the votes of his predecessor.

The general elections in Uruguay will be preceded by mandatory internal party elections. The mayor of Canelones, Yamandú Orsi, leads the voting intention in Frente Amplio and Álvaro Delgado, former Secretary General of the Presidency of Luis Lacalle Pou, in Partido Nacional.

The data presented in this report do not express the opinion or the institutional position of the Directorio Legislativo.

Todos los gráficos que se presentan a continuación pueden verse en formato interactivo en este link.
The power of the image: Javier Milei’s first 100 days

Freneticism is the word that perhaps best describes the first 100 days of a certainly disruptive government that the President describes as "libertarian liberal". While the most traditional political referents try to decipher this phenomenon, Milei’s strategy is to sow confusion while his cabinet moves forward with severe economic adjustment measures. Without pause. A total shock.

In spite of being a minority government in Congress, the new president has lost no opportunity to remind his opponents that he won the election. During the legislative debate of his two flagships - the decree of necessity and urgency DNU 70/2023 and the Bases Bill - he permanently sought to clash with the blocs interested in preventing the government from an early failure. As things turned out, one was rejected in the Senate (the most difficult Chamber for La Libertad Avanza) and the other one fell in the Chamber of Deputies. Blunder or strategy?

Perhaps there is a bit of both. The president tried to capitalize on the situation by reinforcing a simple but effective message, the "political caste" is the other. This amorphous concept in which there is room for everyone functions - in Laclau’s terms - as an empty signifier that admits multiple meanings according to the situation and the interlocutor. The meaning may vary but the structure of the message is sustained and closed to the extent that the assignment of responsibility is not transferred to the government itself. The "political caste" is the constitutive exterior, there can be no identity without this opposition.

The simplicity of the message is its strength, but it also entails a risk in the medium and long term, when external support becomes necessary. It is the risk that it will end up mimicking the cracks that have structured Argentine politics in the last seventy years. If that point is reached, there will be little room left for shifting responsibility.
With an approval rating that for now remains steady at 50% - despite the rigors of the economic measures - the president threw the government communication manual out of the window. Instead, he opted for a decidedly electioneering tone, as Mario Riorda points out in this article (constant blows to the political caste and its privileges, use of campaign slogans, audience segmentation, among others). Government actions are in first and last instance legitimized by the votes obtained in the ballotage (56%), even against those who enjoy the same source of legitimacy (legislators, governors).

In this communicational scheme, the president is more protagonist than his government, whose approval throughout these three months has remained about 6 points below his personal image. The predominant use of social networks as a communication channel traces a sort of direct line between the charismatic leader and (a sector of) the citizenry vaguely defined as “good people”. Discursively, this channel does not admit mediations, controls or counterweights, including the government officials themselves and the legislators who represent him/her in Congress.

In turn, the replication of content from anonymous accounts suggests that the enunciator is at some point indifferent, only the statement matters because the message is the truth, and truth is not relative. But how long can this dynamic be sustained? In other words, what are the conditions of possibility?

One is the lack of clear leadership in the opposition. This was shown by the votes in Congress with the splitting of blocs, the breaking of party discipline or the abstentions of some provincial benches. It was also crystallized in the internal processes of election of party authorities in PRO, Partido Justicialista and Unión Cívica Radical. At this moment, there are no actors with veto power.

Another is the social hope that the shock will produce positive changes, that such strict measures would not have been taken if they were not the necessary means to achieve the desired end. It is an achievement of the government that this social mood has been sustained so far, but it can also be volatile. The latest Zuban Córdoba report suggests that some rearrangements are appearing regarding the assignment of responsibility: 51% of the people surveyed already believe that the economic situation is the fault of the current government, while only 24% think that the adjustment is being paid for by politics (against 44% in December).

