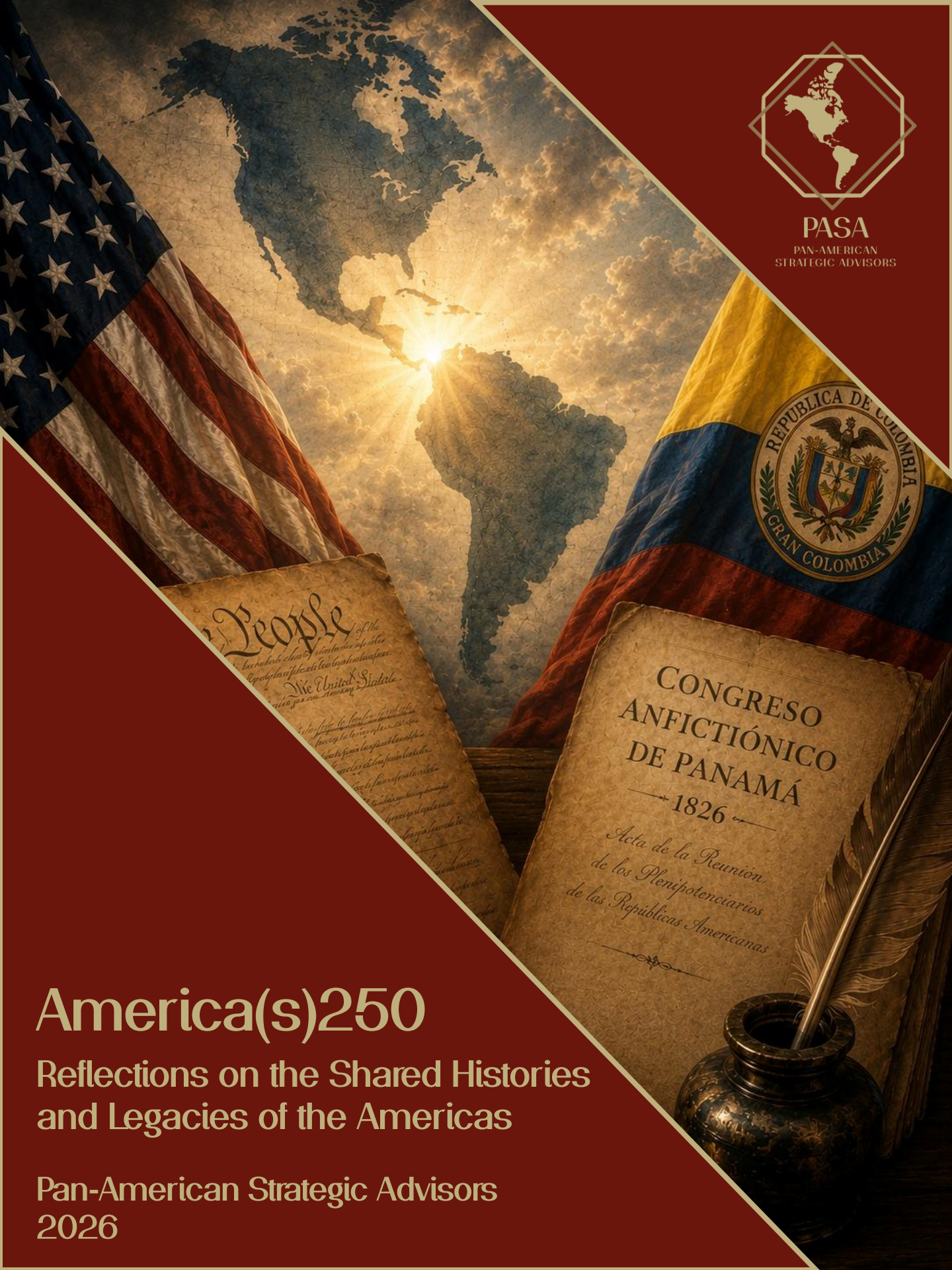




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America(s)250

Reflections on the Shared Histories
and Legacies of the Americas

Pan-American Strategic Advisors
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Forward

The semiquincentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence provides an opportunity for the United States to both celebrate its achievements and reflect on the challenges that it still faces. The birth of the United States did not occur in a vacuum and created reverberations across the Hemisphere and the globe. Not only did the U.S. revolution mark a turning point for colonies seeking independence, it also showed the world a new form of governance was possible. A colony could in fact defeat an empire. The ideas of enlightenment thinkers no longer just existed on a page, but were being tested—albeit often not fully—in the “New World.” Patriots in other countries looked on and applied these lessons to their own contexts. Soon republics would demand their freedom—from France to Haiti to much of what is now Latin America.

At the same time as we mark the 250th birthday of the United States, we also mark the 200th anniversary of another foundational moment in the Western Hemisphere—the Congress of Panama. At this gathering, the idea of a shared identity and future for the Americas began to take shape. While Bolívar would not live to see it, institutions for collective inter-American action would begin to develop over the next 200 years, but divisions between these “Sister Republics” would continue to hamper cooperation.

Today, the ideals laid out by both the U.S. and Latin American founding fathers are being put to the test. The Americas continue to grapple with how to reach these ideal—from the role of religion, to immigration and belonging, to challenges of democracy, to questions of racism and inequality. In this collection of essays, members of the PASA team have reflected on what the lessons of both the Declaration of Independence and the Congress of Panama mean for the peoples of the Americas and show that the “American Revolution” was not a U.S. Revolution, but the beginning of a Hemisphere wide experiment and a set of commitments that we all continue to strive toward.

To another quarter millennia and a more connected Americas,

Adam Ratzlaff
Founder and CEO
Pan-American Strategic Advisors



The Americas at 250: A Shared Democratic Future or Parallel Paths?

