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Feminised International Politics: three cases from Latin America

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What role and impact do women have on politics and international affairs? Nearly a century ago, when suffragettes demanded the vote, a number of assumptions were made about female political representation. They included the claim that women would bring virtue and morality into what was seen as a largely immoral male public sphere, while later feminists argue that women share common interests that are distinct from those of men (e.g. a greater concern with reproductive rights and state provision of social care).

Those beliefs have largely stuck even as the growing body of scholarly literature on female representation remains inconclusive. It has not been helped by the emphasis on women's involvement in the legislative branch rather than the executive. Furthermore, it has generally focused on women's descriptive role (i.e. their capacity to change the composition of politics) rather than whether they have had a substantive impact (i.e. if they have pursued a different agenda and with what results).

Latin America: a region of women presidents

Given that uncertainty, being able to compare women as political leaders and their approach to diplomacy may prove useful in this regard. Latin America is ideally placed as a region to draw this comparison since it has seen a number of women presidents over the past few years, including one that has just left office (Chile's Michelle Bachelet, 2006-10), another more than halfway through her presidential term (Argentina's Cristina Kirchner, 2007-11) and another at the beginning (Costa Rica's Laura Chinchilla, 2010-14).

Latin America is also a useful case study in three other ways. First, its foreign affairs have been in a state of flux over the past two decades, which should provide greater scope for presidential action. The structural adjustments, including liberalisation of domestic markets during the 1980-90s occurred alongside an active commitment to democracy and human rights. For two of the three countries – Chile and Argentina – this coincided with the ending of the military dictatorships, while in Costa Rica the absence of a standing army since the 1948 civil war has provided it with a strong moral stance in favour of pacifism. Since then, the countries and wider region have seen a general economic and political shift to the left: Chilean voters continued to elect centre-left leaders from the Concertacion coalition while Costa Rica's electorate plumped for Oscar Arias in 2006 and the Argentine electorate for Nestor Kirchner (2003-07), Cristina Kirchner's husband.

Second, variation between the different female presidents should be possible to spot given the specific conditions in each country. Chile and Costa Rica have been relatively stable politically and economically since the 1990s, in stark contrast to Argentina. During the 2000s the latter veered more to the left than Chile and Costa Rica, the 2001-02 financial crisis resulting in a fluid political and economic environment and greater scope for its presidents to pursue a new policy direction. From the early 1990s Argentina was the International Monetary Funds's (IMF) model for the region, undertaking an extensive economic liberalisation and privatisation programme and tying its currency to the dollar. That policy proved unsustainable as debts mounted and proved too costly to pay. Abandoning the fixed exchange rate, the eventual political beneficiary, Nestor Kirchner, adopted an increasingly distant stance from its traditional alliance with the US and negotiated repayment of its debt with the IMF. At the same time he aligned with governments in the region that were critical of the previous economic mode, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales.

Third, the present crop of female leaders in Latin America can be compared with minimal interference from other potential variables. By this I mean that they have all come to (or left) power in the last few years and in the same region, thereby diminishing potential contextual differences in terms of time or culture.

Laura Chinchilla and Costa Rica

Since taking office in May 2010, Laura Chinchilla is following the main parameters of Costa Rican foreign policy. This is one that, according to Costa Rica academic Otto von Feigenblatt of Nova Southeastern University, stresses human security and rights, with a commitment to political neutrality.

Almost immediately after her inauguration, Chinchilla attended the Central America-European Union (EU) summit. The resulting agreement will lower tariffs on a range of agricultural and industrial goods which would benefit Central American and European exporters respectively. However, Chinchilla's direct involvement was limited, the bulk of the negotiations having taken place over the past three years. Where she will have a role to play is in the agreement's ratification, a situation made more difficult by the absence of a congressional majority in her favour.

Alongside the EU agreement, Chinchilla faces two additional foreign policy challenges. The first is relations with China. To date, Chinese trade with Costa Rica is smaller than with the rest of Central America. As she decides how far to open up Costa Rica's markets to Chinese investment and products, she also faces encouragement from American ambassador Anne Andrew, who claims that US and Costa Rican interests are complementary, to press ahead with greater economic liberalisation.

The second challenge is Costa Rica's relationship with Honduras – and Central America more generally. Chinchilla's predecessor, Oscar Arias, brokered an agreement between the deposed president Manuel Zelaya and the instigators of the June coup in late 2009. Chinchilla's first actions after winning the presidential election earlier in the year was to visit and appeal to neighbouring countries to readmit Honduras into the Organisation of American States (OAS) and restart the Central American Integration System (SICA) – the latter has not met since the coup.

Michelle Bachelet and Chile

Like Chinchilla, Michelle Bachelet largely operated within broadly set foreign policy parameters for Chile. It is revealing to read her speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in September 2008 to see how she perceived her role as an international actor, particularly as a 'reliable partner, [and] not as an unconditional ally' of Washington.