Finally, we cannot avoid the "epochal climate", the emergence of social emergents of diverse profile and extraction that favored the emergence of "anti-systemic" leaderships and discourses. Beyond the particular traits of the Argentine president, Milei is not a marginalized player on the global chessboard, but one who appears aligned with other relevant figures such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom or Elon Musk. The achievement of Trump or Bolsonaro, even if they did not win reelection, was precisely to transform that diverse electorate into the basis of a competitive alternative. The long term game has to be seen, and it is just beginning.
Daniel Noboa's first 100 days: national crisis and growth of the presidential image

Daniel Noboa has already completed his first 100 days and maintains a very high image despite the fact that in January he faced a security crisis of major proportions. In this context, he made an unprecedented decision, he decreed the internal armed conflict and qualified more than 20 gangs as terrorist organizations and deployed the Armed Forces in the streets and in the prisons that had been taken over. It should be recalled that his predecessor faced several prison crises that ended in hundreds of deaths. As a result of his "iron fist" policy, he immediately achieved a notable reduction in the homicide rate, from 40 per 100,000 inhabitants to 12, although the number of kidnappings for ransom increased.

All this contributed to change the social mood and generate a certain optimism in the population that boosted his image to over 80%. However, it is still too early to anticipate whether the government will be able to sustain the effect of these early achievements over time, and even more so if it moves forward with less popular measures. For example, the VAT increase, the reduction of fuel subsidies (which in Lenin Moreno's time caused a popular uprising) or the regulation of fixed-term and hourly labor contracts that had been prohibited by the 2008 Constitution. Regarding the latter, it must be taken into account that unemployment is the second concern of the citizenship and that the rate of adequate employment barely reaches 34.7%, according to data from the Institute of Statistics and Census.

On April 21 there will be a referendum for the reform of the 2008 Constitution and popular consultation. The 11 questions approved by the Constitutional Court have to do with the attributions of the Armed Forces (complementary support to the police to fight organized crime - already included in the 2023 referendum - and of weapons on roads and corridors to prisons); increase of penalties for crimes of drug production and trafficking, organized crime, murder and hired assassination, arms trafficking, money laundering, illegal mining, etc.; classification of the crime of possession of weapons for private use of the Armed Forces; extradition of Ecuadorians, among others. The modification of the Labor Code to regulate fixed-term and hourly work contracts, referred to above, will also be submitted for consultation. Since the enactment of the 2008 Constitution, three constitutional referendums and four public consultations have been held. The last one dates back to the government of Guillermo Lasso and its results ended up being adverse for the ruling party. The "No" vote was imposed in all questions.

At the legislative level, where the ruling party's bloc is a minority, Noboa's strategy was the presentation of organic bills of economic urgency. Thus, he achieved the approval of the Organic Laws of Efficiency and Generation of Employment, of Energy Competitiveness and the Organic Law and the Organic Law to Confront the Internal Armed Conflict, which he later partially vetoed.
He also presented two other bills, the "Recovery of Assets of Illicit Origin and Transparency in Public Contracting" and "Strengthening of Tourist Activities and Promotion of Employment".

**Petro's image rebounds for the first time since he took office**

Since his swearing in at the beginning of August 2022, the level of popular support had done nothing but shrink, some 30 points in just 18 months of government. However, in the first two months of the year, Cifras y Conceptos recorded a recovery of 7 points and Invamer of 9, while for Datexco it remains stable. Rejection would have been reduced in the order of 8 points.

So far Petro has shown himself as a convinced but elusive leader with little disposition to negotiate. Willing to go ahead with his most ambitious proposals regardless of the political costs, he ended up hurting relations with allies and complicating his legislative approval. In the Cabinet, he reduced the space of his allies to retreat to more like-minded sectors; in Congress, he tried to capitalize on the fissures in the allied ranks. Thus, Petro decided to insist on reforms to the health, labor and social security systems, with no more success in Congress than in his first year.

As we analyzed in our last issue, in contexts with heterogeneous government coalitions, transaction costs increase. Sustainability depends, among other things,
on the ability and willingness of the leader to manage expectations, resources and timing; on the ability of allies to build competitive alternatives on their own; on economic indicators and the perception of government transparency.

So, what happened now, why did Petro’s image improve? The reasons are not clear but there are several points to consider.

The upturn coincides with the government’s strong confrontation with the Supreme Court and with former Attorney General Francisco Barbosa, whom the president accused of wanting to lead an institutional coup. After four unsuccessful votes, the Court opted for Luz Adriana Camargo Garzón, who will be in charge of the investigation of very sensitive cases for the president, such as the alleged irregularities in the financing of his electoral campaign and the role of his son Nicolás Petro.

