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Democracy and its challenges



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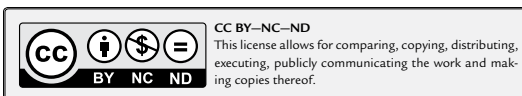
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Presentation

Democracy and its challenges

THE RECENT DISCUSSION about democracy leaves the impression that we are talking about a world that is no longer what it used to be. Although the end of dictatorships in countries such as Brazil, Panama, Paraguay, and Chile occurred between 1985 and 1990, current circumstances suggest that the democratic regime has not succeeded in establishing a scheme of equity and freedoms for citizens. Ecuador and the Dominican Republic were the first in the region to hold free elections forty-five years ago, but emerging evidence suggests that the—once essential and distinctive—voting mechanism is no longer indicative of a functioning democracy’s performance. In fact, even for centuries-old systems like the American one, it seems to malfunction, operate for the wrong reasons and has become an instrument for upstart power. It is not only that we are talking about a democratic world that does not exist, but one that will never be again.

This volume of *Mirada Pública* addresses the current and transversal issues of democracy in a context of weakened institutions, economic scarcity, and a rise in insecurity. These unresolved challenges have undermined trust both in democratic processes and representatives, so that any arrangement —whether nationalist or authoritarian— appear preferable to established and regulated political mechanisms. On the other hand, the channels of communication and the ways in which opinions are formed have transformed the mechanisms of participation, further deteriorating the relevance of political parties; any person now believes they are capable (and entitled) to speak out and deal with matters they consider common (whether they are or not), because the limits of the common are lax in the digital space.

The articles presented below offer approaches from political science to issues such as the quality of democracy, globalization,

mechanisms of direct democracy, the influence of social networks on politics, participation in elections at the local level, the role of the Armed Forces, and the perception/approval of populist governments. The scope of the work examines scenarios in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Ecuador, with both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The first paper serves as an introductory study. “The anomalies of democracy in the XXI century,” by César Ulloa, provides an overview that incorporates data from the Latinobarómetro [Latinbarometer] on what has happened to democracy since the end of the Cold War. It was also the end of bipolarism, the last scene of a global order that sought to eliminate totalitarian regimes; notwithstanding, the author points out that in Latin America “elections that were meant to be transparent, free, competitive, universal, secret, periodic and monitored [did not lead to] an ideal democracy either, as the economically excluded sectors had little, if any, possibilities to ensure an effective political representation within the parties.”

Governability agreements were necessary but never sustainable. Their undermining has had consequences on representation to the extent that neither politicians nor political parties are seen as spokespersons for interests or channels of participation. The author states that this vacuum allows *outsiders*, or figures with authoritarian or populist tendencies, to instrumentalize the schemes of democracy to impose their own interests in power. In fact, a sensitive issue is that Trump came to power (and may do so again) through free elections; Maduro, Ortega, and Putin ‘win’ elections over annulled contenders; far-right parties occupy seats throughout Europe, and all this happens in democracy-labelled frameworks. In view of the above, it is reasonable to assume that, as pointed by Professor Ulloa, the problem does not lie in “democracy, but [...] in the lack of democrats and a political culture that does not build the values of this kind of political regime.”

The Latinobarómetro data provides an overview of the situation of democracy in the subcontinent. Moreover, the perspective of this study reviews the attempted coup in Bolivia, the social mobilizations and state repression in Ecuador and Colombia, including

information on what revolves around the figures of Milei and López Obrador. The figures are not auspicious. In such an unequal region, the issue mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph is compounded by the fact that the population of democratic citizens are always willing to sacrifice their civil and political rights to improve their living conditions.

The next contribution comes from Mexico. Israel Covarrubias and Cristhian Gallegos, in “Democracy under fire? Ethics, distress and populism in current Mexico,” confirm that democracy has provided spaces in which it could be conceived as a significant, communicable, and transcendent principle or notion. Although López Obrador’s presidency is a relevant milestone for transition in the Mexican political scenario, his “particular governing style [which uses] the flag of populism both in his rhetorical and governmental construct [...] has caused controversy and serious doubts on the credentials of the President concerning his interest to keep and deepen the modalities of Mexican democratization.”

It is unusual that a president be so popular at the end of his mandate (with 66%, he is only below Bukele with 88%) and that his party has won with ease the last elections, when this success does not correspond, concretely, to the results of his administration, which shows clear gaps in safety, fight against corruption, health, environment and science.

