

**SIGLA: States and Institutions of Governance  
in Latin America**

# **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

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# Table of Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b>	2
<b>2 Case Selection and Conceptual Scheme</b>	2
2.1 Country Case Selection	3
2.2 Countries Included in the Beta Version of SIGLA	3
2.3 Conceptualizing and Categorizing Institutions	3
2.4 Institutional Categories Included in the Beta Version of SIGLA	5
2.4.1 Codes	5
2.4.2 Constitution	5
2.4.3 Elections	6
2.4.4 Executive	6
2.4.5 International Institutions	7
2.4.6 Legislature	8
2.4.7 Body of Law	8
<b>3 Data Collection, Updating, and Verification</b>	8
3.1 Personnel and Procedures	8
3.2 Standardizing Variables	8
3.3 Collecting and Structuring Data	9
3.4 Updating and Verifying Data	10
3.4.1 Initial Updating & Verification	10
3.4.2 Standard Updating & Verification	11
3.4.3 Ad Hoc Updating & Verification	11
<b>References</b>	12



# 1 Introduction

SIGLA (States and Institutions of Governance in Latin America) is an online multilingual database that provides comprehensive information on political and legal institutions in Latin America. By democratizing access to these data, SIGLA facilitates the generation of knowledge and increases the transparency of governance in the region.

The SIGLA research team began to envision the structure, scope, and content of the database in 2017, the website went live on the internet in 2020, and SIGLA formally launched in beta in April 2022. The beta version of SIGLA offers cross-nationally comparable, current data on 18 institutions across three countries (see [Institutional Matrix](#)). Eventually, SIGLA will include historical and contemporary data covering 51 institutions in 20 Latin American countries.

SIGLA is the successor to the Political Database of the Americas (PDBA). The PDBA launched in 1995 as a joint project between Georgetown's Center for Latin American Studies and the Secretariat for Political Affairs at the Organization of American States. Created during an era when scholars were concerned about potential democratic backsliding in the region, the PDBA sought to promote the consolidation of democracy by publishing systematized data about democratic institutions in 35 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. At its peak, the website included over 1,500 pages and had more than 600,000 users per month. In 2010, new investment in the project halted and the PDBA was decommissioned. The PDBA's absence left a vacuum for scholars and others interested in political institutions in Latin America. SIGLA aims to fill that gap; it also reaches beyond the PDBA's empirical scope to include a broader set of state institutions — in particular, legal institutions — and narrows the former database's geographic scope to 20 countries.

This document outlines SIGLA's methodology. Section 2 discusses case selection and SIGLA's conceptual scheme. Section 3 introduces each institutional category included in SIGLA, defining each and highlighting SIGLA's intellectual contributions. Section 4 describes how the data SIGLA provides are collected, updated, and verified.

## 2 Case Selection and Conceptual Scheme

SIGLA advances scholarship about states and governance in Latin America by providing data on a systematically selected, regionally comparable set of institutions and variables. SIGLA strives to balance cross-national comparability with documenting the unique features of each country's institutional structure. This section presents the theoretical justification for the countries, institutional categories, institutions, and variables included in SIGLA and discusses those that are included in its beta version.



## 2.1 Country Case Selection

SIGLA is envisioned ultimately to include the 17 countries of continental Ibero-America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela) plus Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Exactly which countries comprise Latin America is contested. The set of countries selected for inclusion in SIGLA aligns with the understanding of many scholars (e.g., Dressing 1996) and practitioners (e.g., Statista [<https://www.statista.com/topics/3287/latin-america>]).

## 2.2 Countries Included in the Beta Version of SIGLA

The beta version of SIGLA includes data for Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Three of Latin America's largest polities and economies, these countries also reflect the region's diversity. They are geographically situated in different subregions of Latin America: Brazil is considered to form part of the Southern Cone, Colombia is in the Andean subregion, and Mexico is in North America. The three countries also exhibit linguistic variation, since Spanish is the main language spoken in Colombia and Mexico, and Portuguese the main language spoken in Brazil. The three countries also showcase the region's institutional heterogeneity. For instance, Brazil and Mexico have federal governments while Colombia operates as a unitary system. Varied recent experiences with authoritarianism also shaped the countries' institutions in distinct ways: Brazil emerged from a 20-year military-led dictatorship in 1984, Colombia remained a democracy during the region's most recent era of autocracy in the 1960s and 1970s, and Mexico was ruled as a non-military dictatorship during much of the 20th century.

