Image of Power

BIMONTHLY MONITORING OF PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL IN LATIN AMERICA
NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2023
The dealer deals the cards. In the background, the murmur of people watching the table can be heard. The players raise their cards in disguise so as not to reveal their play prematurely and look at each other suspiciously. Some withdraw, luck has not been their ally tonight. In politics, as in poker, cards and strategy make winners and losers.

The context presents some common traits, independent of the hand each one is dealt. There are at least three closely related phenomena that we need to take into account. First, citizen patience runs out quickly in contexts of economic and security crises such as those that are plaguing the countries of the region. Second, most governments do not achieve their own legislative majority and even have to govern with highly fragmented congresses. Third, the relationship with allies - necessary to sustain governability - is rapidly eroding as presidents’ popularity declines and political costs rise.

When we analyze the evolution of citizen approval at different stages of a president’s term, we see that there are no winning cards per se. A good hand (high percentage of votes in the first round or single round, solid numbers in the legislature or relatively homogeneous coalitions) does not in itself guarantee governability. Nor is the lack of them necessarily synonymous with a lost party. In short, there are no wild cards in politics.

**Presidents with large benches**

In recent years there have been few majority governments or governments with strong benches. In these cases, the ruling parties have no incentive to include other forces in their cabinets, especially if the opposition is divided. Precisely for this reason, the challenge sometimes lies in maintaining the cohesion of the political force itself.

We find here the governments headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador - who with the legislative support of his three allies has an absolute majority in both chambers - and Nayib Bukele who since the 2021 mid-term elections has a qualified majority in the Assembly. In terms of Cox and Morgenstern (2001), the Legislative Branch here plays a more subordinate role to the agenda of the Executive. In both cases, the presidents have managed to consolidate their political proposal over time with high or very high levels of approval. (graph 1)
However, we also find other governments that, despite having solid numbers in the Legislature, established a more negotiating type of dynamic with the latter (Cox and Morgenstern, 2001). The most notable case is probably that of Alberto Fernández, although we could also add here Luis Arce. In spite of initially counting on winning cards from the political point of view, his leadership was disputed from within.

The following graph allows us to see the steep fall of Alberto Fernandez who, after a year in office, and due to a pandemic, had already broken the percentage that allowed him to come to power. Two years later, he also faced a strong setback at the polls which weakened his position even more, although he did not totally lose his legislative traction. However, in this context, it did not seek to mobilize the legislative agenda in the post-pandemic period either.
Presidents leading coalition governments

Government coalitions have been very frequent in the region, in those cases where the ruling party needs others to achieve majorities in Congress, or to improve its negotiating position. For this, the bargaining chip is usually the granting of positions in the national cabinet. Brazil, Chile and Uruguay have a long tradition of coalition governments, with variable success that can be associated to different structural and conjunctural variables.

The theory of transaction costs suggests that, as the number of potential allies increases and the coalition diversifies, the costs for the incumbent government increase. This principle highlights the importance of ideological affinity and the number of parties involved in coalition building. In recent years, the presidents of Brazil, Chile and Uruguay have managed to build stable and relatively homogeneous alliances in ideological terms that allowed them to consolidate competitive policy proposals.

To deal with a historically fragmented Congress, Bolsonaro and Lula were successful in gaining support through a strategic distribution of positions in their cabinet which, although not enough to reach a legislative majority, allowed them to significantly strengthen their negotiating capacity.

Here, pragmatism is the player’s ability, both to build coalitions and to deal with the powerful “centrão” in Congress. Polarization also operated as an organizing factor in the political scene. Bolsonaro thus managed to sustain a very solid level of support that fluctuated between 30 and 40%, while, a year after his inauguration, Lula has been holding steady at around 45 to 50%.

Lacalle Pou came to power with Partido Nacional. However, as president he has enjoyed the support of four other ideologically related parties, the so-called "multicolor coalition", with which he managed to achieve an absolute majority in each chamber of Parliament. Despite a certain level of erosion of his popularity, he managed to emerge practically unscathed from the pandemic and to build over time a competitive proposal for the next elections.

What we are interested in highlighting here is not so much the level of approval, but its stability over time. (Graph 3)
The situation is different for Gustavo Petro, whose popularity has been going downhill since he took office in July 2022. Faced with the lack of his own parliamentary majorities - Pacto Histórico has 16% of the total seats - Petro formed a very heterogeneous post-electoral coalition with parties from the center-right, center and center-left. Thus he achieved a legislative front of 140 seats out of 188 in Representatives and 75 out of 108 in the Senate, while 9 of the 18 cabinet portfolios went to his allies, including some very sensitive ones.

