

Latin American Independence

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CLACS Resource Packet for Educators

Hispanic Heritage Month which is September 15th to October 15th celebrates those of Hispanic Heritage in the United States. The dates reflect the time period when many countries in Latin America obtained their independence. This educator resource packet provides an overview and context for the independence movements and an opportunity for comparing and contrasting the histories of independence in the region with that of the United States.

Table of Contents

Independence Dates	2
The Latino & Hispanic Definitions & Identity	3
Latin vs Latin-America vs Hispanic	4
Colonial Latin America	5
Country Independence Overview	7-15
Independence Glossary	16
Key Figures	17-19
Independence Day Celebrations	19
Additional Resources	20



Independence Dates in Latin America

1804

January 1st - Haiti

1810

July 20th - Colombia

September 16th - Mexico (start of war for independence)

September 18th - Chile (start of war for independence)

1811

May 5th - Paraguay

1816

July 9th - Argentina

1821

July 28th - Peru

September 15th - Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras

September 28th - Panama

1822

August 10th - Ecuador

1825

August 6th - Bolivia

August 25th - Uruguay

1844

February 17th - Dominican Republic

1902

May 20th - Cuba

1966

May 5th - Guyana

1973

July 10th - Bahamas

1975

November 25th - Surinam

1981

September 21st - Belize



Hispanic Heritage Month:

September was when the highest number of Latin American countries obtained their independence. Five countries (Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua) obtained their independence on the same day, September 15th, which is the first day of Hispanic Heritage Month.

The Latino and Hispanic Definitions and Identity

Latino and Hispanic are not interchangeable.

Latino usually refers to someone who is from a Latin American country.

Some utilize the broader but older definition of Latino which includes countries whose languages derived from Latin, this includes European countries: France, Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Hispanic applies to those from Spanish speaking countries. While Spain is a Hispanic country, the term Hispanic is sometimes used to solely refer to Latin American Spanish-speaking countries.

Further Reading:
[Latin Europe cluster: from South to North](#)

There is debate regarding who identifies as Latino or Hispanic. Some argue that this definition should not apply to Europeans, others argue that it should apply to anyone of Latin American descent and some define as Latinos only those born in a Latin American country.

In the US, the terms Latino or Hispanic are usually used to define persons of Latin American origin or descent. However, within the US there is a debate regarding ethnicity and nationality that makes defining this identity even more difficult. Some argue that in order to identify as Latino or Hispanic a person needs to be ethnically or racially Latin American. This is challenging because while some people from Latin American origin have native roots others do not, therefore, there is no “Latin” or “Hispanic” race or ethnicity.

In Spanish, Latino is used to describe a man while Latina would describe a woman. While there are some purported gender neutral terms, there are many opinions about the acceptability of their use.

