

LASA's Congress Program Committee Response to Petitions Circulating Regarding Fernando Henrique Cardoso's Status on a LASA Plenary Session Debating "Fifty Years of Democracy and its Discontents in Latin America"

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) prides itself on its mission to serve as a forum for scholars and practitioners of diverse academic and political perspectives to discuss and debate issues of relevance to Latin America. Moreover, LASA is highly respectful of the political and social processes in each country in the region. For this reason we would never consider disqualifying a reputable academic from participation based on his or her political position. We now feel obliged to reiterate this policy, given that we have received opposing petitions to rescind or reconfirm our invitation to Dr. Fernando Henrique Cardoso to participate in LASA 's 50th Anniversary Congress in New York City this coming May. Cardoso is scheduled to participate in a presidential panel along with other speakers that will debate the challenges that have faced the development of democracy in Latin America over the past half century. Those who request that we cancel our invitation base their petition on the public position that Dr. Cardoso has taken in recent Brazilian political events, most notably the contested impeachment of the current President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff. Those who request that we reconfirm our invitation to Dr. Cardoso argue the same reason as their principal rationale.

Our position is that Dr. Cardoso has been invited as a leading thinker and statesman who has contributed importantly to discussions regarding Latin America's political and economic condition over the decades since LASA's founding. He accepted our invitation to dialogue and debate with Chile's Ricardo Lagos, who has also been a leading thinker and statesman over the long haul (and like Cardoso a former president of his country). Neither will be making a political speech; each will make some initial remarks, engage in dialogue with the other, and then respond to a range of questions from the audience. The session will be moderated by a distinguished scholar with no political affiliation with either of the two invited speakers.

The mission of the watershed "LASA at 50" Congress is to critically engage with Latin America's recent past and to debate new directions for its future. In that spirit, the Fiftieth has assembled a broad and distinctive program that represents a diversity of positions and perspectives. In addition to Cardoso's dialogue with Lagos, we are proud to feature presidential panels on such issues as the new moment in US-Cuban relations, which will showcase both countries' new ambassadors and the architects of the historic normalization of relations. Similarly LASA members will debate immigration policy with a leading representative of the Obama administration, and, at another session, consider diverse perspectives about the role of journalists and the media in Latin America. Luis Guillermo Solís, the President of Costa Rica, will discuss current political and economic trends in the region, and a blue-ribbon panel of distinguished scholars will examine critical issues of continuity and change over the past 50 years. Noted international linguist Noam Chomsky will be interviewed about his advocacy during the Central American conflict of the 1980s. Yet another panel, sponsored by LASA's Otros Saberes initiative, will discuss new forms of cultural activism and identity. In short, the central logic of the watershed Fiftieth is to privilege a wide range of positions and promote engagement between our speakers and LASA's members.

We expect that Dr. Cardoso's political views will draw both supporters and detractors to the session; such is the nature of political life. But LASA cannot endorse a particular side. We heartily encourage participants of the Congress to attend the forum on democracy and its discontents that was planned almost a year ago and has never been more timely. We envision a rewarding event anchored by two former presidents and active politicians and thinkers. Their presentations will spark a lively discussion of the current moment, when democracy in the region faces critical and complex challenges, and when participants on the Left, Center, and Right are reassessing their policies and strategies to respond to the demands of a volatile global economy and the needs of their straitened constituencies.

In sum, LASA does not see the need either to rescind or reconfirm its invitation to Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who will participate in our Fiftieth Anniversary Congress. At the same time, we reiterate our invitation to members to attend this plenary session and engage in the kind of free expression and exchange of ideas that have always characterized LASA.