The authors refer to a “blind spot” to refer to a circumstance that would prevent people from seeing the reality of the president, who uses weekly broadcasting events to address the citizens, where he can be inaccurate (if not incongruous), clouding the contradiction that exists between the enormous legitimacy of the president, his movement, and the discrete institutional performance. The keys offered by this study are related to the weak role of traditional parties and leaders, together with Obradorism, that shows itself as an anti-system and anti-government alternative. In the same way, the worn-out *status quo* is not a difficult target for a “model of direct political communication, in which the intention of closeness to the people prevails through his statements and daily gestures, [that break] political

hierarchies and formalities, creating new power relationships.” These relationships are, in some ways, more inclusive, yet ineffective in the construction of structures that would allow the establishment of a full democracy.

From the National University of Costa Rica, José Andrés Díaz and Sindy Mora present “The greys and shades of Costa Rican democracy at the cantonal level.” Democracy in this country—along with the one in Uruguay—is the most consistent and stable in the region; however, the authors suggest that the decline in participation in municipal elections may indicate a process of decay. Unlike Ecuador or Brazil, this Central American nation does not have institutional mechanisms that force or encourage participation in electoral processes. However, the fact that democracy has been relegated to electoral events seems to aggravate if people do not show interest in taking part in them.

This article indicates that the weakening of bipartisanship and the loss of trust in public institutions—due to their inefficiency in addressing the basic needs of the population—may be the cause of low participation. To increase participation, it was proposed to hold municipal elections on dates other than the national elections, providing political organizations with the opportunity to consolidate their proposals. Moreover, the increase in the number of parties and demographic changes in the territories has been considered. However, none of these variables stand as a plausible or definitive explanation. Abstentionism, for the period studied (2002-2024), reaches (on average) 70%. Díaz and Mora point out that variables such as the political culture of the electorate could help explain the low levels of participation. Finally, they suggest that focusing on this type of analysis could yield positive results to the extent that local governments, due to their proximity, can directly identify and solve the population’s issues.

Natalia Angulo, the general research coordinator at the IAEN, shows in “Politics in times of Twitter” how participation has surged since social media became widespread. The early introduction of a tool like the Internet suggested the possibility of breaking communication barriers. Once space was overcome, times simplified, accessibility along with the notion of inclusivity and equality was magnified,

participation could be enhanced, bringing evident benefits to democracy. Notwithstanding, the author suggests that this multidimensional participation reveals the presence of actors who occupy the mediatic scene, engage in public spaces, express their opinions through the spread of conflict, and take positions that reflect individual or collective interests, without necessarily leading to the construction of a consistent and sustainable meaning.

Conversely, “mediatization of politics has had a significant impact on [...] the processes of deliberation and analysis regarding events of common interest. Social media have turned into vehicles of propaganda for public figures [...] of political class, [which] have shifted attention towards sensationalism and drama.” Information is produced and consumed at a great speed without including other considerations, contrasts, confirmations. Everyone feels the right and the authority to express their opinion, while they believe that, from that platform their point of view is attended and evaluated; the truth is that these are episodes that position themselves and exert pressure, all too often without a practical or constructive aim, being replaced by other episodes.

The author suggests that the result described is an illusion of democracy, or rather, a type of democracy in a flux that relies on both fiction and reality to survive in an ever-changing environment. The use of a tool such as X (previously Twitter) inflates the debate to dimensions that would have been inconceivable a decade ago; however, the multiplication of details does not contribute to a fluent decision-making process. Not everything is negative since the potential of communication in times of Twitter has not been leveraged in a constructive way. Politicians have the duty to intervene, by paying attention to and discriminating the information they receive, while citizenry has the duty to channel important and lasting messages.

“Popular consultations and referenda in Ecuador (1978-2006)”, by Alejandro Molina, examines another mechanism that transfers discernment and decision on a relevant issue from the government to its voters. These are, in principle, valid mechanisms of direct democracy; however, they have also been instrumentalized as tools to

measure the approval of presidential performance. Frequently, the questions posed are confusing and even irrelevant as the measures being voted on could be implemented by the executive without any mediation. Within this framework, the hypothesis of this research is that the higher the approval of the president's performance, the higher the percentage of approval for the questions posed.

The events of 1986 (constitutional referendum called by President Febres-Cordero), 1994 and 1995 (convened by president Durán Ballén, the first on economic issues and the second on political and economic issues), 1997 (when interim President Alarcón proposed electoral reforms and called for a Constituent Assembly), and 2006 (called by the also interim President Palacio, who consulted on social issues) are analyzed. Febres Cordero and Durán Ballén¹ had an approval rating below 30% and suffered setbacks. Alarcón and Palacio were appointed during irregular power transitions after the dismissal of Bucaram and Gutiérrez, respectively. The former enjoyed an approval rating just under 70% (which was rather the opposite of the rejection of the outgoing president), thus being expected to win the referendum with a similar percentage: 62%. Palacio was appointed to the presidency to get out of the crisis, but he had not resolved the issues that underpinned instability. His approval was the lowest of the studied cases (23%), Congress blocked his administration and the questions of that consultation were, as the author mentions, "trivially acceptable," wining in the concept of the runoff election in which Correa was elected.