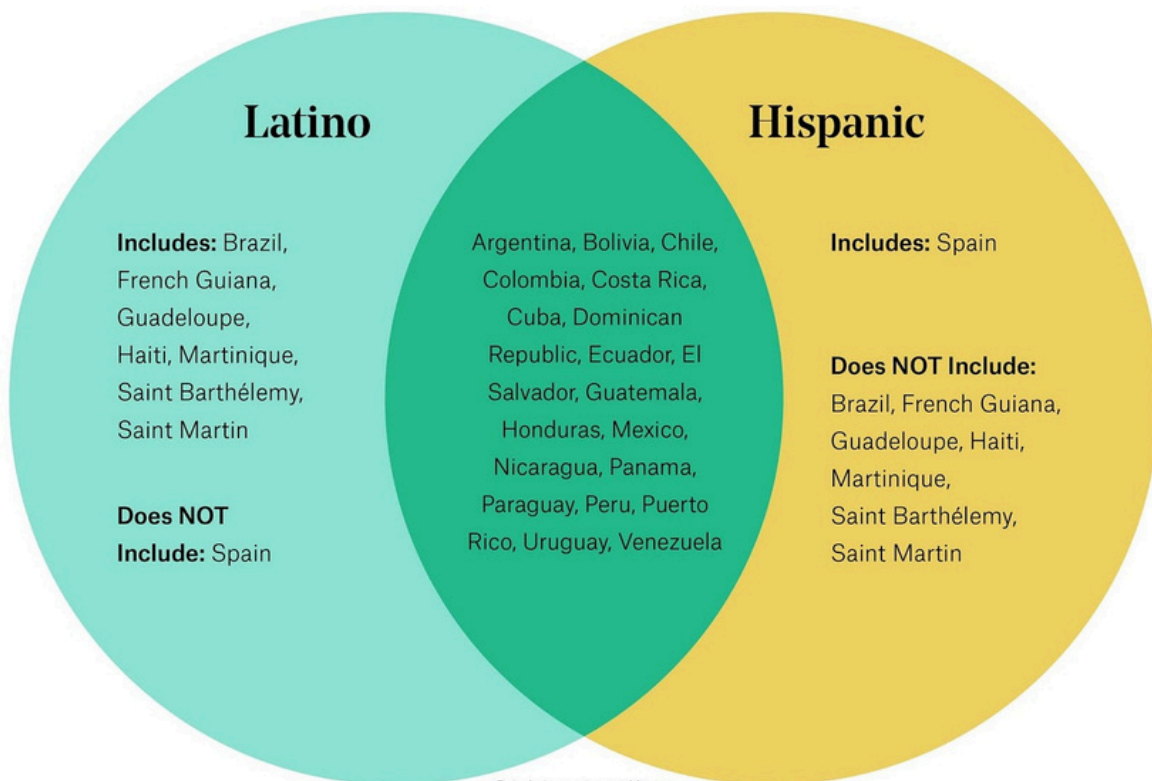
Because of the complexities associated with this identity it is important to respect people’s right to self-identification.

Latin vs Latin-American vs Hispanic Countries: What's the difference?

Latin countries share the Latin linguistic heritage, meaning they speak languages derived from Latin (Spanish, French, or Italian for example).

Latin-American countries have languages derived from Latin and are on the American continent.

Hispanic countries are countries where the primary language is Spanish and / or they had Spanish influence or colonization.



Colonial Latin America

476 CHAPTER 17 The Diversity of American Colonial Societies, 1530–1770



Map 17.1 Colonial Latin America in the Eighteenth Century Spain and Portugal controlled most of the Western Hemisphere in the eighteenth century. In the sixteenth century they had created new administrative jurisdictions—viceroyalties—to defend their respective colonies against European rivals. Taxes assessed on colonial products helped pay for this extension of governmental authority.

Colonial Latin America

Colonial Forces

Spain

From old Mexico (reaching into modern day California) through all of central and South America, Spain laid claim at some time to all lands outside Brazil, Guyana, and Belize. Additionally it held both Cuba and Puerto Rico.



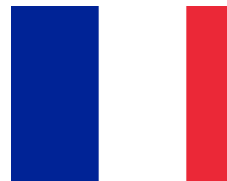
Portugal

Present solely in modern day Brazil.



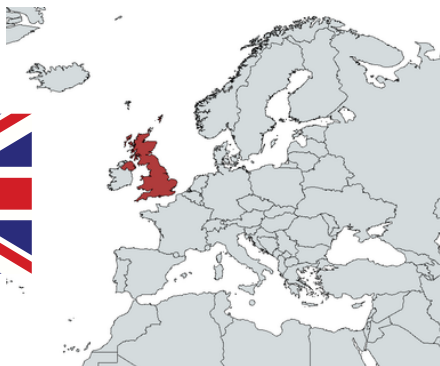
France

Along with its various holdings in the Caribbean, French Guiana remains a modern department of France. At one point, Mexico was a French territory.



United Kingdom

Though it had several holdings in the modern day Caribbean, Great Britain's mainland presence in South America was felt in the forms of modern Guyana and Belize.



