

Vaccine Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Importance of U.S. Engagement

Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues.

Daniel A. Restrepo¹

It is difficult to overstate the importance of US vaccine diplomacy across Latin America and the Caribbean. To understand why this is true, it is important to take a step back and understand the broader context of the cascading set of crises affecting the region.

Front of mind among these, of course, is the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Since it arrived in Latin America and the Caribbean, the pandemic has claimed at least 1.5 million lives, representing more than 30 percent of all reported deaths world-wide for a region with 8 percent of the world's population.ⁱ At various points in the past 20 months, multiple countries throughout the region have laid claim to the dubious distinction of leading the world in infection and mortality rates. We will not soon forget scenes of bodies piling up on the streets of Guayaquil, Ecuador nor forget stories of entire cities in Brazil running out of bottled oxygen.

The pandemic's economic fallout has, in many ways, been even more severe. In 2020, Latin America and the Caribbean endured, according to the World Bank, the most significant economic contraction of any region in the world, with regional GDP contracting by 7 percent.ⁱⁱ The first 9 months of the pandemic saw 22 million people fall into poverty, including 8 million into extreme poverty—whipping out, respectively, 12 and 20 years of progress, on these fronts.ⁱⁱⁱ Latin America and the Caribbean has also been among the slowest regions of the world to bounce back for its COVID-onset economic contraction. Economic growth in 2021 is expected to be 6.3 percent but regional GDP is not expected to be above pre-pandemic levels until 2023 at the earliest.^{iv} Given the pandemic's persistence, the economic wreckage continues to pile up and millions more will have slipped into poverty and extreme poverty during this calendar year.

Although the region's overall COVID profile has begun to improve markedly, the region is also being buffeted by the accelerating effects of the climate crisis and by multiple governance failures—and worse—fueled by a plague of corruption, populism, and authoritarianism. The region is also seeing an historic displacement of vulnerable populations both within and across international borders, including:

- 100,000s of Haitians dislocated by the 2010 earthquake;^v
- More than 5.9 million Venezuelans driven from their country since 2015;^{vi}
- Nicaraguans fleeing an authoritarian regime;^{vii}
- Haitians dislocated by 2021 earthquake and post-Moise assassination political tumult;^{viii}
- Central Americans uprooted by Ida and Iota that befell them on top of COVID and the historically predatory conditions under which they live;^{ix} and

¹ The views reflected in this testimony are my personal views and do not represent the views of any institution with which I am or have been affiliated.

- Mexicans subject to spiraling violence and loss of economic opportunity.^x

COVID's impact, however, is perhaps most troubling for US interests in the Western hemisphere because it hit at a time when democracy was under its most significant strain since the region's post-Cold War democratic transformation and its 2001 embrace, through the Inter-American Democratic Charter, of a shared responsibility to protect it.

In 2020, less than half of all Latin Americans, 49 percent, according to *Latinobarometro*, the region's leading public opinion survey, viewed democracy as the preferred form of government and only 25 percent report being satisfied with their democracy.^{xi} Although some take solace in the fact that those levels were virtually unchanged from 2018, which saw 48 percent preference for democracy and 24 percent satisfaction with democracy, such "stability" should be cold comfort.^{xii} A steady downward trend has perhaps temporarily been arrested, but a fundamental crisis of confidence in democracy still prevails, opening up ample space for populists—of the Left and the Right—to fill with divisive rhetoric, empty promises, and nostalgia for oftentimes illusory, by-gone, golden eras.

The reasons behind this loss of faith are multi-factor, but a clear thread is a belief that democracy is incapable of addressing people's basic needs with pronounced majorities believing basics like education (58 percent), healthcare (64 percent) and justice (77 percent) are not equitably available.^{xiii} Only majorities in the curious trio of Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Nicaragua view these three basic services as being equitably available.^{xiv}

It is in the context of this complex backdrop that, in my estimation, it is no exaggeration to say that for the past several months, away from the glare of camera lights, the Biden Administration through its vaccine diplomacy has been executing the most important US geostrategic initiative in the Americas in decades with lasting implications for democracy in the region—and for US democracy here at home.