In "Guardians of democratic order: the Armed Forces in Ecuador's Political stability (1996-2016)" Horacio Palomeque examines the role of this institution in the succession of democratic regimes. To examine this role, the author reviews conceptualizations of democracy and ascribes to the overall perception that the Ecuadorian Armed Forces are publicly accepted and have not engaged in the excessive measures that took place in the Countries of the Southern Cone. This study relies on the contrast between democracy and the role of the army to "[understand] how the Armed Forces have [interacted] with

1 In the 1995 consultation he lost in all the questions. The 1994 process yielded varied results.

democratic institutions and have influenced the quality of democracy in Ecuador.”

Palomeque shows that the legal framework, i.e., that the military cannot be candidates for office, that their right to vote is optional, and that they are subject to the civil authority, creates adequate circumstances for their activities to adhere to the protection of sovereignty, of rights and liberties, as well as fair elections. The results of this article show that Ecuador is under a democratic regime (though weak and imperfect) and that the legal framework has made it possible that the Armed Forces (such as in the case of the presidential overthrows between 1997 and 2005) did not get involved in more areas of power than necessary to retake a fragile equilibrium.

Finally, Giuseppe Cabrera adopts a theoretical approach to ask if globalization comes into play in the crisis of political representation. This phenomenon is not the only cause, but the author shows that aspects related to globalization, such as the “deterritorialization of the State, understood as the loss of sovereignty of the state, the economic and financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of nationalisms and populisms,” can be considered as factors for the crisis. The article recognizes that the dismantling of the welfare state (resulting from the neoliberal financial dynamics), and the consequent inability of the public institutions to respond to the needs of citizens and the distrust they have caused, leads to the emergence of other institutions that capture people’s attention.

The author proposes that the new bodies have not been built as vehicles that channel opinions. There are no converging diversities to organize discussion and coexistence. In fact, they are the result of a deterritorialized world and external pressure; thus, they are not prepared to solve short-term issues. On the contrary, a distorted representation leads to the rise of extreme-right, populist and nationalist parties, which try to move in the opposite direction to globalization, but without a constructive goal, as the necessities are not covered, xenophobia and isolation are triggered and leader discourse is utilitarian.

The challenges of democracy presented in the previous documents show that the path between the first attempts of humanity to find the best mechanisms and institutions for governance has been surpassed. Institutional and representational patterns, professionalization of politicians, and citizen empathy regarding democratic participation seem to have dislocated because political spaces have, at the same time, expanded and blurred. In a new world, in which everything seems relative, the study of the challenges of democracy may be the first step towards reconstruction. We hope that readers find this proposal interesting and that their ideas nourish academic debate and begin to lay the foundations for a future democracy that provides the best possible benefits.

Bolívar Lucio
Editorial Director of the IAEN

The anomalies of democracy in the XXI century

César Ulloa-Tapia¹

1. Introduction

AS OF THE third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1993) and the subsequent end of the Cold War, the satisfaction regarding democracy has receded, and this article revolves around this idea. This document stresses the anomalies of the political system and its constraints upon the development of democracy. According to the second meaning listed in the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, an anomaly is defined as “a deviation in form or functioning.” A greater challenge arises when referring to anomalies in plural, due to the multiple difficulties faced by democracy, regardless of its age, location, and the various political systems where it is implemented.

Currently, various lists and surveys classify countries in terms of a greater, medium or lower, as well as by types, quality (Levitsky & Way, 2004) and resilience. In this sense, several elements will be considered that —despite not being related to political science— condition the perceived satisfaction on democracy, such as the social, economic and cultural aspects. No democracy is exempt of an anomaly that conditions its performance.

This article reviews the literature on democracy and it incorporates the data of the Latinobarómetro [Latinbarometer] regarding the issue to expand the interpretation of the phenomenon under study from a qualitative perspective. The primary emphasis is on the analysis of Latin-America. Finally, a set of conclusions is presented, which will lead to an ongoing debate.

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2. Democracy discussed

With the aim of narrowing the discussion on democracy, the following definition is proposed, without excluding or ignoring the contributions from other approaches within the Social Sciences.

