

# Giving Citizens a Voice

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In this section, you will learn about the pursuit of democracy in Latin America.

All questions require at least  
**THREE** sentences on own paper.

## PLACES & TERMS

**oligarchy** government by the few

**junta** harsh government formed by the military and run by the generals

**caudillo** rule by a military dictator or political boss

**land reform** the process of breaking up large landholdings and giving land to peasant farmers

## A Struggle to Be Heard

Latin Americans today seek more democratic governments. Democracy depends on several things. There must be free and fair elections. Citizens need to participate. There should be majority rule with protection for minority rights. And there must be constitutional freedoms. Latin American history, however, has often stood in the way of democracy.

The Spanish conquered the region in the 16th century. After that, Native Americans in Central and South America were ruled by governors. These governors took their orders from the king and queen of Spain. Latin American countries won their independence during the 1800s. However, they were still governed mainly by small groups of Spanish colonists.

This government by the few is called an **oligarchy**. It was not democratic. The government censored the press, limited free speech, and punished *dissent*. It also discriminated against

everyone who was 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. They would seize power and form a new, harsher government known as a **junta**. A junta was run by the generals.

Throughout the 20th century, many Latin American countries were ruled by a caudillo. A **caudillo** is a military dictator or political boss. The caudillo's 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 turn of the century, Mexico was governed by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), or 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 embrace a *stable* democracy.

### 1. How was a junta formed?

Answer in at least THREE SENTENCES on own paper.

## Establishing Stable Democracies

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

The goal of political reform is to establish a constitutional government. A freely elected government that respects the rule of law is important to a democratic nation.

At the same time, the participation of citizens in political affairs is 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.

Another element of reform is the increasingly important role of women in politics. Throughout the region, women are running for office. They are taking an active role in government. For example, in 2000, Marta Suplicy was elected mayor of São Paulo, Brazil. This city is the financial center and economic engine of Brazil.

Latin America had been ruled by a wealthy *elite*. Economic power, including land, was in the hands of the few. To spread the wealth more fairly, some governments set up a program of land reform. **Land reform** is the process of breaking up large landholdings and giving the land to land-poor peasant farmers.

In Mexico, for example, the process of land reform began with Benito Juarez. He was from a small farm. He was elected Mexico's president in 1858. One of his main reform goals was to redistribute land. He did not want rich landowners to 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 of economic equality.

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

### 2. What is required in order to get citizens to participate in political affairs?

Answer in at least THREE SENTENCES on own paper.