Since President Biden first prioritized our closest neighbors for distribution of US-manufactured COVID-19 vaccines, the United States has distributed nearly 50 million vaccine doses throughout the Americas,^{xv} including more than 10 million via COVAX.^{xvi}

This clear prioritization of the Western hemisphere is sound policy on numerous levels. It is a vital component of any effective strategy to mitigate the unprecedented irregular movement of people throughout the region triggered, in no small measure, by the impacts of COVID-19. It is good for our economy and for export-supported sectors, in particular, given that one-third of all US exports go to countries in the Western hemisphere.^{xvii} It has been an excellent, basic public health policy given that most foreign visitors to the United States originate in our closest neighbors.

It has, however, been an even better application of US power with clear geopolitical benefits.

It demonstrates the US competitive advantages compared to China and unquestionably advances US interests, as helping governments put vaccines in arms, turn the tide on COVID-19, and bolster economic recovery is the best possible demonstration project that democracy can deliver for the people of the Americas.

The efficacy of US-manufactured vaccines—made possible by international and public-private collaboration—also provides a stark contrast with China’s much-touted vaccine diplomacy. Although China—and to a lesser extent Russia—enjoyed “first-mover” advantages distributing vaccines across the region before the United States and doing so with more emphasis on making headlines than delivering impact, Chinese and Russian vaccines have proven far less effective than their US-manufactured counterparts.^{xviii} As a result, they have been increasingly less sought-after with countries that were high-profile recipients of Chinese and/or Russian largesse earlier this year turning to the United States as the partner of choice.

That US vaccines are delivered with no strings also sends a powerful, albeit indirect, message. It underscores a confidence in the power of innovation and openness to collaboration, two characteristics that not only made the highly effective, US-manufactured vaccines possible, but which also draw perhaps the most critical distinction between the power of the American experiment writ large and that which fuels China’s rise.

Finally, shoring up faith in democracy in the Americas is not just good for the above stated reasons. Nor does it simply advance abstract US interests abroad. It is also important for what it portends for the interplay between a crisis of faith in democracy across the Americas and its effects on US democracy considering the deep interconnection that binds the United States to the rest of the countries of the Americas.

As it has done with so many other pre-existing conditions, COVID-19 has laid bare a dark underside of interconnection in the Americas. Over the course of the past 9 months lies and distortions—communicated in Spanish and emanating from Latin America—have fueled vaccine hesitancy among US Latinos.^{xix} A similar, robust, negative feedback loop exists around mis- and disinformation campaigns in and from the region fueling skepticism in democracy—there and here—via platforms like WhatsApp^{xx} and YouTube.^{xxi} Platforms on which US Latinos over-index and which are falling short in countering Spanish-language propaganda.^{xxii} As a result, the more the United States can do to shore up democracy across Latin America and the Caribbean, the more it will do to shore up democracy at home as well.

Aligning the United States with the democratic aspirations of the approximately 600 million individuals with whom we share the Americas, of course, does not end with vaccines. It requires using the full range of US policy tools to support peaceful, prosperous, and resilient communities throughout the Americas. But helping end the COVID-19 pandemic, making economic recovery more possible, and instilling greater faith in the promise of democracy across the Americas nonetheless amounts to an essential, historic step forward in the face of regional tumult likely to continue for years to come.

ⁱ In Focus, “Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19,” Congressional Research Service, November 15, 2021 available at [IF11581.pdf \(fas.org\)](#).

ⁱⁱ International Monetary Fund, Regional Economic Outlook Western Hemisphere: A Long and Winding Road to Recovery, October 2021, available at [Regional Economic Outlook for Western Hemisphere, October 2021 \(imf.org\)](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Social Panorama of Latin America,” March 2021, available at [Pandemic Prompts Rise in Poverty to Levels Unprecedented in Recent Decades and Sharply Affects Inequality and Employment | Press Release | Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean \(cepal.org\)](#).