I follow the analytical perspective that considers civil and political rights as constitutive elements of democracy (Bobbio, 1985; Dahl, 1991; Przeworski, 1998; Linz, 1993; O' Donnell, 2010). I refer to these rights as the freedom of opinion, expression, election, thought, press, participation, among the most important ones. These rights are materialized through the joint efforts of institutions and the rules of the game within a framework of the rule of law (Ulloa-Tapia, 2017, p. 8).

When democracy is addressed as a type of regime, there is an ample vision that integrates principles, rights, regulations, institutions, actors as well as political culture. Therefore, it is a highly dense and comprehensive framework that is not equally reproduced along all the countries where it takes place. In other words, even though there is a stated democracy in concept,

the population does not always plot a consistent bridge towards daily practice. This is mainly observed in those that have different political roles and functions. Democracy, on the other hand, is not to be blamed for every evil, as it has its limitations (Przeworski, 2010).

The third wave of democratization was evidenced by the end of the military dictatorships, fascist and authoritarian governments, and it took place under diverse transition modalities (O'Donnell, 1989) along different scenarios worldwide. A great majority of the countries implemented elections that were meant to be transparent, free, competitive, universal, secret, periodic and monitored. Therefore, the power of the bayonets was dissipated through agreements with *de facto* regimes; notwithstanding, this fact did not entail an ideal democracy either, as the economically excluded sectors had little, if any, possibilities to ensure an effective political representation within the parties, both in the traditional options as well as in those that were created thereafter.

In a few democracies, national agreements were encouraged

which, while having timely positive and lasting effects, were not reviewed and updated with the demands of the population at the time, such as the Moncloa Pact in Spain, the conciliation agreements in Chile, the Naval Pact in Uruguay and the Pact of the Casa de Olivos in Argentina, among the most studied. In view of the fact that dialogue is the vertebral axis of a peaceful co-existence, leading to a long-term country perspective with the integration of the majority of the sectors, the design, implementation and assessment of the agreements would have been favorable for the strengthening of the democratic processes.

The ample agreements are rooted in institutional designs and democratic rules related to political culture, i.e., to the values of citizens vis-à-vis their interpersonal relation with the institutions and their authorities. Institutions are formed by people, who carry out, modify or substitute the rules of the game. These same people are in charge of designing inclusive institutions that “are based on limits accorded to the exercise of power and on a pluralist distribution of the political power in society,

enshrined in the Rule of law” (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, p. 362). In this sense, it would also be worth identifying which factors influence on the success of inclusive institutions and the role of actors.

The lack of an effective political representation, acting based upon agreements, led to a crisis of the parties, and the immediate consequences were, and still are, the emergence of outsiders and populists (Díaz González *et al.*, 2022), as well as certain anomalies for democracy represented by authoritarianisms (Levitsky & Way, 2004), new dictatorship modalities and coups (Pérez-Liñán, 2009). The crisis of the parties is global, especially of the traditional ones, even in seemingly solid two-party systems, like the United States, where the idea of the death of democracy was considered (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) with the election of Donald Trump in 2017, due to this president’s transgressions to civil rights, human mobility and freedom of expression, opinion and press. Currently, the election is being disputed anew in the USA.

Political parties have a decisive role in democracy, as they are the drive belt between the

state and society. However, when they have reached positions of power, as well as when they are in the opposition, they have not been able to propose a model for economic sustainability that outlasts the times of prosperity, nor have they been able to manage the recurrent crises, which often came about as wider global-financial, mortgage-related phenomena, and a permanent process of realignment of power during the post Cold War period (China, Russia, European Union, USA.). This anomaly has generated political instability. In this way, it may appear that the relationship between economy and politics is indissociable when it comes to determining people's satisfaction for democracy in any country.

A source of institutional instability is the high periodicity of economic turbulences. The pressure for institutional change emerges when a modification in the surroundings alters the impact of a rule, which is more likely to happen in regions that are more exposed to these crises in light of their non-diversified economies and their dependence on natural resources and external financing (Murillo *et al.*, 2021).

Thus far, several elements can be identified conditioning the acceptance and satisfaction for democracy, namely, crisis of representation, downturn of political parties, insufficient and precarious action of political actors that were meant to manage economic prosperity and overcome the crises (Przeworski, 2022; Rosanvallon, 2015). In the case of Latin America, the failure of the Washington Consensus and the cessation of the *boom on commodities*, accompanied by the high cost of hydrocarbons, gas and oil, stands out. There were two immediate consequences that still persist, i.e., people seeking for new alternatives to solve their problems regardless of the political dimension of the proposal, whether new or unknown, while, on the other hand, populism keeps on spreading in an everlasting comeback with characters that act as saviors. (Díaz González *et al.*, 2022).