Jeffery A. Tobin

In 1807, a young Simón Bolívar [traveled](#) through the United States on his way back to South America. The future liberator arrived in a country just three decades removed from its own revolution. He observed a republic that, despite its imperfections and contradictions, had accomplished something remarkable: it had transformed a colonial rebellion into a functioning political system. Years later, Bolívar would [write](#) admiringly of the United States' constitutional order even as he wrestled with the reality that Spanish America faced very different circumstances and challenges.

Bolívar's experience reflected a broader truth. The American Revolution did not remain confined to thirteen British colonies along the Atlantic seaboard. It became part of a larger hemispheric [story](#). The ideas unleashed in 1776—popular sovereignty, representative government, constitutionalism, and the rejection of inherited political authority—crossed borders and influenced debates from the Caribbean to the Andes.

Two hundred and fifty years later, the question is no longer whether the American Revolution shaped the Americas. The historical record [leaves](#) little doubt that it did. The more important question is whether that shared inheritance still points toward a common democratic future or whether the nations of the hemisphere now follow increasingly parallel political paths.

The American Revolution demonstrated that colonial rule could be challenged and that political legitimacy could derive from citizens rather than monarchs. Although revolutionary movements throughout the Americas [emerged](#) from their own local conditions and traditions, many confronted similar questions about representation, sovereignty, and self-government. The revolution in [Haiti](#), the independence [struggles](#) led by Bolívar and José de San Martín, and the broader [collapse](#) of European imperial control of the hemisphere unfolded within a world transformed by the revolutionary era.

By the early twentieth century, republican government had [become](#) the dominant political model across the Western Hemisphere. Empires largely disappeared from the Americas—apart from much of the Caribbean. Constitutions [proliferated](#). Elections became established, if imperfect, mechanisms for political competition. The hemisphere [developed](#) a common democratic vocabulary. Concepts such as citizenship, constitutional rule, individual rights, and representative institutions became central features of political life from Canada to Argentina.

Yet a shared vocabulary did not produce identical outcomes.

The United States developed relatively durable constitutional institutions and experienced only one large-scale civil war after independence. Much of Latin America and the Caribbean [confronted](#) different realities. Military interventions, civil conflicts, authoritarian governments, oligarchic rule, foreign interference, and deep social inequalities shaped political development across the region.

These experiences did not reflect a rejection of democratic ideals but rather demonstrated how similar principles could evolve differently under distinct historical and institutional conditions. As a result, the Americas developed not one democratic tradition but many.

That diversity remains evident today. Across the hemisphere, citizens overwhelmingly express support for democracy as an ideal. Yet they often [express](#) frustration with democratic performance. Surveys conducted over the past two decades have consistently [revealed](#) a tension between support for democratic governance and dissatisfaction with the institutions responsible for delivering it. Citizens may endorse elections and constitutional government while simultaneously questioning whether political systems can effectively address insecurity, corruption, economic uncertainty, or social polarization.

This challenge represents one of the most important democratic questions of the twenty-first century.

The central political problem of the revolutionary era concerned the source of political authority. Who should govern? Kings or citizens? Empires or republics? Today, the debate has shifted. Most governments in the Americas derive legitimacy from constitutional and electoral systems. The more pressing question concerns effectiveness. Can democratic institutions govern well enough to [maintain](#) public confidence?

The answer increasingly shapes political debates throughout the hemisphere.

In some countries, concerns about organized crime, public security, and state capacity dominate public life. In others, [debates](#) center on institutional reform, economic competitiveness, migration, technological change, or democratic backsliding. Artificial intelligence, disinformation, transnational criminal networks, and geopolitical competition present [challenges](#) that the founders of the United States, or the liberators of Latin America, could scarcely have imagined. Yet these issues ultimately return to familiar questions.

This reality reveals both the strength and the limits of the hemisphere's shared democratic inheritance.

On one hand, the nations of the Americas continue to operate within a political framework profoundly shaped by the revolutionary era. Elections [remain](#) the primary source of political legitimacy. Constitutional government is the dominant [organizing](#) principle. Even political actors who challenge democratic norms typically [justify](#) their actions using democratic language. The revolutionary ideals that emerged in the late eighteenth century continue to define the terms of political debate.

On the other hand, the hemisphere does not move in lockstep. Different societies confront different pressures, possess different institutional capacities, and pursue different political priorities. Shared origins do not [guarantee](#) shared destinations.



As the United States commemorates the 250th anniversary of its founding, the occasion offers more than an opportunity for national reflection. It provides a moment to consider the broader hemispheric legacy of the revolutionary age. The American Revolution helped [initiate](#) a conversation about liberty, representation, citizenship, and self-government that extended far beyond the borders of the United States. Generations of leaders and citizens across the Americas joined that conversation and adapted it to their own circumstances.

Today, the debate has entered a new phase. Few serious political actors argue that monarchy should replace republican government or that popular sovereignty should yield to imperial rule. The foundational questions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have largely been settled. The challenge facing the Americas today is different. Citizens across the hemisphere increasingly [ask](#) whether democratic institutions can provide security, prosperity, accountability, and effective governance in a rapidly changing world.

That challenge may ultimately determine whether the Americas move toward a shared democratic future or continue along parallel political paths. The most consequential divide in the hemisphere may not emerge between left and right, or even between democracy and authoritarianism. It may emerge between states that can translate democratic legitimacy into effective governance and those that cannot.