-
- ^{iv} UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “The recovery paradox in Latin America and the Caribbean. Growth amid persisting structural problems: inequality, poverty and low investment and productivity,” July 8, 2021 available at [Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021 Will Not Manage to Reverse the Adverse Effects of the Pandemic | Press Release | Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean \(cepal.org\)](#).
- ^v Jacqueline Charles, “In aftermath of Haiti’s 2010 earthquake, many still face immigration uncertainty,” *Miami Herald*, January 13, 2021 available at [Haitian immigrants who fled 2010 earthquake face uncertainty | Miami Herald](#).
- ^{vi} Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela available at [Home | R4V](#).
- ^{vii} Alvaro Murillo, “Soaring numbers of Nicaraguans seek refuge in Costa Rica amid domestic crackdown,” *Reuters*, August 10, 2021 available at [Soaring number of Nicaraguans seek refuge in Costa Rica amid domestic crackdown | Reuters](#).
- ^{viii} Lisa Deaderick, “A perfect storm of crises and instability leading Haitian migrants to seek U.S. asylum,” *San Diego Tribune*, September 26, 2021 available at [A perfect storm of crises and instability leading Haitian migrants to seek U.S. asylum - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](#).
- ^{ix} Dan Restrepo, “Central Americans Are Fleeing Bad Governments,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 5, 2021 available at [Central Americans Are Fleeing Bad Governments | Foreign Affairs](#).
- ^x Kirk Semple, “Violence Drives Swell in Mexican Migration,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2019 available at [Violence Drives a Swell in Mexican Migration - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#).
- ^{xi} Latinobarometro, Latinobarometro Report 2021, available at [Latinobarometro](#).
- ^{xii} Latinobarometro, Latinobarometro Report 2021, available at [Latinobarometro](#).
- ^{xiii} Latinobarometro, Latinobarometro Report 2021, available at [Latinobarometro](#).
- ^{xiv} Latinobarometro, Latinobarometro Report 2021, available at [Latinobarometro](#).
- ^{xv} Chase Harrison, “Tracker: U.S. Vaccine Donations to Latin America,” AS/COA, November 3, 2021 available at [Tracker: U.S. Vaccine Donations to Latin America | AS/COA \(as-coa.org\)](#).
- ^{xvi} Chase Harrison, “Tracker: U.S. Vaccine Donations to Latin America,” AS/COA, November 3, 2021 available at [Tracker: U.S. Vaccine Donations to Latin America | AS/COA \(as-coa.org\)](#).
- ^{xvii} Office of the United States Trade Representative, Countries & Regions, available at [Countries & Regions | United States Trade Representative \(ustr.gov\)](#).
- ^{xviii} Sui-Lee Wee, “They Relied on Chinese Vaccines. Now They’re Battling Outbreaks.,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2021 available at [They Relied on Chinese Vaccines. Now They’re Battling Outbreaks. - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#).
- ^{xix} Nada Hassanein, “‘You can’t trust the government’: Spanish-speaking social media spreads COVID-19 vaccine disinformation, adds to hesitancy,” *USA Today*, March 29, 2021 available at [COVID-19 'infodemic': Social media in Spanish spreads myths, hoaxes \(usatoday.com\)](#).
- ^{xx} Sam Sabin, “Hispanic Adults Use WhatsApp More Than the General Public. Disinformation Campaigns Are Targeting That Vulnerability,” *Morning Consult*, October 30, 2020 available at [Hispanic Adults Use WhatsApp More Than the General Public. Disinformation Campaigns Are Targeting That Vulnerability - Morning Consult](#).
- ^{xxi} “2021 Hispanic Digital Fact Pack,” H Code available at [DocSend](#).
- ^{xxii} Stephanie Valencia, “Misinformation online is bad in English. But it’s far worse in Spanish,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2021 available at [Social media misinformation is bad in English. But it’s far worse in Spanish. - The Washington Post](#).