## 2.3 Conceptualizing and Categorizing Institutions

To structure the database, SIGLA identified or created 14 “institutional categories,” each including one or more formal institutions. This section offers the rationale behind SIGLA's structure and organization. The complete list of the institutional categories and institutions about which SIGLA will eventually provide information can be found in the [Institutional Matrix](#). The beta version of SIGLA offers data on Codes, the Constitution, Elections, the Executive, International Institutions, and the Legislature.

Each country's constitution and codes influence the structure and functioning of all other political and legal institutions. Constitutions structure the state, manage the distribution and allocation of political power, and impact governance at all levels of the state (Eleftheriadis 2008). Latin America has high rates of constitutional change through amendments and wholesale replacement (Negretto 2008, 2012; Versteeg and Zackin 2016; Negretto and Couso 2018; Lobo Koerich 2021; among others). This volatility makes studying constitutions critical for understanding institutional instability, the weakness of the rule of law, and other elements of governance in the region.



Similarly, because Latin American legal systems have their origins in the civil law legal tradition, codes play a key role, organizing particular areas of law and serving as a “middle ground” in the legal hierarchy between ordinary law and the constitution. As such, they are an important source of information on governance in the region.

SIGLA also will provide information on the three traditional branches of government — the executive, legislature, and judiciary. Institutions in these institutional categories shape Latin American political reality, especially when they enter into conflict, such as in impeachment processes or the application of judicial review. As such, their individual and interlocking roles in democratic governance have been the focus of a great deal of political science research since the third wave of democracy (see Griffith, 1977; Linz, 1990; Horowitz, 1990; Lijphart, 2012; among others), including applications in Latin America (Bates et al., 2002; Kapiszewski and Taylor, 2008; Martínez-Gallardo, 2014; Alemán and Tsebelis, 2016; among others).

In addition, SIGLA will isolate for separate analysis several institutions located within or closely related to one of the three branches of government that play a particularly critical role in the functioning of Latin American states and politics. Examples include the institutional category of Administration of Justice and Law Enforcement, which includes institutions such as Police, Security Forces, and Prisons (see Hinton, 2006; Cruz, 2010); Intelligence and Military (see Hunter, 1996; Fitch, 1998); Participatory Institutions (see Nylen, 2011; Mayka, 2019); and State-Owned Enterprises (see Mani, 2011; Musacchio et al., 2015); see again SIGLA’s [Institutional Matrix](#).

SIGLA also will include institutions designed to be independent of the three branches of government, such as the Central Bank. Likewise, the institutional category Institutions of Accountability and Transparency includes entities mandated by the constitution to oversee the functioning of the state and public administration. In addition, SIGLA will provide information on “cross-cutting” institutions that affect and reflect the functioning and behavior of various other institutions, such as Elections. SIGLA also will include formally constituted political parties as an institutional category because of the leading role they play in elections and governance in Latin America (see Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Lupu, 2014; Levitsky et al., 2016).

Finally, in the category of International Institutions, SIGLA provides information on an extensive set of institutions that have at least a plurality of full members from Latin America. These institutions foster intergovernmental cooperation on democracy, governance, human rights, rule of law, trade, or development in the region. This category includes the Organization of American States, the common market MERCOSUR, and the Inter-American Development Bank, among many others.



## 2.4 Institutional Categories Included in the Beta Version of SIGLA

This section introduces (in alphabetical order), defines, and justifies the inclusion of the six institutional categories featured in the beta version of SIGLA. It also identifies the institutions that comprise each category. Finally, the last subsection describes the Body of Law variable, through which SIGLA provides a list of the major laws, decrees, regulations, and other elements of law comprising each institution's legal framework. Each subsection highlights SIGLA's intellectual contributions.

### 2.4.1 Codes

SIGLA defines codes as comprehensive and continuously updated “bodies of systematic legislation covering broad areas of law” (Merryman 1985, 26). Since codes vary across Latin America, the main challenge in data collection was to identify a comparable set on which to offer information for each country. Drawing on the classifications in the *Latin Laws Online Legal Library*,<sup>1</sup> *Lexadin* (the World Law Guide),<sup>2</sup> and the *Legal Information Institute*,<sup>3</sup> SIGLA includes information on the following codes:

- Civil Code
- Civil Procedure Code
- Criminal Code
- Criminal Procedure Code
- Commercial Code
- Labor Code
- Tax Code
- Electoral Code

### 2.4.2 Constitution

SIGLA provides general information about constitutional history, ratification, content, and change. SIGLA makes two important intellectual contributions with regard to constitutions.