History suggests that when democratic systems [lose](#) the capacity to deliver, citizens rarely abandon their demand for results; instead, they often [place](#) their faith in leaders who promise to bypass the perceived obstacles of democratic governance altogether. Public confidence in democracy depends not only on elections and constitutions, but also on whether governments can deliver results in the face of some towering hurdles.

The enduring significance of 1776 lies not simply in the institutions it created, but in the proposition that legitimate government derives from the consent of the governed. That principle transformed the political history of the Americas. Yet consent cannot survive on symbolism alone. It requires institutions capable of meeting public expectations and adapting to new realities.

The next chapter of the hemispheric democratic story will not be written by those who celebrate the revolutionary inheritance most enthusiastically. It will be written by those who prove that democratic governance remains capable of solving the problems of the twenty-first century.

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Between Cooperation and Nationalism

Adam Ratzlaff

In the decades immediately following the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, countries across the Americas began to also demand and fight for their own independence. As the bloody battles for independence came to a close, one of South America's Founding Fathers, Simón Bolívar invited the leaders of the newly independent nations—including the United States—to Panama City to discuss opportunities for supporting regional cooperation and integration. Two tendencies—the push for sovereign autonomy and regional cooperation—have become embedded within inter-American affairs. When interacting with a nation's foreign policy, those tendencies are often contradictory. With this year marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the 200th anniversary of the Congress of Panama, understanding the legacies of these events and the dueling tendencies helps explain the persistent challenges to regional action in the Americas.

Bolívar's Dream

When countries across the Americas first gained independence, two existential questions quickly emerged. How would they ensure that they maintained their newly won independence? And, without the economic linkages to their former colonial powers, how would these economies thrive?

Simón Bolívar and others viewed unity across the Americas as a potential solution to these problems. According to this vision, unity would provide collective security. Moreover, linking their economies would also benefit all. The dream of a unified continent varied radically from the fissures that were seen in Europe and promised a unique vision for the future of the “New World.”

Nor was Bolívar the only leader that believed in regional cooperation. Foundational U.S. leaders from Jefferson to Monroe wrote of the need for cooperation across the Americas in what has come to be known as the “[Western Hemisphere Idea](#).” Likewise in 1889, the United States [invited](#) representatives from across the Americas to the first Pan American Conference in Washington with the goal of promoting regional economic integration. While the full objectives of the conference were never realized, the conference and subsequent Pan American Conferences laid the groundwork for the development of the Inter-American System including the Pan American Union (which would become the Organization of American States in 1948), the Pan American Health Organization, and various functional regional institutions. Over a century later, Washington returned to these ideals and [hosted](#) the first Summit of the Americas in 1994.

The Independent and Nationalist Streak

The desire to promote regional integration faced nationalistic headwinds. Leaders from various parts of the Americas sought greater levels of independence and countries across the region fragmented. Gran Colombia soon became Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela (and later Panama). Likewise, the Central American Republic would become Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Furthermore, the U.S. vision of Manifest Destiny put it at odds with Latin America. In 1846, the United States' push westward led to conflict with Mexico and the annexation of half of Mexican territory.

National rivalries, domestic political disputes, and concerns over Yanqui Imperialism would hamper regional integration efforts throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Even where regional bodies were created—such as through the Organization of American States—concerns over ensuring sovereignty led to competing visions for the purpose of regional bodies; were they to promote cooperation or constrain impulses of the most powerful states in order to protect the sovereignty of smaller states.

Between Sovereignty and Cooperation

The tension between sovereignty and cooperation is a deterrent to deeper regional cooperation. There are many areas where commitments to regional cooperation mean that there will be some interference from regional organizations and other states in the domestic affairs of others. For instance, while countries across the region ratified the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001, effectively defending democracy requires interfering in the domestic political processes of countries where undemocratic action occurs. Differences in definitions surrounding democracy and concerns that countries will use “defending democracy” as a pretense for intervention further hamper collective effort to address real problems in the region.

Today, as we reflect on the anniversaries of the Declaration of Independence and the Congress of Panama, we must confront the tensions of liberalism and nationalism. The dreams of founding fathers across the Americas were both to ensure the sovereignty of their nations while strengthening ties across the region. While bridging these two ideas can be difficult, it is not impossible and living up to these Pan American ideals will strengthen countries across the hemisphere.

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The Americas Made Different Bets on God. Neither Expected This.

Ernesto Fiocchetto

In 2026, the Americas mark two anniversaries that shaped the hemisphere's political imagination: 250 years since the United States declared independence, and 200 since Simón Bolívar convened the Amphictyonic Congress in Panama to bind the new republics together. Both were arguments about how to build a nation. Two centuries later, one question they tried to settle is being reopened, not in constitutional conventions, but in foreign ministries and election campaigns.

Religion is slipping from the grasp of the nation-state. It increasingly operates through transnational networks that no single government controls, even as political leaders invoke religion to define who belongs to the nation. Faith has become less national in how it is organized and more central to the politics of nationhood. That is not what the founders expected. Both North and South American leaders' bets on God assumed the nation would have the final say.

Those bets ran in opposite directions. The Founding Fathers of the United States wagered on separation: no religious test for office, no established church, a republic whose legitimacy rested on no official faith. Conversely, Spanish American republics wagered on Catholicism as the national religion and treated Catholic identity as the foundation of national cohesion. One built a republic without a church; the others built nations through one. Yet both assumed the same thing: religion would remain a national question and serve the purpose of the state. It no longer does.

This comes at a time following the election of Pope Leo XIV, the first "[Pan-American Pope](#)." Born in Chicago and a naturalized citizen of Peru, where he ministered for decades, he leads a Church whose center of gravity no longer maps onto traditional political power. The point is not that the papacy became American; it is that the national categories no longer fit. Is he a North American pope or a Latin American one? Both answers fall short. As governments across the hemisphere fortify borders and invoke national tradition, the leader of the world's largest Christian denomination embodies a reality that overruns them.