According to the latest Cifras y Conceptos survey, 63% of the people surveyed believed that the tensions between Petro and Barbosa were indicative of an “institutional rupture”, while CNC places them in the sixth place of most read, seen or heard news related to the president. In the same period Invamer showed a deterioration of the public image of the Supreme Court and the attorney general’s office.

On the other hand, it should be noted that on January 1 the new subnational authorities took office. The mayors of the main cities, governed by the opposition, started with very high approval levels, which could be contributing to the improvement in the social climate and the perception of the country’s direction. According to Invamer, Carlos Fernando Galán (Bogotá) starts with 54% approval (+14% with respect to his predecessor); Federico Gutiérrez (Medellín) with 76% (+53); Alejandro Éder (Cali) with 64% (+43); Alejandro Char with 74% (+14) and Jaime Andrés Beltrán (Barranquilla) with 61% (+31).

Finally, the polls detected a slight increase in the support to the main reforms promoted by the president, especially the labor reform, which went from 24% to 30%, according to Cifras y Conceptos.

**El Salvador: Bukele triumphs in the one-runner race**

The opening of the electoral year in the region began in February in El Salvador with a resounding, although expected, triumph of Nayid Bukele with 80% of the valid votes. The controversy surrounding the prohibited reelection, which we have already analyzed in previous issues, and to which a last minute electoral reform was added, did not detract any points from the president’s victory.

At this point there is no doubt that Bukele’s strategy of focusing his discourse on an exclusive and very sensitive issue for the Salvadoran society, the fight against gangs and insecurity, was highly effective. It allowed him to shield the public approval of his government in values that exceed 85%, it also gave him regional stature in a context of countries strongly affected by the problem of insecurity.

The new term will begin on June 1, while a month before the new Legislative Assembly will take office, with some changes. With the **electoral reform** of 2023, the number of legislators was reduced from 84 to 60, of which 54 correspond to the ruling New Ideas bloc, and another 3 to allied parties, a true “supermajority”. Thus, the legislative representation of the opposition was reduced to only 3 seats. For the first time since its legalization, the FMLN, which was in government from 2009 to 2019, did not manage to obtain seats.

It will be interesting to see how the second presidency unfolds. Security as a monotheme was effective, but it may also run out of steam.
In that case, what will Bukele’s turnaround and strategy be?

MORENA beyond AMLO

In recent years, the question has often arisen about the continuity of the great political movements of the 21st century beyond the leaders who gave birth to them: what would happen to PT without Lula, to MAS without Evo Morales, to Correism without Correa, to Chavism without Chávez, to Kirchnerism without Néstor and Cristina? Mexico could be a case study.

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) reaches the end of his presidency with high levels of approval that only in a few moments pierced the floor of 60%. The main one coincided with the beginning of the pandemic from which, like few others, he managed to recover quickly.

He will not be able to be president again, but he is still redoubling his bet with the presentation of a new battery of constitutional reforms, including some that have already stumbled in Congress or in the Judicial Branch (electoral reform, transfer of the National Guard to SEDENA, elimination of autonomous agencies, election of judges, magistrates and ministers of the Judicial Branch by popular vote, revocation of the 1997 and 2007 pension reforms, among others). None of them will be dealt with in the remaining months of his term.

We will leave for another time the analysis of the reasons for such sustained support to focus now on some electoral data.
The campaign officially started on March 1 in view of the general elections which, for the first time in history, will be held on June 2. In that same election, both Houses of Congress will be completely renewed, governors will be elected in 8 states (Chiapas, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Morelos, Puebla, Tabasco, Veracruz and Yucatán; and the head of Mexico City) and 29 city councils will be renewed. A mega-election in which some 20,000 positions will be at stake.

Three candidates will compete for the top prize. Claudia Scheinbaum (MORENA), Xóchitl Gálvez (PRI-PRD-PAN) and Jorge Álvarez (Movimiento Ciudadano). The average of polls elaborated by El País currently places the candidate of the ruling party as the favorite of the electoral process, with 60% of voting intention. In second place is Gálvez with 35% and in third place Álvarez with only 5%. As reported by the same media and Oraculus, Gálvez grew, reducing the distance with Scheinbaum at the expense of Movimiento Ciudadano, after the officialization of Álvarez's candidacy.