Netherlands (Dutch)

Had settlements in Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, and Dutch Guiana (now French Gu).



Country Independence Overview

List of Countries in Latin America

Argentina



Argentina Independence Day

Argentina's independence process began with the May Revolution of 1810, when Buenos Aires established a local government that operated in the name of the deposed Spanish king. After a prolonged struggle, Argentina formally declared its independence on July 9, 1816, at the Congress of Tucumán.

This date is now commemorated as Argentina's national Independence Day.



Belize



Belize Independence Day

Belize was a British colony from 1840 to 1981. It was initially named British Honduras until 1973 when it was renamed Belize. In 1964, Britain granted Belize (then British Honduras) self-government. Belize gained independence from the UK on September 21st, 1981. Despite this, British troops remained on the island to prevent Guatemala from claiming sovereignty over the southern part of Belize. The British Monarchy remains the head of state in Belize, represented by the Governor General. Spanish is spoken in Belize but English is the official language.





Bolivia declared its independence from Spain on August 6, 1825, following the efforts of revolutionary leaders such as Simón Bolívar and Antonio José de Sucre. The country was named after Bolívar in recognition of his contribution. The struggle for independence was particularly fierce in the region, with local populations, including Indigenous fighters led by women such as Juana Azurduy, playing a significant role in the uprising against colonial authorities.



Chile's independence process began with the establishment of a national junta in 1810, but it was not fully realized until after years of warfare. Independence was officially proclaimed on February 12, 1818, under the leadership of Bernardo O'Higgins and José de San Martín. Chile's fight for sovereignty was part of a broader campaign to liberate southern South America from Spanish colonial rule.





Colombia's independence was first declared on July 20, 1810, in Bogotá, following a popular uprising against Spanish officials. However, the path to full independence was long, with major battles led by Simón Bolívar continuing through the 1810s and early 1820s. Colombia eventually became part of Gran Colombia, a short-lived republic uniting several northern South American territories.



Cuba achieved formal independence on May 20, 1902, following the Spanish-American War, which ended Spanish colonial rule on the island. The United States military occupied Cuba from 1899 until 1902 and the adoption of a new constitution. As a condition for ending the occupation, the U.S. implemented the Platt Amendment, leading to the establishment of the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. Tomás Estrada Palma became Cuba's first president, however, his administration was marked by great instability, allegations of fraud and failure to uphold promises of reform. This led to a revolution in 1906 and US intervention until 1909. During the terms of the next 3 presidents, the US interfered twice and threatened to intervene multiple more times. Another insurrection occurred in 1917 and the rebels hoped the US would intervene and support them but the US did not since it was focused on Europe and World War I.





The Dominican Republic declared its independence from Haiti on February 27, 1844, after 22 years of Haitian rule over the entire island of Hispaniola. The movement was led by La Trinitaria, a secret society founded by Juan Pablo Duarte, with key figures like Francisco del Rosario Sánchez and Matías Ramón Mella playing pivotal roles. The uprising began with Mella's symbolic blunderbuss shot at the Puerta de la Misericordia, followed by the raising of the Dominican flag at the Puerta del Conde. Despite initial success, the new republic faced continued Haitian attempts to reclaim the territory, leading to intermittent conflicts until 1856. The Dominican Republic's independence is celebrated annually on February 27, honoring the nation's struggle for sovereignty.



Ecuador's independence movement began with an uprising in Quito on August 10, 1809, which is recognized as the “First Cry of Independence” in Latin America. Despite this, real independence from Spain was only achieved on May 24, 1822, following the victory at the Battle of Pichincha, where forces under Antonio José de Sucre defeated the Spanish royalists.



The areas include what is now Ecuador, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela. The republic which was—in its entirety—liberated as one by Simón Bolívar, broke apart generally due to rivalries and infighting.