In the same vein, the incapacity of the governments in power to solve economic crises resulted in two different moments for Latin America: the staging of the self-proclaimed progressive governments within the context of the *boom* of their economies (by the

end of the 1990s decade and the first two of the 2000s) (Arditi, 2009; Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006), and, on the other hand, the impossibility to honor their proposals to manage the crises, leading to a political scenario with alternate ideological perspective governments. This situation should not be considered as a pendulum, but rather as a momentum where the population votes for people that promise to solve their problems regardless of their ideological baggage.

The effects revolving around these two phenomena are the nostalgia for the leaders who expanded the positive effects of economic prosperity to the greatest number of people, and, on the other hand, the dilemma of turning their votes towards governments with an alternate ideological baggage within resource-scarcity scenarios that inherited the effects of the economic policies of Socialism of the 21st century. These cases were evidenced in Ecuador, Bolivia and Argentina, although the first two took place during the active regimes of their mentors, Rafael Correa and Evo Morales, Lenín Moreno and Luis Arce. In the case of Argentina, the off Kirchnerism

succession took place in two stages, Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) and Javier Milei (2023).

3. Anomalies that condition democracy

Democracy has a quality that differentiates it from other types of political regimes, i.e., it includes the greatest number of actors and organizations in the political-electoral contest. Moreover, it incorporates proposals, actors and parties that threaten it, such as authoritarianisms and populisms. Contradictorily, these same manifestations take advantage of democracy in their favor to participate in the elections and propose another type of democracy. Namely, they use the freedom of opinion and expression to vilify democracy itself. In spite of their efforts to encourage another, non-liberal, democracy, they have not been able to configure a compelling proposal. However, it is counterproductive that, in several cases, the majority of the population agrees with these manifestations.

In the cases of the United States, several countries of Latin America and Europe, the leaders that dispute power, within the framework of liberal democracy,

have transgressed civil and political rights (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Donald Trump, at a certain point, attacked the press, stigmatized and considered immigrants as enemies (Ramírez, 2020) and refunded a Nationalist and Protectionist doctrine, contrary to globalization. In the case of the progressive governments of Latin America, there were clear signs of populism and authoritarianism, due to a strategy of polarization, redemption of the messiah and attack to the traditional institutions of democracy (Ulloa-Tapia, 2020). In Europe, the emergence of extreme right parties and leaders is a clear forewarning of the virtual success of the nationalisms and the weakening of the traditional parties that were incapable of innovating in accordance with a new world scenario (Akkerman, 2018), especially after the pandemic. These emerging parties also promise better days to come in the economy of the population (Patkós, 2022).

In Latin America there are extreme cases, such as those of Venezuela and Nicaragua, which turned into dictatorships, even when they proclaim themselves as fully-fledged democracies. The

regimes of Nicolás Maduro and Daniel Ortega have transgressed the principles of any democracy, even those that are in bad shape (Martí i Puig & Mateo, 2021). Free and competitive elections have not taken place in these countries, while there is a constant criminalization of the opposition and a monopolization of the truth by controlling public opinion. There is a civil and military alliance, whereby the armed forces have a greater role upon the decisions of the states. The main opponents cannot participate in elections, as they have been disqualified by the electoral bodies. The elections that have taken place in these countries exclude the main representatives of the opposition while limiting, within their own parties, the possibility of the emergence of other political schemes. To disprove, internally and externally, the accusations against them, elections are held, political campaigns are carried out and results are proclaimed. The press has parodied that in these countries the results are available before the elections.

The problem does not lie in democracy, but rather in the lack of democrats and a political culture that does not build

the values of this kind of political regime. Usually, there is a sort of *trade off*, the population sacrifices their civil and political rights to the improvement of their quality of life in exchange for someone that proposes order, food, housing and progress. Ultimately, the problems of the population are not solved, but become rather worse. In that sense, when there is a lack of a democratic culture, people justify attacks to the press, businesses, and organizations of civil society if, so to speak, there is an improvement of their living conditions. The anomaly is the inconsistency of the democratic values on any electoral practice.

Regarding populism, there is evidence that the elections that take place in the countries where it is successful will prefer, majorly, and at some point, the messianic, charismatic, and demagogical leaders, who introduce in their narrative counter-systemic and polarizing discourses while underscoring the people, capitalizing the deficient social and economic performance of preceding governments (Ulloa-Tapia, 2020). In other words, the populist leaders get to power with the electoral favor of the people, while following the electoral rules

of liberal democracy. Upon the end of their mandate, they are not able to implement something different from democracy, thus exacerbating institutional problems (Ulloa-Tapia, 2021).