The Vatican is the most visible case, not the most telling one. The [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God](#), founded in a Rio de Janeiro funeral parlor in 1977, now operates in more than a hundred countries and runs its own television network back in Brazil. It is less an outlier than an emblem. Over half a century, Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity has spread across the hemisphere with little regard for borders: Protestants were roughly four percent of Latin America in 1970, are [approaching a fifth today](#), and exceed forty percent of the population in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. A pastor in São Paulo, a congregation in Houston, and a radio audience in Tegucigalpa can belong to the same religious project without belonging to the same country or even speaking the same language.

Yet this is only half the story. At the very moment religion is becoming less bound by borders, nationalist movements are leveraging religion to reinforce them. Across the hemisphere, leaders increasingly invoke faith as a marker of national belonging—separating authentic citizens from outsiders, the nation's defenders from its enemies. Christian nationalism in the United States, evangelical political power in Brazil, and religiously inflected populism elsewhere in Latin America are expressions of one tendency: faith enlisted to define who properly belongs.

None of this would matter to a foreign ministry if it stayed in the pews. It does not. In 2018, [Guatemala](#) became the first country after the [United States](#) to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem; [Honduras](#) followed in 2021. Both decisions owed less to conventional diplomacy than to the convictions of the hemisphere's fastest-growing religious constituency, for whom solidarity with Israel is a theological commitment as much as a strategic one. Guatemala's foreign minister defended the move as a [sovereign foreign-policy choice](#), which is exactly the point: belief organized across borders has influenced one of the weightiest decisions a state can make.

The pattern is neither uniform nor tied to one ideology. The region is [genuinely divided](#): Chile, Colombia, and Bolivia have distanced themselves from Israel over the war in Gaza, and Honduras's current president reversed her predecessor's stance. Religious networks have also [mobilized for migrants](#) and pressed governments on [poverty and the environment](#). The point is not the direction of any single campaign, but that faith communities across the Americas act as political forces in their own right, operating across the borders that states still treat as the limits of their authority.

None of this is what the founders imagined. They debated whether religion should stand above the republic, beside it, or apart from it, never a world in which religious actors would routinely cross the boundaries through which states understand authority and belonging. That mismatch is why today's conflicts over faith are so hard to resolve: governments still treat religion as either safely outside politics or safely contained within the nation. Increasingly, it is neither.

As the United States commemorates 250 years of independence and the hemisphere marks two centuries since Bolívar's congress, the most important lesson may lie not in the answers the founders gave, but in the limits of the questions they asked.

Religion of the nineteenth century was understood as one in which faith belonged in the nation. The question of the twenty-first may be whether democratic societies can live with forms of religious life that transcend national borders while resisting the temptation to turn faith into a test of belonging. The founders never imagined a world in which religion would become, at once, less national and more useful to nationalism itself.



1776 in the Americas: Shared Currents of Enlightenment Thought

Jeffery A. Tobin

Long before most of Latin America achieved independence, Francisco de Miranda set out to study a political experiment that many contemporaries considered improbable and some considered dangerous. In 1784, the Venezuelan soldier, intellectual, and future revolutionary was in exile in the newly independent United States, meeting political leaders and observing a society attempting to build a republic on principles that only recently had existed largely in the realm of political theory. Miranda was searching for more than knowledge about a new nation. He was trying to understand whether new ideas about liberty, representation, and self-government could transform the wider Americas.

His journey offers a useful reminder as the United States commemorates the 250th anniversary of its independence. The story of 1776 is often told as a national story. Yet from the beginning, it formed part of a much larger hemispheric conversation.

The American Revolution did not create those ideas. Nor did it single-handedly inspire every independence movement that followed. Its greatest contribution was something more subtle and, arguably, more important: it helped demonstrate that Enlightenment principles could move beyond philosophy and become the foundation of a functioning political order.

By the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment thought had already begun reshaping intellectual life throughout the Atlantic world. Thinkers such as John Locke, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau challenged long-standing assumptions about sovereignty and governance. They asked questions that would reverberate throughout the Americas: Where does political authority originate? What rights do individuals possess? What obligations do governments owe their citizens? Can legitimate authority exist without the consent of the governed?

These debates spread through books, pamphlets, newspapers, universities, commercial networks, diplomatic channels, and personal correspondence. They crossed oceans and imperial boundaries. Colonial elites in British North America, Spanish America, the Caribbean, and beyond encountered many of the same ideas and participated in many of the same intellectual conversations.

Seen from this perspective, 1776 appears less as the beginning of a story than as a turning point within a larger transformation. The Revolution did not introduce new questions to the hemisphere. It demonstrated that those questions could have political consequences.

This helps explain why the revolutionary era produced such diverse outcomes across the Americas.

The leaders who pursued independence in Spanish America admired aspects of the American experience, but they did not seek to replicate it wholesale. Figures such as Simón Bolívar, José de San Martín, and Francisco de Miranda confronted social and political realities that differed profoundly from those of the thirteen colonies. Their societies contained different administrative traditions, different demographic compositions, different economic structures, and different relationships between local communities and centralized authority.

As a result, they adapted Enlightenment ideas rather than simply importing American institutions. They grappled with many of the same questions that had animated the American Revolution, but they often reached different conclusions.

The same pattern emerged elsewhere. Revolutionary movements from Mexico to the Río de la Plata drew upon common intellectual currents while producing distinct political experiments. Even Brazil's path to independence, which unfolded through a constitutional monarchy rather than a republican revolution, reflected broader Enlightenment debates about legitimacy, representation, and political authority.

