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Covering a vast region of twenty countries which comprise Latin America, this book is organized around themes of political culture, economic change, social change, political institutions, public policy, and the place of each country in the global economic and security regime.

After a strong introduction, which provides the reader with a critical regional context from which to view these countries, the twenty countries are each treated to an in-depth chapter authored by an authority in the field. This approach effectively organizes a region that possesses vast diversity, ranging from the poorest country in the Northern Hemisphere, Haiti, with a life expectancy of 63, to up-and-coming newly industrialized countries such as Chile, Bolivia, and Mexico, who appear to have successfully found niches in the global economy, which allow them to prosper.

A theme of the book is that democracy is a universal aspiration of people throughout Latin America. Progress towards democratization has accelerated with the growth of an educated middle class. As noted by Huntington and others, democracy does not progress at an even rate. Most of these countries are proximate democracies whose progress towards a true democratic political system advances and retreats with economic and historic events.

A recent example of this is Brazil. A country viewed until recently as an up-and-coming economy with a relatively stable democracy has been seriously destabilized by political and economic upheaval in the past few years.

The impact of globalization on the region is another theme of the book. Although these countries may appear to thrive economically and politically at any given time, we learn that all are subject to varying degrees of instability. They also face challenges common to developing nations such as weakly institutionalized governments, praetorianism, corruption, rapid urbanization, economies blighted by the colonization by European powers, poor economic diversification,
demagoguery, clientalism, cronyism and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of few elites.

Despite the diversity of this vast region, this book does an excellent job of using the tools of comparative analysis to find commonalities among the nations of the region and bring order and comprehension to the reader.

The country chapters are well edited and move crisply through important comparative data that provides consistent themes while recognizing the uniqueness of each country. Each chapter examines the country in the context of the region and its history and quickly moves to give the reader in-depth understanding of the country being considered. The chapter authors do a solid job of presenting the context of each country’s existence, the challenges facing each country and positing possible paths forward.

As such, this is an excellent text. The student reader will not be overwhelmed by the diverse regions considered. The deft organization of the material will enable the reader to come away from the book with a deep understanding of both Latin America and the individual nations, which comprise that region. The reader will also gain a valuable perspective on the future hopes and possibilities of this important region of the world.