Democracy defends and promotes freedom of opinion, expression and the press; however, the strong emergence and permanent innovation of information and communication technologies (ICT), in an inevitable context of advancement of telecommunications, has led to an unquantifiable flow of information that promotes the enhancement of two phenomena, namely, post-truth and polarization (Ponte Torrel, 2022; Umpierrez De Reguero *et al.*, 2022). In the first case, democracy is under permanent threat, due to the relative nature of facts and opinions, as everyone defends their point of view as an established truth, whereby there is no consensus on a narrative. Therefore, everyone defends and keeps their truth.

On the other hand, discussions on social media are not balanced, as the conquest of the extremes is being disputed by internet users (Waisbord, 2020), now *facebookers*, *tiktokers*, *instagramers*. The old belief that

politics revolves around friends and enemies (Schmitt, 1999) is still true, but now in the virtual space. Polarization is a reality, and it is expressed by groups in favor of several causes, namely, pro and against abortion, in favor and against same-sex marriages, conservation against nature exploitation, nationalisms against affirmative policies for immigrants, among the most relevant.

The threat to democracy is evident, due to relativism of the truth or the post-truth, sensationalism of the facts, cosmetology of the political actors and electoral marketing, which turn politicians into products, all too often discardable. In addition, it is observed around the world that traditional political leaders are replaced by characters that bear high levels of popularity, acceptance, and charisma. The game of political dispute has been shifted to social media, staying away from streets and squares, thus the concept of the agora has become senseless. Moreover, the failure of the elites in many countries is evident, as there is no guidance on the aim of economic, social and cultural policies.

Notwithstanding, democracy is also threatened by the economic performance of the countries that already faced problems before the pandemic and that have not been able to improve their indicators after this phenomenon. Even if democracy is not an economic model, the satisfaction with the quality of life of the people affects its standing. The following quote illustrates this: “[...] Latin America and the Caribbean is the most unbalanced region of the world. The richest 10% of the population has on average an income 12 times greater than the poorest 10%. The average for developed countries in the OECD is fourfold. Additionally, one in five inhabitants in Latin America and the Caribbean is classified as poor” (Bachelet, 2024, par. 1).

The scarce economic results of the governments in power affect their political image, which undermines, in a progressive way, the approval and satisfaction for democracy. It seems that the population does not discriminate between the meaning of democracy and governmental administration. On the other hand, a social democracy is encouraged so that the income and wealth

redistribution mechanisms improve the living conditions of the population.

4. The performance of democracies in Latin America

On June 27, the world rejected military intervention in Bolivia against the constituted government of President Luis Arce. Immediately, the presidents of the region, the international organisms and the international community supported the head of state and condemned all those involved. A few days before, the analysis was placed in a porous zone, due to the lack of elements regarding the relation between the military that promoted this event and the Government. Regardless of the assumptions and subsequent evidence (coup and self-coup), the reality illustrates the fragility of democracy in that country. The ghost of the military headquarters is still present in our countries.

What happened in Bolivia is not an isolated event in the region, while countries such as Perú and Ecuador undergo hardships that reveal the inconsistencies of their political systems (Alcántara

Sáez, 2019). In both countries, there is evidence of a fragmented multiparty system that recalls the presence of the electoral ghost of the previous presidents, Alberto Fujimori and Rafael Correa, led by justice. Since the investigations to Odebrecht Company and its involvement on the region (Morales & Morales, 2019; Yuhui, 2021), there have been several governments and political actors in these two regions involved in a corruption network that taints all state functions and government levels. The complete network is yet to be revealed, due to its scope and depth. The most immediate consequence is the disqualification of the political system, including its parties and actors.

Countries such as Colombia, Chile, and Ecuador are still processing the effects of the protests that began in 2019 and, in some cases, extended into 2020. In Ecuador, the cycle of protests was even longer and more damaging in 2022. In the three countries, people expressed their rejection against the economic model and there was even the possibility of a new social pact with the drafting of new constitutions. In Chile, the process did not have the

expected results; thus, President Gabriel Boric, main driver of this initiative, is a political refugee. Among the effects of the protests in Colombia against the government of Iván Duque, a left-wing president was elected for the first time, while in Ecuador, the accumulation of events led to the dissolution of the Assembly, the call for anticipated elections, and the compliance of a short period for a transitory president who serves the time for which his predecessor was elected.