This diversity reveals an often-overlooked aspect of the revolutionary era. The spread of Enlightenment thought did not produce ideological uniformity. Instead, it expanded the range of political possibilities.

In that sense, the U.S. Revolution's greatest hemispheric impact may not have been its specific institutional model. Its greatest impact may have been helping normalize the idea that political legitimacy could be debated, challenged, and redesigned.

That assumption feels commonplace today. In the eighteenth century, it was profoundly disruptive.

Perhaps nowhere did this become clearer than in Haiti. If the U.S. Revolution demonstrated that colonists could challenge imperial rule, the Haitian Revolution exposed unresolved contradictions within the revolutionary age itself. The principles of liberty and equality raised unavoidable questions about slavery, citizenship, and human rights.

The Haitian Revolution forced political leaders throughout the hemisphere to confront issues many preferred to leave unanswered. It expanded the meaning of Enlightenment principles and challenged narrow interpretations of who could claim the rights associated with them.

Taken together, the North American, Haitian, and Spanish American revolutions reveal a more complicated history than traditional national narratives often suggest. They were not chapters in a single coordinated movement. They emerged from different circumstances, pursued different objectives, and produced different outcomes. Yet they participated in a shared intellectual transformation that reshaped political life throughout the hemisphere.

Importantly, that transformation did not create consensus.



In fact, one of the Enlightenment's most enduring legacies may be the opposite. It institutionalized disagreement.

Once societies accepted that political authority required justification rather than mere inheritance, political debate became permanent. Questions about representation, constitutional design, executive power, citizenship, and sovereignty ceased to be settled matters. They became recurring subjects of public contestation.

The age of revolutions did not resolve arguments about politics. It ensured those arguments would continue.

That legacy remains visible across the Americas today.

From debates over democratic backsliding and constitutional reform to concerns about corruption, political representation, and institutional legitimacy, countries throughout the hemisphere continue to wrestle with questions that emerged during the revolutionary era. The specific circumstances differ. The actors differ. The stakes differ. Yet the underlying issues often appear remarkably familiar.

This continuity offers an important lesson as we reflect on 1776 from the vantage point of 2026.

The U.S. Revolution mattered not simply because it created a new nation. It mattered because it helped validate a new way of thinking about politics itself. It demonstrated that inherited structures of authority could be questioned, that legitimacy could be debated, and that political communities could imagine alternative futures.

The revolutionaries of the eighteenth century did not agree on every principle, nor did they share a common vision of democracy. Yet they participated in a broader transformation that altered how people throughout the Americas understood power and governance.

Two hundred and fifty years later, that transformation remains unfinished.

The age of revolutions has long since passed into history. The debates it unleashed have not. Across the hemisphere, citizens and governments continue to argue about the nature of freedom, the limits of authority, the meaning of representation, and the responsibilities of self-government. Those debates persist because the Enlightenment currents that shaped 1776 never belonged to a single nation. They became part of a shared hemispheric inheritance—one that continues to define the political life of the Americas today.



One Hemisphere, One Playbook: How Displacement Built the Americas

Ernesto Fiocchetto

In 2023, more than [half a million people](#) crossed the Darién Gap, the jungle passage between Colombia and Panama. In all of 2025, [only a few thousand](#) did. By conventional enforcement metrics, the crisis is over; in reality, it has only been redirected. This is not a break from the American story. It is the latest answer to a question as old as the hemisphere's founding: who belongs.

In the Americas, this July has marked a double memory: 250 years since the Declaration of Independence and 200 years since Simón Bolívar's Congress of Panama adjourned. These anniversaries commemorate more than two founding moments. They represent competing visions of what the Americas could become and different answers to the same political question: Who belongs?

Both projects emerged from a hemisphere already shaped by displacement and migration. Yet two centuries later, governments increasingly treat human mobility as a threat rather than a force that made the Americas possible. As the United States celebrates its founding while the hemisphere marks Bolívar's unrealized vision of political community, that original question remains unresolved.

Independence movements across the Americas were largely led by colonials and criollos—descendants of European settlers—who severed ties with the very empires their ancestors had left. Generalizations are risky; some movements drew their force from mestizo, Indigenous, or enslaved African populations, as in Haiti and Mexico. But as the new republics took shape, political leadership across much of the hemisphere remained concentrated in the hands of white colonials and their descendants. Canada, too, was molded by migration, including the arrival of tens of thousands of Loyalists who moved north after the American Revolution to remain under the British crown. The founding-era Americas were shaped by migration and displacement in all its forms, voluntary and coerced.

The Open Door and the Gatekeeper

From their inception, the new republics confronted migration, and they did so through a deep contradiction. On the one hand stood the “myth of the open door.” The [U.S. Declaration of Independence](#) lists, among its grievances against the King, that he obstructed the naturalization of foreigners and discouraged their migration; the revolutionaries treated open movement as a right worthy of noting in their rationale for war. Across the hemisphere, young republics wrote remarkably similar scripts. In Argentina, Juan Bautista Alberdi distilled the era's creed into the phrase “*to govern is to populate*,” and the

[1853 Argentine constitution](#) offered “the benefits of liberty” to “all the men of the world who wish to dwell on Argentine soil.”

On the other hand, the door was never as open as the myth implied. The “all” before “men” was never as inclusive as it sounded. Even while proclaiming openness, governments retained the power to decide who could enter, who could belong, and who could be expelled. Migration policy became an instrument through which the new republics defined the nation itself. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender shaped the figure of the “desired immigrant,” the ideal citizen imagined by liberal elites, and, conversely, the “undesirable foreigner.”