First, SIGLA includes information on the constitutional rights in each country. To identify the rights in each country's constitution the SIGLA research team systematically searched for explicit mentions of rights in each constitutional text, rather than searching for a predefined set of rights. This methodology helped to avoid imposing prior conceptions and expectations on the search.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://latinlaws.com/laws-by-country>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.lexadin.nl/wlg/legis/nofr/legis.php>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.law.cornell.edu/world/samerica>



After identifying rights in this manner, the SIGLA research team recorded each right's beneficiaries, subject matter, and location in the constitutional text. To facilitate cross-national comparison, rights were classified into one of the following categories: Social Rights, Civil and Political Rights, Legal Procedural Rights, Physical Integrity Rights, Economic Rights, and Miscellaneous Rights.

Second, SIGLA “tags” amendments to current national constitutions to indicate the changes each amendment introduced. SIGLA drew on the Brazilian, Colombian, and Mexican constitutions to create inductively an initial set of general and specific tags. Eventually, these topical tags will be refined and applied to all constitutional amendments. For a complete list of tags, please see the SIGLA Technical Codebook.

### 2.4.3 Elections

The Elections institutional category includes key information on Electoral Systems, Electoral Results, and Institutions of Electoral Governance (IEGs) for each country. Electoral Systems provides an overview of the rules governing presidential elections, legislative elections, and national public consultations by vote (e.g., referenda, plebiscites, etc.). SIGLA offers data on election frequency, voter and candidate qualifications, electoral quotas, and rules for the conversion of votes to seats. Electoral Results presents data on variables such as voter turnout and candidate/party rankings for the most recent presidential election, upper and lower house congressional elections, and national public consultation by vote.

SIGLA defines IEGs as autonomous institutions that have the core mission of, and are legally responsible for, managing one or more aspects of national elections (including national public consultations). Since IEGs vary by country, SIGLA includes different sets of institutions for Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. IEGs are classified into four categories for comparison purposes: Civil Registry, Electoral Court, Electoral Council, and Country-Specific Electoral Institution (e.g., Mexico's National Electoral Institute [Instituto Nacional Electoral]). SIGLA offers data on variables relating to, for instance, each individual institution's creation, main functions, interaction with other institutions, membership, leadership, and incumbent leader.

### 2.4.4 Executive

The Executive institutional category includes several institutions: Executive Overview, Presidency, Ministries Overview, and Ministries. Executive Overview provides information about the whole executive branch, including its powers and interaction with other branches of government. Narrowing in on the executive branch's leader, Presidency contains data about presidents and vice presidents. Variables cover multiple parameters including presidential powers, privileges, autonomy from other institutions, qualifications to serve, election, term, removal, and



information on the incumbent. In collaboration with the Executive Approval Project (see <https://www.executiveapproval.org>), SIGLA also provides quarterly executive approval ratings for the incumbent president. Ministries Overview presents general information about ministries' role in the state, including ministries' core competencies, how ministries are created and dissolved, and how ministers are appointed and removed.

Since individual ministries vary by country, SIGLA includes a slightly different set of ministries for Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. The SIGLA research team collects data for a range of variables, for instance, the ministry's creation, main functions, mission, and incumbent minister. Here, SIGLA makes an intellectual contribution by tagging ministries' primary and secondary focus areas. Rather than imposing a standard cross-national classification — e.g., designating one ministry of agriculture, one ministry of development, etc. per country — the SIGLA research team inductively developed a set of tags, potentially expandable, that encompasses all of the primary and secondary focus areas of all of the ministries in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Each ministry was then assigned a set of tags based on its core competencies. Ministries can have multiple tags, and the same tag may be applied to more than one ministry. For example, a user who requests to see all ministries with the primary focus area of defense will be served data on one ministry in Brazil and Colombia, and two ministries in Mexico: the Ministry of Defense (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional) and the Ministry of the Navy (Secretaría de Marina). Moreover, not every tag is deployed in each country. The primary focus area of “sports” applies to Colombia's Ministry of Sports (Ministerio del Deporte) but no ministries in Brazil or Mexico. This system facilitates meaningful cross-national comparison without imposing artificial uniformity.