In Argentina, 41 years after the transition to democracy, the atmosphere of political polarization reflects the tension between Executive, Congress and Senate, which is worsened by a government that rejects Peronism and intends to stay away from the nostalgia of Kirchnerism. Javier Milei, its president, proposes a liberal model that goes against a structural state assistance-based model. Meanwhile, in Central America, Mexico elected its first woman president, Claudia Sheinbaum, who will continue the policies of her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Periodically, the PRI is undermined and a new political system is enabled.

There is a common denominator among these countries that affects the quality of democracy: insecurity driven by transnational organized crime and its efforts to control the production, commercialization and distribution of drugs in collaboration with local criminal groups. At this time, the enemies of democracy are not only the dictatorships and the de facto regimes. The current enemies are the drug cartels and their related businesses. For that matter, there is a lack of safety conditions, liberties and rights of citizens, as the state cannot guarantee peace, mobility, or the normal development of economic activities, including others that hinder education, proper governance, and access to justice, among the most important challenges. The fight against insecurity places the Salvadorean president, Nayib Bukele, among the most popular around the world.

Narcopolitics undermines democracy as the governments of several countries lose control of the state, either partially or significantly. The struggle for political power is not just about political parties, but also illegal groups seeking to infiltrate institutions, such as the judiciary, the police,

and the armed forces on their behalf (Nieto, 1995). The electoral system of countries such as Colombia, México, Ecuador, and Bolivia have a hard time determining the source and financing of the parties and candidates. It is always a challenge finding the source of the resources obtained by multi-million-dollar political campaigns that are far from matching the investment capacity of the political contenders.

In Latin America, Uruguay and Costa Rica, are still the highest-rated countries in terms of democratic performance, due to the strength of their political institutions to defend, promote, and oversee the civil and political rights, regardless of the governments in power. There are no gaps in the constituted order; elections are celebrated in strict accordance with equal conditions of the actors, while policies for the progressivity of liberties and a social agreement for the compliance of duties are encouraged. This is not to idealize them, but it is a recognition of their resilience, even if the traditional parties have lost their former relevance.

5. The figures of democracy

For the analysis of the scenario of democracy in Latin America, as well as of the causalities and effects in terms of satisfaction, the data of the *Latinobarómetro* from 1995 to 2023² will be used as source of information. Even though democracy is initially described as a type of political regime in this chapter, the fact that those in power, within the framework of liberties, select an economic model cannot be overlooked. This decision can influence public satisfaction for democracy, as a higher quality of life likely leads to greater satisfaction with the democratic system. However, this is not a definite conclusion.

Since the beginning of the *Latinobarómetro series* until 2023, there has been a decline in satisfaction with democracy. In 1995, 38.4% of people surveyed reported being very satisfied or fairly satisfied with democracy. By 2023, this figure had fallen to 28.1%, representing

² Due to the fact that the series of the *Latinobarómetro* initiated in 1995, in the course of time, other countries were included, as well as new questions, to correspond with the situation.

a decline of over 10 percentage points. In 1995, only 11.5% of the population surveyed by the *Latinobarómetro* reported that the economic situation was either very good or good. By 2023, this figure is similar, at 11.9%. This fact reflects the inability of the governments to improve the living conditions of the population over a period marked by several events, i.e., the end of the Cold War, the Washington Consensus, the Pink tide or the emergency of the governments self-proclaimed as progressist, the mortgage crisis in the USA, the election of presidents that inherited the end of the economic boom provoked by the high price of hydrocarbons and commodities, the pandemic and its throes.

In those times, the economic performance of the countries was different. However, overall, there is a recurrent economic crisis in several of them, such as the case of Argentina and Ecuador, which report two different evaluations with democracy. In the first case, 36.8% of the respondents provide a very satisfied response; in the second case, fairly satisfied represents 11.8% of the responses.

The performance of economic, political and intellectual elites could influence in the satisfaction with democracy. The first ones play a key role in the generation of wealth, jobs and income, even in the case of *de facto* regimes. The second and third ones condition the electoral, ideological and cultural preferences. Notwithstanding, there is not always an alignment of elites to achieve a larger project. Thereupon, from 1995 to 2023 the response in the *Latinobarómetro* has not changed regarding the perception that the countries are ruled by powerful groups seeking their own benefit. The figure varies between 70.8% and 72.1%. However, this response opens the exploration about the relationship between politicians and those who could be perceived as powerful in the countries. The response to where power is placed and how it is managed provides greater insights for a comprehensive explanation of how democracy functions.