Some novelties introduced by this election from Peña Nieto's 2014 electoral reform. On the one hand, the advancement of the dates of the elections and the inauguration of the president. Until now, elections were held in July and the president took office in December. This time, the population will go to the polls on June 2, and the president will take office on October 1. This temporary change is not only of form, it will also give the new government time to formulate and present its Income Law and Federal Expenditure Budget. On the other hand, it will be the first time that male and female senators with a valid mandate will be able to opt for consecutive reelection. The change has already taken place for the deputies elected in 2021.

Graph 4 (Link)
What is the outlook at the sub-national level? As we indicated before, in these elections the governorships of 9 of the 32 states will be at stake, of which 6 are governed by MORENA (Mexico City, Chiapas, Morelos, Puebla, Tabasco, and Veracruz), two by PAN (Guanajuato and Yucatán) and one by PRI-PRD (Jalisco). According to February data from Demoscopia Digital, the polls favor the local ruling parties with the exception of Jalisco, where the candidate of Movimiento Ciudadano is in the lead. However, in two of them the race seems tight: Morelos and Yucatan where the PAN-PRI-PRD alliance only has an advantage over MORENA of 2 points and 4 points respectively. The percentage of undecided voters is 13% and 11%.

Between 2021 and 2024, MORENA went from not having any governorship to dominating 20, which are added to the 2 controlled by its allies PVEM and PES. The remaining 10 are distributed among PRI (which in the same period went from 14 to 3), PAN (from 11 to 5) and Movimiento Ciudadano (from 0 to 2).

Panama: the disqualification of the most popular candidate shook the electoral scene

On May 5 there will be presidential elections in Panama. Both the offices of president and vice-president will be renewed; as well as the 71 seats of the National Assembly, 81 mayors, 20 legislators of the Central American Parliament and other positions.

The road will be arduous for the candidate of the ruling party (PRD + MOLINERA), Gabriel “Gaby” Carrizo, current vice-president. His challenge will be to “detach” himself from a government that ends with less than 10% approval, which so far he has not achieved. According to a CID GALLUP survey, more than 90% of the population believes that the country is on the wrong course. Social concerns are monopolized by the economy (unemployment and inflation).

With 45 days to go before the elections, the words that best describe it are disenchantment and uncertainty.

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**Graph 5 (Link)**

Source: Image of Power - Directorio Legislativo, based on the collection of public opinion polls from outside sources taken between January and February 2024
With 20% of voting intentions, the candidate with the greatest possibilities is José Mulino, who took the place of former president Ricardo Martinelli when he was disqualified. Behind him there are 5 other names, each with 10% of support in the pre-electoral polls. This is a highly fragmented scenario that we have already seen in other countries, such as Peru and Costa Rica.

Until the beginning of March, the election seemed to be defined in favor of Martinelli with 40% of vote intention. The former president had been acquitted in two cases of illegal wiretapping, but was later convicted of misuse of public funds and money laundering. This conviction, which Martinelli has described as political persecution, was what finally frustrated his run for the presidency. Despite this, a survey conducted by The Marketing Group in February showed that 64% of the people polled stated that "he is not a traditional politician", 38% that "he is honest" and 34% that "he is in a clean party with no problems".

Other data to take into account: there was no direct transfer of votes from Martinelli to his running mate José Mulino; one fifth of the voters are still undecided; only 28% trust somewhat or a lot the Electoral Tribunal which ordered the disqualification. Furthermore, 80% would consider voting for a candidate who adopts policies similar to those of Nayib Bukele.

**Dominican Republic: in the final stretch of the electoral campaign, the ruling party is in the lead**

On May 19 there will be presidential elections in the Dominican Republic and everything suggests that Luis Abinader will be reelected for the 2024-2028 term. A recent poll by Cid Gallup, places him in first place with 59% of voting intentions and a difference of 32 points with respect to the second place, the former president of this country, Leonel Fernandez Reyna. Furthermore, his party, Partido Revolucionario Moreno, has just won a resounding victory in the municipal elections of last February.
Abinader is the only president in the region who took office in the middle of the pandemic (August 2020), after beating the ruling party's ticket with 52% of the votes.

With the initial credit of the recently won election and the wear and tear of his predecessor, he managed to overcome the first 6 months with a 70% approval rating. His discourse focused on the fight against corruption and economic stability allowed him to sustain a high level of support, which today is in the order of 65%.