Many criollo elites in Latin America and political leaders in the newly independent United States forged a new “desired identity” of the Americas on a faith in European superiority, differing less in conviction than in practice: Anglo-America policed a rigid color line and disowned the mixture it produced, while Iberian America folded extensive mestizaje into a hierarchy that still prized European descent. Progress and modernity, they assumed, would come only from white Europe. Other populations—Indigenous, mestizo, and Afro-descendant—were treated as obstacles to it.

Desirability even carried a creed. In the United States, a self-consciously Protestant republic remained uneasy about Catholic newcomers: the Irish first and later the Italians. In much of Latin America, meanwhile, governments often favored Catholic immigrants—especially Spaniards and Italians—who fit the prevailing national and religious ideals. Across the region, Catholicism remained deeply intertwined with emerging national identities. Protestant or Catholic, the liberal embrace of the European migrant stood in stark contrast to the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of enslaved Africans, a trade formally banned in the early 19th century but long continued in practice.

These prejudices, and the agendas of dispossession behind them, hardened into formal policy built on racial exclusion. In the United States, the [Naturalization Act of 1790](#) reserved citizenship for “free white persons.” The instinct was not merely cultural; it was written into law and codified again in the [Immigration Act of 1924](#), whose national-origins quotas were engineered to favor northern and western Europeans while barring those from Asia. This architecture governed American immigration for four decades, and its logic of sorting the world's people into the wanted and the unwanted still frames the debate today.

The pattern repeated across the hemisphere. In Argentina, the military campaign known as the [Conquest of the Desert](#) cleared Indigenous peoples from Patagonia to make room for the settlers the elites wanted. Chile paired the state-sponsored German colonization of its south with the [armed occupation](#) of Mapuche territory. Brazil, after abolishing slavery, [subsidized European arrivals](#) in an explicit project to “whiten” its population. Canada drew European farmers to its prairies with [land laws](#) modeled on the American homestead, while a [head tax](#) walled out Chinese migrants and treaties confined Indigenous nations.

Movement in the founding Americas was as often forced as voluntary. The transatlantic slave trade and the forced removal of Indigenous nations were forms of displacement, too. The hemisphere's founding story was never only about welcoming migrants; it was also about deciding whose movement counted and



whose humanity did not. Bolívar himself grappled with this contradiction. His commitments to abolition, bound up with the support he had received from Haiti, were real, if incomplete.

The Founding Vision That Failed

Yet the hemisphere's founding story did not end there. The bicentennial we mark this year commemorates not simply another diplomatic gathering, but the clearest alternative to the nation-building model that prevailed. Bolívar imagined [the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama](#) not merely as a diplomatic conference but as the institutional foundation of a hemispheric community. He envisioned the Americas as a confederation that might transcend its new borders: a league bound by mutual defense, common arbitration, and, tellingly, the abolition of the slave trade; a community held together by solidarity rather than sorted by suspicion.

That vision failed. The treaty of union it produced was ratified only by Gran Colombia, and the United States nearly stayed home. Southern politicians stalled the American delegation in part because Spanish America had largely moved toward abolition, and they feared the implications of any discussion of slavery. Instead, the hemisphere chose the nation-state over the hemisphere itself. With that choice came borders, checkpoints, and the enduring authority to decide who belongs. Two hundred years later, Bolívar's question remains ours: Are the Americas a single political community, or merely a collection of walls?

One hemisphere, one playbook: open doors for the desirable, closed doors for the rest.

The Border Question Today

The dominance of the nation-state did not end the founding debate over belonging; it simply carried it into the present. The language has changed, but the impulse remains. Today's migration debates are rarely framed in the overtly racial terms that characterized the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet the underlying impulse to sort, select, and exclude remains strikingly familiar. U.S. border enforcement today is more restrictive than at any point in decades. Encounters at the southern border have fallen by more than 90 percent from their peak, and for months virtually no migrants were released into the country.

The Darién Gap tells the same story: the jungle corridor that carried those half-million people has gone [nearly silent](#), with some months counting crossings in single digits. The flows collapsed, largely after the U.S. government under President Trump intensified enforcement and Panama moved to seal the Darién, backed by U.S.-funded deportation flights. The triumphant anti-migration discourse now echoes across the hemisphere.

But displacement has not ended; it has been redirected. Nearly [7.9 million Venezuelans](#) remain outside their country: one of the largest displacement crises in the world and the largest in the Americas. The

overwhelming majority were absorbed not by the United States but [by their neighbors](#): more than 2.8 million in Colombia, some 1.6 million in Peru. Others are stranded in Mexican border towns or reversing course, walking back toward the country they fled.

Enforcement redrew the map of the displacement crisis; it did not resolve the reality beneath it. Instead, it answered the founding question in the founding way: sort the desirable from the undesirable, and shut the door on the latter.

These anniversaries remind us that movement is not incidental to the history of the Americas; it is one of its founding forces. To celebrate 1776 or 1826 while treating migration as an aberration is to misremember the hemisphere's origins. To commemorate these anniversaries honestly is to confront what they left unresolved: Who belongs? The open door and the gatekeeper who decides who may pass were never reconciled. For two centuries, the hemisphere has answered that dilemma largely by default, not by abandoning the ideal of openness, but by narrowing who qualifies for it. These anniversaries invite us to choose deliberately rather than inherit the answer history handed down. At 250 and at 200, the choice is between founding visions: the gatekeeping nations that sort human beings into the desirable and the undesirable, or Bolívar's broader vision of a hemispheric community bound together by mutual obligations across borders. The people at the door are not a threat to the founding story of the Americas. They are its unfinished ideal.