Just like her predecessors in the Concertacion since the return of democracy in 1990, Bachelet's approach remained one committed to greater international integration and engagement. Examples of this included an increasing number of bilateral trade agreements including with Canada and Mexico in late 1990s and the US in 2004 on the one hand as well as peacekeeping efforts in Haiti.

In terms of her own time in office, Bachelet highlighted her country's election to the UN Human Rights Council, financial provision for low cost treatment of malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in the International Drug Purchase Facility (UNITAID) and development assistance to Haiti the hallmarks of that policy. In addition, Bachelet's role as the acting president of the new South America-wide organisation, UNASUR, was instrumental in bringing together other heads of states to issue a declaration in support of Bolivian democracy and head off a potential coup in that country in September 2008.

Cristina Kirchner and Argentina

Given the economic and political crises of the early 2000s which helped realign Argentine foreign policy under Nestor Kirchner, Cristina Kirchner has had arguably had the greatest scope of the three women presidents to diversify her country's foreign relations. However, her approach has been broadly in line with that of her predecessor and husband by maintaining previously developed links with Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba – all of which have adopted a more critical attitude towards the US and the role of market liberalisation. Among the ongoing commitments signed up to by Cristina Kirchner include support to create an alternative development bank for the region in the guise of the Bank of the South (Banco del Sur) initiative with Venezuela and a jointly proposed reform of the global financial system with Brazil's President Lula ahead of the 2009 G20 summit in London, to which both countries were invited.

That Cristina Kirchner has adopted the same direction to foreign policy as her husband has drawn criticism. This was apparent in early 2009 when she visited Fidel Castro at the same time that Barack Obama took office in Washington. Domestic opponents accused her of pursuing foreign support that were more in keeping with the contentious George W Bush period rather than in the more accommodating Obama era.

At the same time, Cristina Kirchner's critics may reflect her domestic difficulties since the start of her term. They include agricultural producers' protests against her government's export tax soon after she took office and the fracturing of her political support, resulting in her party's legislative defeat in mid-2009. As a result, much of the expectation that she aroused as a candidate has not come to pass, including in foreign affairs. Prior to her election in late 2007 she had made a number of overseas visits to Bill Clinton, Spanish Prime Minister José Zapatero and the Paris Club (the finance ministers of the 19 countries with whom Argentina owes much of the debt that it defaulted on in the early 2000s). These trips seemed to indicate that Argentina would diversify its relations under her presidency. That it has not done so is reinforced by the largely peripheral role that Argentina has influencing the international agenda. This is evident in two ways: first, when compared to Brazil's relative influence, both within the regional trading bloc, Mercosur, and at last year's G20 summit; second, her reiteration of the sovereignty issue over the Falklands/Malvinas in February.

By raising the question of the Falklands/Malvinas, Cristina Kirchner is not doing anything new in Argentina foreign policy. In raising objections to British deep sea oil drilling she merely echoes the view of the political establishment, which sees the islands as belonging to Argentina. Despite Cristina Kirchner's stance, her achievements have been few: while she may claim victory through regional recognition of Argentina's claims, the change in government in London and Washington's unwillingness to involve itself directly in mediating talks between Buenos Aires and Britain has stymied progress.

Conclusions

Given the changing political and economic environment in Latin America over the past three decades, presidents have faced a regional order in flux. As a result, they have had the scope to shape and change their foreign policies in different ways, especially as the international arena is one where they face fewer domestic limitations. Instead, the constraints that presidents face are international, from past policy decisions their outcome to their relative room for manoeuvre in the global political and economic order.

This being said, the Costa Rican, Chilean and Argentine cases highlight the extent to which women as presidents have been largely hemmed in by their countries' position in the world. In none of the three examples have female presidents carved out a new foreign policy direction; rather they have operated within the framework they inherited. While these have been supportive of a more multilateral environment and emphasise democracy and markets, there is nothing distinctively 'female' about them; international norms have all moved in this direction, even before women acquired the top job. Furthermore, women presidents in Latin America do not appear to be necessarily more virtuous or moral in their dealings with their peers, either in the region or globally.

In sum then, the evidence from the three cases suggests that women as presidents have a more descriptive than substantive role in international affairs. Of course this can only be a tentative conclusion; several objections can be made. One is the small presence of women as presidents in the region and the potential substantive shift that could result from a larger number of them. Another is women's ability to shape the international agenda without using formal political institutions like the presidency (e.g. through participation in and lobbying of international organisations such as the World Bank and UN). These present additional variables which would need to be taken into account if a more comprehensive measure of women's impact on international politics is to be made. Until then, as with the current literature on the matter, it will remain both incomplete and uncertain.

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