## 2.4.5 International Institutions

In an effort to provide systematic information about regional cooperation in Latin America, within the category of International Institutions (IIs), SIGLA offers information on a set of such institutions. SIGLA defines IIs as multilateral organizations or agreements created with the goal of fostering intergovernmental cooperation among the countries of Latin America. SIGLA provides data on an extensive and representative, but not exhaustive, set of major entities, including institutions:

- a) composed of national-level governments or political parties;
- b) with at least a plurality of full members from Latin America;
- c) whose mission is related to democracy, governance, human rights, rule of law, trade, or development;
- d) that do not form part of another II included in SIGLA.

Users can access information about multiple institutional attributes such as mission, functions, history, members, governance, and leaders; they can also compare this information across IIs.





## 2.4.6 Legislature

The Legislature institutional category contains just one institution: the Legislature. SIGLA includes variables that address the entire legislative branch, as well as variables specific to the upper and lower houses. Data cover a broad range of variables relating to, for instance, legislative powers, committees, processes for initiating and passing legislation, interaction with other parts of the government, members' qualifications and privileges, leadership bodies, and incumbent leaders.

## 2.4.7 Body of Law

For Elections, the Executive, and the Legislature, SIGLA provides a list of major laws — statutes, decrees, regulations, resolutions, or other “normas” — that comprise the legal framework for that institution, i.e., that define the institution's structure and/or guide its operation. The Body of Law associated with each institution is not an exhaustive inventory; rather, it includes important law that focuses primarily on that institution.

# 3 Data Collection, Updating, and Verification

## 3.1 Personnel and Procedures

Professor Diana Kapiszewski (Department of Government, Georgetown University) directs the SIGLA project. Revolving teams of Georgetown undergraduate and graduate students serve as research assistants (RAs) for SIGLA. RAs' primary responsibilities are collecting, updating, and verifying the data that SIGLA provides. Each RA is assigned to a country team, offering them the opportunity to build specialized knowledge of and familiarity with that country's laws, political system, and government structure. The research team meets weekly to discuss questions, discuss ideas to improve the database, and systematize data collection procedures. As questions arise that reach beyond the research team's expertise, external experts — mainly political science faculty in the U.S. and Latin America — are approached for advice and guidance.

## 3.2 Standardizing Variables

The structure, goals, and functioning of Latin American political and legal institutions can be described through a vast set of variables. Developing the variables for which SIGLA would provide data for each institution was thus an important and challenging intellectual exercise. SIGLA aims to capture the information most relevant to each institution (recognizing cross-national heterogeneity) while also standardizing variables across institutions to the extent possible (by creating headings, and collecting data for variables, that are relevant across countries and institutions, i.e., “Common Headings and Variables”).



Over time, through an iterative process, SIGLA established a list of basic variables applicable to each institution included in the database relating to general characteristics, functioning, institutional positioning and interaction within the state, members, and leaders. Each institution also includes customized variables to capture additional data that are critical to understanding the institution's structure or functioning. For example, as noted above, the “constitutional amendments” variable, which offers detailed information on changes in the content of a constitution since its promulgation, is only included as a variable in Constitution; likewise, Executive includes several variables on presidential powers not included for other institutions; and only International Institutions include a variable listing all member states. Please see the Technical Codebook for a detailed list of the variables for which data were collected for each institution.

### 3.3 Collecting and Structuring Data

The SIGLA research team manually collects and curates all of the data that SIGLA provides. The information SIGLA offers for each variable in the database is structured in “Triples,” i.e., matrices with three components:

1. *SIGLA's Answer*, composed by a member of the SIGLA research team, offers information corresponding to the variable, synthesized from the excerpt in the *Original Text* column and potentially other sources cited in the *Source* column; when any summary would be incomplete or misleading, *SIGLA's Answer* is omitted, and users are referred to *Original Text*.
2. *Original Text* contains excerpts pertaining to the variable from the sources in the *Source* column.
3. *Source* includes references to the official source(s) that offer the information pertaining to the variable, which was excerpted in the *Original Text* column and summarized in *SIGLA's Answer*. All data are drawn from official sources such as constitutions, laws, and other government sources; as necessary, this information is supplemented with information from academic articles, reliable news media, and other credible sources.

The “Triple” structure allows for multiple levels of engagement with SIGLA. Users looking for clear answers in plain language can refer to *SIGLA's Answer*. Users seeking a deeper understanding of variables can read *Original Text* or review the formal *Source* itself.

*SIGLA's Answer* is written in English. *Original Text*, comprising exact quotes, is written in the same language as the underlying *Source*; English-language sources are used when an official translation is available. Eventually, SIGLA will offer content in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Users can view SIGLA data by country or by institution. They also can compare a given institution across countries. The site also includes a custom browse feature allowing users to view and



download data associated with any combination of variables across countries and institutions. [SIGLA's User Guide](#) offers more information about navigating the database.