Washington's Lesson on Saying Goodbye

Adam Ratzlaff

In Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, George Washington's "Farewell Address" is recreated in the song "[One Last Time](#)." The song captures one of the single most important founding stories that has supported U.S. democracy: Washington's willingness to give up the power that he has attained. This "teaching them to say goodbye" coupled with Washington's [insistence](#) that he not be crowned king of the newly independent nation in favor of serving as president enshrined the liberal ideals of U.S. revolution.

The idea of a president as head of state and how these powers were embedded into the Constitution did not stay within the United States. The model traveled to many countries as they gained independence, particularly those in Latin America. Indeed, nearly every country across the continent—with the exception of Canada and the Caribbean—opted for a presidential system.

The challenge for the region is that not all presidents are willing to give up power as George Washington did. Furthermore, presidential systems can lead to gridlock with legislators due to the separation of powers. These two characteristics have created—and continue to create—a challenge for democratic governance across the Western Hemisphere.

The Inherent Challenge of Presidential Systems

Presidential systems make up the majority of Latin American governments as well as the United States. These presidents face inherent challenges. Given that they are directly elected by the entire population, presidents often feel as though they are the most direct representation of the will of the people. This can become a challenge when legislatures—elected in separate elections—may not be of the same political majority as the president. This can lead to gridlock between the branches—and presidents who seek to break through the gridlock through undemocratic means.

These tensions between the branches of government have led political scientists to [highlight](#) the instability of democracy in presidential systems relative to parliamentary systems. Today, this tension and its resulting disfunction is evident in many countries across the Americas. Perhaps the most notable example is Peru—a country that just elected its ninth president in the past decade. But Peru is not the only country where presidents have faced governance challenges due to conflicts with their legislatures. Impeachments have been on [the rise](#) across the Americas, but they do not always [address](#) underlying challenges.

In other cases, presidents have taken actions into their own hands and sought to bypass congress by ruling through states of exception. These laws—frequently designed to be implemented for a narrow crisis—have

increasingly become the norm across the region. Some presidents have gone so far as directly challenging their legislatures. In just the past few years, El Salvador's Nayibe Bukele [marched](#) troops into the legislature, Peru's Pedro Castillo [attempted](#) to close congress through a "self-coup," and Ecuador's Guillermo Lasso [dissolved](#) congress and called for new elections when facing impeachment. These efforts to concentrate power or eliminate the separation of powers weaken democratic accountability even when nominally done to improve government performance.

Saying Good-Bye?

George Washington's decision to hand power back to the people is also far from the norm. In recent decades, presidents across the Americas—including Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—have sought to terminate term limits and concentrate power within the executive. In many cases, these processes started slowly. Even in the United States where there are clearly delineated term limits, President Trump has toyed with the idea of running for a third presidential term.

In many cases, the process of eliminating term limits started slowly. In countries like Bolivia and Venezuela, presidents used constitutional rewrites to avoid term limits in both constitutions. For instance, Bolivia's [Evo Morales](#) claimed in his first reelection bid that it was his first time running for election under the new constitution. Later, after losing a referendum to allow for reelection, he took his claim to the courts—and won—on the basis that reelection was his human right.

Although term limits may not seem like a critical element of a flourishing democracy, they serve an important guardrail. Leaders that eliminate term limits or that are in office longer tend to turn toward other means of concentrating their power. In addition to ruling by states of exception, such methods of included constitutional referenda to bypass other branches, assaults on the judiciary and the press, and rewriting constitutions to create electoral rules that favor their party. These efforts, coupled with an unwillingness to leave office, can create situations where presidents are able to rule as monarchs with little fear of answering to the rule of the people.

At the same, George Washington is not the only U.S. leader who is influencing the region. For instance, Donald Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 elections—by lobbying Congress and the vice president not to recognize the results and then inciting riots to accomplish the same goal—have sparked other examples of [interference](#) across the region. Almost precisely two years after Trump's attempts, former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro incited [riots](#) in an effort to overturn his electoral defeat. He is now under [house arrest](#) for his role in trying to overthrow Brazilian democracy. Likewise in 2024, President Bernardo Arevalo of Guatemala faced a congress that [refused](#) to recognize his electoral victory as opposition parties in the country sought to hold on to power. While George Washington highlighted the importance of the peaceful transfer of power, Donald Trump taught leaders new tactics for holding on to power and ignoring the will of the people.

The U.S. revolution not only had a profound impact on the direction of the country but also shaped the institutional design of countries across the hemisphere. Not all of the institutions that were established



over two centuries ago have been perfect. Presidential systems have been the norm in the Americas, but they continue to lead to governance challenges. Leaders across the region should reflect on Washington's legacy, especially his recognition that there's a time to step aside. Presidential legacies are built not on sheer power but on strengthening the democratic systems of one's country. To paraphrase [Batman's Harvey Dent](#), you either leave a hero, or stay long enough to become the villain.

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From Migration to Membership: The Latino Diaspora and the Unfinished Americas

Ernesto Fiocchetto

In the Americas, 2026 is a year of double memory. As the United States marks 250 years since the Declaration of Independence and the hemisphere marks 200 years since Bolívar's Congress of Panama, another story quietly reminds us how unfinished those founding ideas remain: the maturation of a transnational Latino community that has become one of the largest and most enduring in the hemisphere, and that only continues to grow.

The two anniversaries this July remind us that the Americas were founded on competing ideas of belonging. The Declaration of Independence gave rise to the sovereign nation-state, with its borders and its gatekeepers. The Congress of Panama imagined the opposite: a hemispheric political community bound by common purpose, rather than divided by frontiers. The nation-state won throughout the Americas. Bolívar's confederation collapsed almost immediately, ratified by only one republic, and the Americas settled into separate nations, each guarding its own door and deciding, on its own terms, who belonged.