Mexico



Mexican Independence

Mexico's history with independence is complex as they were controlled by Spain and later France. On September 16th 1810, Don Miguel de Hidalgo y Costilla called on the people through the church bells to use their arms and rise against Spanish rule. The Mexican Independence war started on September 16th 1810 and ended 11 years later on September 27th 1821 when the Mexican army led by Agustín de Iturbide and Vicente Guerrero entered Mexico City. Mexico enjoyed a period of independence from September 1821 to 1862 when the French powers took control of the territory naming Maximilian of Habsburg as Emperor of Mexico. The French finally withdrew in 1866.





Panama declared independence from Spain on November 28, 1821. However, rather than establishing itself as an independent republic, Panama opted to join Gran Colombia under the leadership of Simón Bolívar. It remained part of Colombia until it separated and declared full independence on November 3, 1903. Up to this point, the United States had been pursuing a patchwork of treaties to gain access to Panama to build its canal in exchange for its suppression of Panama's nationalist movement. With the rejection of the main Hay-Herrán treaty, the United States then decided to build up nationalist forces. Through the French-US Panama Canal Company, Nationalist fighters were given weapons and funding in order to secure secession from Gran-Colombia.



Paraguay's independence began with a revolution in May 1811, when local patriots, dissatisfied with Spanish colonial rule and inspired by regional independence movements, took control of Asunción and established a provisional government. Unlike other Latin American countries, Paraguay's independence was relatively peaceful, as Spanish authorities offered little resistance. A congress formally declared Paraguay independent on October 12, 1813, leading to the establishment of a sovereign republic, free from external control.





Peru declared its independence from Spain on July 28, 1821, when General José de San Martín proclaimed sovereignty in Lima's Plaza Mayor. However, Spanish royalist forces continued to control much of the Andean interior. The struggle persisted until December 9, 1824, when Simón Bolívar's lieutenant, Antonio José de Sucre, led patriot forces to a decisive victory at the Battle of Ayacucho.

This triumph effectively ended Spanish rule in South America and solidified Peru's status as an independent republic.



The first peoples of the island of Puerto Rico would have come from the Rincoco River in modern day Venezuela until they were joined by the more well-known Taino people around 1000 AD. The Spanish arrived in the year 1493 during Columbus' first voyage to the Americas. The island was a Spanish viceroyalty until they granted it independence in 1897. Puerto Rico would enjoy this for just under a year, when the United States invaded in the wake of their victory over Spain. Little resistance was raised to stop the US because most of the population believed being part of the US would bring democracy and economic development. The 1898 Treaty of Paris codified the cessation to the United States as a territory, a status which it retains today.





Uruguay's path to independence was marked by a complex struggle involving multiple colonial powers. After initial resistance against Spanish rule led by José Gervasio Artigas in 1811, the region known as the Banda Oriental faced occupation by Portuguese forces in 1816, later becoming the Brazilian province of Cisplatina. On August 25, 1825, a group known as the Thirty-Three Orientals, led by Juan Antonio Lavalleja, declared independence from Brazil and expressed a desire to unite with the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata (present-day Argentina). This act sparked the Cisplatine War between Brazil and the United Provinces. The conflict concluded with the signing of the Preliminary Peace Convention in 1828, mediated by Britain, which recognized Uruguay as an independent nation. The country's first constitution was adopted in 1830, solidifying its status as a sovereign republic.



Venezuela's independence began on April 19, 1810, when a local junta in Caracas took power from the Spanish authorities following the political instability caused by Napoleon's invasion of Spain. This set the stage for a formal declaration of independence on July 5, 1811, when representatives from seven Venezuelan provinces officially declared their separation from Spanish rule, establishing the First Venezuelan Republic. This act marked the beginning of a prolonged struggle for sovereignty, led prominently by Simón Bolívar, eventually resulting in Venezuela's definitive independence and the establishment of a sovereign nation, now commemorated annually on July 5.