However, its sustainability was expected to have high transaction costs, even more so as the number of partners increases. Coalitions are not new in Colombian politics, but they had never been led by a leftist party. Thus, after the first year of government, the coalition began to unravel and the president broke the percentage with which he came to power.
To the extent that government management is bad or inefficient, the incentives for allies to remain in the coalition rather than differentiate themselves from the government will be reduced, even more so if they have a chance in the next elections.

**Presidents with few resources to attract the opposition**

In highly fragmented party systems, with presidents who come to power with 20% or less of their “own” votes, governments have few cards to offer potential allies. Excluding the contender in the second round, the government has to deal with multiple stakeholders, so the incentives for opposition parties are reduced. Other factors also play here: the firepower of the Executive Branch (capacity to issue decrees) and that of the Legislature (capacity to control the Executive through impeachment, censure motions or cabinet approval).

Peru and Ecuador are two significant cases, with a long list of presidents who ended their terms prematurely (among them Pedro Castillo and Guillermo Lasso) and high fragmentation in the Assembly. Similar institutional conditions will be faced by the new presidents of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa, who begins his term with 76% approval, and Guatemala’s Bernardo Arévalo.

In terms of image (graph 5), we see that popular support for the tandem Castillo / Boluarte and Lasso started above the percentages obtained in the first round and then dropped rapidly to stabilize at very low levels similar to those of the first election, starting in the second half of the term.

**Graph 5:**

[Graph showing approval ratings over time for various presidents in Peru and Ecuador]
Presidents who "play their own game"

For the end we leave some cases that are a bit more anomalous, at least for the Latin American context. We are talking about presidents who opt for a more "autonomous" management. This is conditioned by several factors. For example, if he has broad legislative powers (he has and makes use of his ability to issue decrees), or when the legislative control mechanisms require very high thresholds.

This game can go well with the "anti-establishment" discourse model of figures such as Nayib Bukele (2019-2021) or Javier Milei, who starts his mandate with an approval rating of around 50%. Logic suggests that a minority government will try to build alliances. However, their own anti-establishment predicament and ideological distance may act as deterrents. In other words, they will avoid including other forces in their cabinet and will opt for more transitional legislative arrangements, shifting the allocation of responsibilities.

These conditions do not necessarily imply that the Legislature will be relegated to a subordinate role. However, the main asset of these governments in highly polarized contexts lies precisely in the symbolic power of their discourse. To the extent that they manage to maintain it, this could give these presidents the air to build competitive proposals beyond the elections that brought them to power.

For a president, his "royal flush", i.e. the best possible hand, arises from the combination of different factors: the initial credit (or votes obtained in the first round), the numbers in the Legislature, the fragmentation of the party system and the relationship with opponents and potential allies (ideological distance).

Nowadays, there are more presidents who started the party with a "complex hand", low support at the ballot box and in the Legislature, high fragmentation of the party system and high social conflict. Here, the margin for negotiation is reduced and with it the capacity to "deceive" the rivals. In these cases, the strategy is oriented to achieve political survival. Some, however, had to leave the table early. In scenarios of accelerated loss of approval or citizen support, weakness within the Legislative Branch is a key factor in allowing or not the survival of the president.

The position of the governing party in the Legislature is a particularly strong card. Experience suggests that only those presidents with strong caucuses, either their own or through coalitions, will be inclined to use the legislative route. Those who have little support will try to use the executive route, whenever they have that capacity, and will have a more distant relationship with the other parties (Chasquetti, 2006). Accordingly, the Legislative Branch may be linked to the Executive Branch with a tougher, more negotiating or subordinate logic.

We have also been able to see that, sometimes, with equal hands, the results are different. Gabriel Boric started with a low legislative flow but managed to sustain his approval level. Alberto Fernández started with winning cards, but lost the game in a resounding way. Finally, players with daring strategies are appearing. Javier Milei took office in a context of deep social and economic crisis, and has poor numbers in Congress. However, he has been deploying a confrontational strategy that does not seem to be so costly for him in political terms.

Ultimately, the game is made up of cards, skill and, also, a bit of luck.
Bibliographical References:


Methodological notes

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

Measurements are aggregated by a simple average per country for the study period. The data sources are not weighted according to the methodology used, the sample size or the surveyor. The averages corresponding to this two-month period are compared with those of previous two-month periods, using the same methodology. Starting in 2022, the presidential image rankings and evolution graphs only aggregate data on presidential approval, but not on government approval, which will be presented separately, when it is deemed necessary.

The presidential image rankings include cases that meet the following two criteria: a) they have presidential image or approval measurements taken by at least two data sources (consulting firms/study centers); b) they have at least three measurements for the period considered. Although the goal of this report is to average multiple data sources, its fulfillment is conditioned by the availability of information.

Graph 6 (click to access the graphic in interactive format)

Image of Power: surveys collected for November - December 2023 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 - Directrício Legislativo, based on the collection of public opinion polls from outside sources taken between November and December 2023.