Two centuries later, these opposing ideas of governing have found an unlikely arbiter: the Latino diaspora in the United States. For most of the modern history of the Americas, the question of belonging has been posed at the border. But the question of who may enter has quietly been overtaken by a deeper question about belonging. The largest community of Latin American origin now lives inside the United States, and most of its members were born there. The living test of which founding vision prevails is no longer whom the United States admits, but whether it can recognize the people already within its borders as its own.

From their founding, the republics of the Western Hemisphere have preached open doors while keeping a firm hand on the latch. [The U.S. Declaration of Independence](#) protested the Crown's obstruction of immigration; Argentina's [1853 constitution](#) offered to "secure the benefits of liberty" to "all the men of the world who wish to dwell" on its soil. Yet the words of welcome always carried an asterisk. Across the hemisphere, elites defined a "desired immigrant"—European, imagined as the raw material of a white republic—against an "undesirable" everyone else: Indigenous, Black, Asian, mixed. The open door and the gatekeeper were never reconciled. They have been passed down through the generations, and no population has inherited that contradiction more fully than the Latinos who are now permanently part of the U.S.

From Movement to Membership

For two centuries, the U.S. has placed limits on who could come in. Now, as a nation of immigrants, the more pressing question is who is already here to stay and who continues to live as though that permanence could be revoked at any moment. The [U.S. Latino population](#) reached 68 million in 2024—one in five Americans, up from one in twenty in 1970. Beyond the size of this population, its settledness is also significant: Of the 68 million, 45.4 million were born in the United States, and 79 percent are U.S. citizens. Recent population growth has been driven overwhelmingly by U.S.-born generations rather than by new immigration, underscoring how thoroughly the Latino presence has become an intrinsic feature of American society. Its [median age is slightly below 30](#), the youngest among any major demographic group, and each year large new cohorts enter adulthood, further deepening the Latino presence in U.S. civic life. This is not a population in transit, waiting at a threshold, as it is often portrayed to be. It is a permanent presence that happens to maintain deep ties to the rest of the hemisphere, the very transnational belonging the nation-state was built to prevent.

A country that sees Latinos as temporary writes border policy. A country that recognizes them as permanent writes policies of belonging, and the United States has barely begun to do so. To treat a large, rooted, mostly native-born population as perpetually foreign is not a new posture; it's the founding sorting of the desirable and the undesirable, wearing modern clothes. The border has moved inward, from the boundary line to the citizen's own standing. Membership, not movement, has become the primary unresolved issue.

Membership Becomes Power

Diasporas have long shaped U.S. policy through organized advocacy, petitioning the government from outside it. The Latino diaspora represents a different kind of influence, stemming not primarily from lobbying the state but from increasingly constituting the electorate and the institutions of the state itself. [In 2024](#), 36.2 million Latinos were eligible to vote, a 153 percent increase since 2000, and constituting half of all the growth in the U.S. electorate over the previous four years. Latinos are now roughly 15 percent of eligible voters, and about 1.4 million more join the rolls each year simply by turning 18. Both political parties court them; neither can dismiss them.

And yet, demographic membership has not become political membership. Latinos are a fifth of the population and a seventh of the electorate, but hold only about [11 percent of House seats, 6 percent of the Senate](#), and barely 2 percent of elected offices nationwide. The people are already integrated into the population, but the institutions have not caught up.

Political incorporation, moreover, does not guarantee political solidarity. Like every established community before it, the Latino electorate contains competing visions of migration, belonging, and the nation's future, shaped by national origins and political histories. Membership does not resolve the question of who belongs; it simply relocates the debate inside the polity itself.



What the Present Asks

The anniversaries we commemorate this year ultimately ask us to consider political imagination alongside migration policy. How nation states manage borders is one question; whether they are prepared to recognize their extant communities is another. The intense focus on border enforcement over the past year has made that deeper question easy to overlook. By many enforcement measures, the [border is quieter](#) than it has been in years. But enforcement is a territorial response and cannot fix an inherently political challenge.

The United States can no longer approach the Latino diaspora as though it were a temporary condition to be managed until it disappears. It's a permanent fixture of the American public, rooted across generations, woven into the country's civic, economic, and political life. Recognition begins with the acknowledgment that belonging is already a social fact, long before it becomes a legal one.

Law, in turn, should catch up to that reality. A population that has put down roots should not be governed as though it remains perpetually provisional. The details of immigration reform will remain contested, but the principle should not. Institutions ought to reflect the permanence of the people they govern rather than the assumptions of an earlier era.

The same is true of the hemisphere itself. Bolívar failed to build a political community through treaties, but history has produced a different type of agreement. Across the Americas, millions of families, languages, faiths, and economic ties already connect societies that politics continues to treat as separate worlds. The transnational community Bolívar imagined did not disappear with the Congress of Panama. It emerged instead through the everyday lives of the people who crossed borders and stayed.

The unfinished question of the Americas has never been simply who could cross its borders. It has always been whether the political communities created by migration would eventually be recognized as belonging. The Latino diaspora has already answered the question history left unresolved. The task now is for institutions to recognize what society already knows: the Americas already share a people. Their politics have not yet caught up.

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About the Authors



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Fiocchetto has conducted extensive research on the governance of forced migration, analyzing the role of non-state actors and faith-based organizations in the reception and integration of Latin American asylum seekers in North America and the European Union. He also examines transnational and domestic policies, as well as best/worst practices taken by civil society. He deepens his analysis through critical interdisciplinary approaches to examine topics such as human trafficking, migrant smuggling, queer migration, the intersection of religion and politics, and gender and sexualities in the Americas.

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