United Provinces of Central America & Federal Republic of Central America



Guatemala



El Salvador



Honduras



Nicaragua



and Costa Rica



Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica formed the United Provinces of Central America after establishing their independence from Spain on September 21st 1821. This country existed from July 1st 1823 to November 22 1824 and later became the Federal Republic of Central America which lasted until 1841. There was an attempt of annexation with Mexico at the time of its creation that cost the Central American Republic the territory of Chiapas, which became part of Mexico. This republic went through many major political changes and conflicts including multiple changes to the country's capital: Guatemala City (1824-1834), Sonsonate (1834), El Salvador (1834) and San Salvador (1834-1841). From 1838 to 1840 there was a civil war that ultimately led to the demise of the Republic. In April 1838 Nicaragua was the first to establish independence from the country followed by Honduras in October 1838 and Costa Rica in November 1838. Guatemala was the last country to leave the republic, doing so in 1839. By the end of 1839 the Republic was basically nonexistent, nevertheless there were multiple attempts to reestablish it.

For more info:

[Las Provincias Unidas del Centro de América, el inicio del «sueño» frustrado hace 200 años](#)



Independence Glossary

Junta

Meaning “meeting” or “committee” and otherwise known as a military junta. The word first came into use in the organized resistance to Napoleon's 1808 invasion of Spain. In the case of Latin America, it generally referred to colonial resistance in pursuit of independence. It has since grown to denote a committee of military power which serves a given cause.



Criollo

Person of Spanish descent born in the Spanish colonies.

Viceroyalty

Territory governed by a representative of a monarch acting as the monarch's representative known as the viceroy. The term usually refers to an administrative unit and can be considered a type of colony. Not all colonies are viceroyalties however. Colony refers to the territory under some level of political control by another country. Colonies may have different types of government such as by direct rule of the monarch or by an individual or group.

Peninsular

Person born in a European colonizing country (on the Iberian peninsula) but lived in a Spanish colony.



Sovereignty

Free from external control with authority or to self-govern.

Mestizaje

Racial mixing practice used in colonial Latin America in an attempt to artificially produce a “whiter” population and erase the indigenous people. The word mestizo usually refers to someone of European or white descent and native and/or black descent.

Triguena

A term more common in the Caribbean meaning someone of three (tri) cultures. Typically this is a person of indigenous, African and European/Spanish descent.

Key Figures



Simón Bolívar

Simón Bolívar, also known as “El Libertador,” was instrumental in the independence movements of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Bolívar envisioned a unified Latin America and led multiple military campaigns against Spanish forces. His leadership and writings deeply influenced the creation of Gran Colombia and the political philosophy of Latin America Miguel Hidalgo.



José de San Martín

An Argentine general and strategist, José de San Martín led the southern campaigns for independence. He successfully liberated Argentina, Chile, and Peru. San Martín led his army through the Andes mountains, defeating the Spanish forces against all odds.



Jose Marti

A Cuban essayist, poet, and martyr Jose advocated for Cuban independence. Martí was the original organizer of Cuba’s independence movement for which he died fighting. During his exile from Cuba, he took up residence in Spain, France, New York, and Venezuela. He became the delegate of the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892. Based in New York, the party planned their invasion which—when realized—meant his death on the plains of Dos Rios, years prior to his ultimate goal of Cuban independence.



Bernardo O'Higgins

Bernardo O'Higgins was born the illegitimate son of a Spanish officer. He was the revolutionary leader of Chile, helping to secure its independence from Spain. He led patriot forces to victory at the Battle of Chacabuco in 1817 alongside José de San Martín. As a leader, he built Chile’s first national navy and laid the foundations of its republican government. His liberal reforms eventually alienated the elite, forcing him to resign and live in exile. O'Higgins died in Peru in 1842 and is remembered as a founding father of Chilean independence.



Manuela Sáenz

Known as “La Libertadora del Libertador,” Manuela Sáenz was a revolutionary figure from Ecuador who played a significant role in the independence of South America. She was Simón Bolívar’s close confidante and political ally, saving his life on more than one occasion and participating in military campaigns.