Uruguay: who will be the protagonists of the June internal party elections?

This year’s presidential elections promise to be historic, as candidates from up to 23 political parties are expected to participate, after the Electoral Court authorized 12 new spaces, including Partido Libertario del Uruguay, which seeks to emulate the ideas of Argentine president Javier Milei. The elections will be held on October 27 and the polls so far favor Frente Amplio and Partido Nacional.

The 30 new senators and 99 members of the House of Representatives, that is to say the totality of the Parliament, will also be elected on that day.

However, the panorama will be finalized in the simultaneous and mandatory (for the parties, not for the voters) internal party elections to be held on June 30. Since the return to democracy there have been 5 internal elections and, as Daniel Chasquetti shows in this article, the participation has been decreasing, 53% in 1999, 46% in 2004, 45% in 2009, 38% in 2014 and 40% in 2019.

Luis Lacalle Pou is not eligible for reelection, which opens the game to new faces within Partido Nacional. The favorite is Álvaro Delgado, former Secretary General of the Presidency, with 60% of voting intention in the internal elections according to a recent poll by the consulting firm Cifras. The solid valuation of the government, currently 41%, underpins his candidacy against his main contender, Laura Raffo, with 24%.

In the coalition of leftist parties, the internal race is polarized between Yamandú Orsi, current mayor of Canelones, who for now leads the voting intention with the support of Movimiento de Participación Popular. Carolina Cosse, supported by Partido Comunista and Partido Socialista among other sectors, has been growing but is still 9 points behind.

Looking ahead to the general elections, the race is tight. Cifra reports that during the summer the Frente Amplio increased 3 percentage points (to 47%) while support for the Coalition has remained stable at around 42%. There is still an undecided percentage of approximately 10%, so the race is expected to be close.

Venezuela, far from the Barbados Agreement on the Promotion of Political Rights

Finally, the government announced the date of the next general elections - July 28 - but the discussion is elsewhere. All expectations encouraged by the Barbados Agreement of 2023 were buried when, as anticipated, the candidacy of María Corina Machado, winner of the internal elections of the opposition held in October last year, was disqualified.
The candidacies must be registered between March 21 and 25, but the margin of maneuver of the opposition was fatally curtailed. After months of uncertainty, Machado declined her candidacy and instead proposed university professor Corina Yoris. However, hours before the deadline, Plataforma Unitaria, which gathers the main opposition parties, had not been able to obtain access to register their candidacies in the CNE platform.

Besides, the National Electoral Council eliminated from the ballot five other opposition parties: Convergencia, Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Movimiento por Venezuela (MPV), Partido Unión y Entendimiento (PUENTE) and the GENTE party. The meeting of the Council was behind closed doors but, according to what transpired, the body was justified in the percentage of votes obtained in the 2021 election which we cover in this report.

For the moment, there are only two certainties. First, Nicolás Maduro, who has already been in power for 11 years, will be the candidate of Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) on March 16. Second, the government is far from meeting the demand for free and fair elections that the opposition has been raising throughout years of unsuccessful negotiations.
Methodological notes

This monitoring of presidential image compiles surveys on presidential image, level of presidential approval and level of government approval, developed in 18 countries of the region by a group of approximately 100 consulting firms and research centers.

The measurements are integrated by means of a simple average per country for the study period. The data sources are not weighted according to the methodology used, the size of the sample or the pollster.

The averages corresponding to this two-month period are compared with those of previous two-month periods, using the same methodology. Figure 6 shows the sources used for this edition.

Imagen del poder is a report prepared by Directorio Legislativo’s research team.

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Graph 8 (Link)

Image of Power: surveys collected for January - February 2024 edition

Every two months, IDP collects surveys from different outside sources and integrates them by means of simple average per country. We collected 51 surveys for this edition, as shown in the graph.

Source: Image of Power - Directorio Legislativo, based on the collection of public opinion polls from outside sources taken between November and December 2013.
Directorio Legislativo is a non-partisan and independent organization that for 15 years has been promoting the strengthening of legislative powers and the consolidation of democratic systems in Latin America through transparency, access to public information and dialogue with actors from the public, private, academic and civil society sectors.

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