## 3.4 Updating and Verifying Data

Data updating is the process by which the SIGLA research team determines whether the information collected during previous rounds of data collection (“Initial”) or that are currently published on the website (“Standard”) for a particular set of variables corresponds to the current empirical reality (as captured in the latest version of the *Source* from which the relevant information is drawn). Data verification is the process through which the SIGLA research team checks and confirms that updated information associated with any variable is valid. In practice, verification consists of: (i) checking that the information SIGLA provides matches the content of the source; (ii) looking for possible omissions; and (iii) ensuring that the information fully answers and is relevant to the variable. If significant errors, omissions, or outdated information is discovered through the verification process, different members of the SIGLA research team re-execute the updating and verification process.

SIGLA engages in three types of updating and verification: Initial, Standard, and Ad Hoc. Initial Updating & Verification takes place before an institution is published on the SIGLA website for the first time. Standard Updating & Verification takes place periodically with the goal of keeping already-published data up-to-date. Ad Hoc Updating & Verification ensures that published data associated with important and unanticipated events (e.g., a presidential coup), or other types of critical updates, get published on the site between rounds of Standard Updating & Verification. This section explains the three processes in more detail.

### 3.4.1 Initial Updating & Verification

SIGLA research teams began to collect data on the 51 institutions for which SIGLA ultimately will provide data in 2017. In 2020, the research team began to carry out Initial Updating & Verification (“Initial U&V”), a process involving restructuring and refining those data to ready them for publication on the SIGLA website, which went live in November 2020. Initial U&V for an institution begins with conducting background research and conceptualizing variables, keeping SIGLA’s “Common Headings and Variables” in mind (see section 3.2). Once the variables for the institution are finalized, the SIGLA research team systematically collects (if a variable is new) or updates (if a variable was included in a previous round of data collection) the information associated with each variable. Next, a researcher uninvolved in this data collection or updating independently verifies that *SIGLA's Answer*, *Original Text*, and *Source* are correct, clear, concise, and fully answer the variable. Thereafter, a coincidence check ensures data are consistent across countries, and a round of copy editing confirms data conform to SIGLA’s formatting conventions. Finally, a series of quality assurance tests ensure that published data appear accurate and website



functions work as expected. When these steps are complete, SIGLA announces through its [Release Updates](#) that a new institution has been published on the website.

### 3.4.2 Standard Updating & Verification

Since SIGLA seeks to provide current information, data published on the website must be periodically checked to ensure they are current. SIGLA developed the Standard Updating & Verification (“Standard U&V”) process for this purpose. All data are checked every three to six months, following a process similar to that described under “Initial U&V” above. Since the likelihood of change varies at the variable level, each variable (for each institution) is assigned a “type,” reflecting the likelihood the information associated with the variable will change; a variable’s type dictates the periodicity with which the SIGLA research team verifies the data associated with the variable.<sup>4</sup> For example, variables with historical content (e.g., date the first civil code entered into force) are checked less often than unpredictable variables (e.g., name of the minister of foreign affairs). Just as with Initial U&V, different SIGLA research team members update and verify each variable. Once a round of Standard U&V is complete, updated information is published on the website. A coincidence check, copy editing, and quality assurance checks on the website follow. When these steps are complete, SIGLA announces through its [Release Updates](#) that a round of Standard U&V has been completed.

### 3.4.3 Ad Hoc Updating & Verification

The world continues to change between rounds of Standard U&V. Moreover, ever attentive to the quality of SIGLA data, the SIGLA research team sometimes finds outdated or inaccurate data between rounds of Standard U&V. Such changes in empirical reality and errors are carefully logged so that they can be included in the next round of Standard U&V. In cases of extreme changes, such as a new president or constitution, SIGLA conducts an abbreviated process known as Ad Hoc Updating & Verification to publish updated data as quickly as possible. As with Initial U&V and Standard U&V, at least two members of the SIGLA research team check any new data before they are published on the website.

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<sup>4</sup> Variable types include: (1) Constitutional variables, whose sources reflect constitutional content only; (2) Body of Law variables, which cite law listed in the Body of Law section; (3) Static variables, which cannot change; (4) Predictable variables, whose changes are tied to a predefined date or schedule; and (5) Unpredictable variables, whose changes cannot be anticipated.



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