Juana Azurduy

Born in what is now Bolivia, Juana Azurduy was a guerrilla military leader who fought in the independence movements of the Río de la Plata territories. She commanded troops and earned the title of lieutenant colonel.



Micaela Bastidas Puyucacha

Indigenous leader that led a rebellion against the Spanish and was later executed.



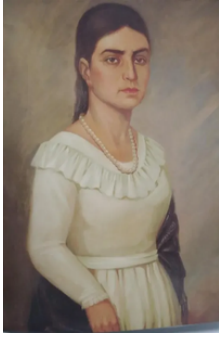
Javiera Carrera

As a part of the Carrera family, Javiera fit in well with her consistent participation in revolutionary activity. Known as the “Mother of Chile,” she played a symbolic and practical role in Chile’s early independence movement, famously sewing the first national flag and supporting her brothers in their military and political efforts. Her dedication to the cause endured despite exile, personal loss, and political turmoil, solidifying her legacy as a foundational figure in Chilean history.



Policarpa Salavarrieta

A seamstress living in New Granada, Policarpa spied for the revolution during the Spanish Reconquista. Her true name is still unknown with Poliarpa being a sobriquet she adopted when she began her spying career. Despite her execution at the hands of Spanish royalists, she is widely regarded as a symbol of Colombia’s independence.



Maria Andrea Parado de Bellido

Maria collaborated with Peruvian Nationalist forces at the age of sixty. In 1822 –despite her illiteracy– she got a message to her husband regarding Royalist General José Carratalá's plans to send forces into Pará. Upon the letter's discovery, it was traced back to Maria at which point she was arrested. Under intense interrogation, Maria refused to inform Carratalá's forces. She responded to questioning with, "I am not here to inform you, but to sacrifice myself for the cause of freedom." She was shot after a month in captivity on the Pampa del Arco, her body was buried at the Church of La Merced.



Leona Vicario

A spy for Mexican independence, Leona was highly educated early on by her distinguished family. She was orphaned and named an heiress at eighteen, when she began to sympathize with educated Mexican's movement to establish a national congress. She attempted to escape Mexico, but was captured and imprisoned in a monastery. She was shortly freed by patriots and joined them, marrying Andrés Quintana Roo, one of the intellectual lights of Mexican independence in the process. She would go on to produce countless revolutionary writings. Towards the end of her life –1818-1842– she focused primarily on the education of her daughters, speaking on issues only when her husband came under attack from his ultra-conservative opponents.

Independence Day Celebrations

Parades and traditional music and foods are common in Independence day celebrations all around Latin America. Additionally, some countries, such as Mexico, celebrate with reenactments of important battles or events related to independence. A lot of Latin American countries enjoy traditional military parades during these celebrations.



For more info:

[Latin Independence Days | National Museum of the American Latino](#)



Additional Resources

General

- [La INDEPENDENCIA de LATINOAMÉRICA en 15 minutos | ¿Cómo se independizó LATAM?](#)
 - Latin American Independence in 15 Minutes (crash-course style), IN SPANISH
- [The Latin American Revolutions](#)
 - Latin American Revolutions (and leaders!)
- [Latin American Independence movements | 1450 - Present | World History | Khan Academy](#)
 - Latin American Independence Movement

Dominican Republic

- [The Dominican Republic Gains Independence from Haiti](#)

Peru

- [Independencia de Perú - Memoria Chilena, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile](#)
- [Independence Day Peru](#)

Puerto Rico

- [Library of Congress Puerto Rico and the United States](#)
- [National Museum of American History A History of Puerto Rico](#)
- [FIU Puerto Rico Has Been Part of the US for 125 Years but its Future Remains Contested](#)

Uruguay

- [Día de la Independencia en Uruguay: ¿por qué se celebra en la fecha que su territorio se unió a las provincias argentinas? - BBC News Mundo](#)