Regarding the institutions that guarantee democracy, the situation is far from encouraging. Trust in political parties, which ranged between some and very

much, at 26.3% in 1995, has decreased to 15.7% by 2023. This explains the crisis of representation that comes from declining processes of the party systems, the end of two-party systems, the configuration of fragmented multi-party systems, the emergence of *outsiders* as of the decade of the 90's, and the return of the populisms of any ideological style. Electoral marketing, political communication strategies on social media, and the placement of politics in the world of show business, has influenced on this phenomenon. But the responsibility is shared between the politicians and the citizens, who are tired and skeptical of changing their living conditions. Merely 68.8% is interested in politics.

The same holds true for the judiciary, as since 1995, the figures have evolved from having no or little trust at 60.1% to 68.7% in 2023. Corruption, impunity and the penetration of drug trafficking into politics and into state institutions has deprived of meaning to one of the most important functions of democracy. The impact of the Odebrecht cases and the illegal financing of politics are the most evident factors of the negative impact. National

congresses are going through their worst times, with 72.7% of respondents in 2023 expressing little or no trust in the main function of the democratic state; however, this figure was 58.2% in 1995. Freedom of expression, opinion and the press have retreated in their guarantees, as they went from 37.1% in 2007 to 45.3% by 2023. Finally, insecurity is identified as the third most important problem, with 13.2%. Unemployment is in the first place, followed by economic issues.

6. First Conclusions

Democracy faces new foes, both internal and external. Among these last there is global organized crime which seeks to control the state. In some cases, it attempts to subdue it, while in others, it seeks to convert it into a narco-state. One of its strategies is to infiltrate dirty money in political organizations, especially during the electoral periods. In the same context, trivialization of politics is another foe, as it vanishes public debate and substitutes politicians by actors who try to show themselves before the population as new electoral products.

The inability of elites to manage the economic affairs of countries has affected the credibility, acceptance and satisfaction with democracy. As a snowball effect, this phenomenon has affected the traditional institutions of democracy, such as political parties, justice systems, congresses and assemblies. However, accountability for this phenomenon is shared by the citizens who, in many cases, have preferred not to get involved in public issues, but who have also reacted from the other extreme through protests occurred during the last quarter of 2019.

Citizen fatigue is the result of the impossibility of renewing a social pact that addresses new global phenomena, ranging from environmental issues, the progressivity of rights, especially for the less attended sectors of the population, to expressions that oppose peaceful coexistence, such as racism, xenophobia and ultranationalism.

No democracy is exempt from being attacked, whether internally or externally. In recent years, it has been observed that not even countries like the United States could stop the attacks against their institutionality. The same is observed in Europe, where there is a reconfiguration of political forces that dispute the power with the emergence of new political actors with extreme ideologies that have been able to convince the population with antisystem discourses and the return of an adamant conservatism. The figures provide us with some clues for the study of democracy, but they are still insufficient when it comes to dimensioning the set of staggering changes that society is facing, with varying impacts according to the political culture of each nation. It becomes necessary to establish new categories of analysis, due to the occurrence of new social phenomena that affect everyday events, as mentioned above.

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Democracy under fire? Ethics, distress and populism in current Mexico

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1. Introduction

IN 2018, WITH the advent of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) to power in Mexico, we witnessed a profound change in the recent political history of the country. This change is attributed to the governing style of López Obrador, who has resorted to the flag of populism both in his rhetorical and governmental construct. This event has caused controversy and serious doubts on the credentials of the President concerning his interest to keep and deepen the modalities of Mexican democratization that had been developing since 2000. On that year, a political alternance took place, closing the long chapter of transition to democracy that had started its process of political liberalization during the 1970s decade. During 2000, for the first time, a president emerging from the ranks of the former Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had governed the country uninterrupted for 70 years, became president.

In the final stretch of his administration, López Obrador has a 66% approval rate, a much higher number than his predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), who, during his last year of government, obtained a 22% approval rate. However, his approval rate

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remains comparable to other Mexican presidents. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994-2000) finished his mandate with a 66% rate, while Vicente Fox Quezada (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) finished with a rate of 63% and 58%, respectively (Márquez, 2024). In contrast with the popularity of other Latin-American presidents, López Obrador is the third best scored president along the region, with a popularity of 68%, just below the Salvadorean president, Nayib Bukele, who leads with 88%, followed by the Dominican president, Luis Abidaner, with 69% (Bloomberg news online, 2024). It is likely that AMLO's popularity is not determined exclusively by citizen judgment on the performance of his administration, where the achieved and unachieved objectives are weighted, but citizen perception that raises his popularity is also based upon his charismatic leadership and his permanent rapport with the more economically vulnerable social sectors using a simple language that reaches quicker to his audiences in contrast to the number-charged technical language that characterizes contemporary politicians.

As a result, there seems to be a 'blind spot' still to be unraveled, which partly confirms citizen esteem for him and his movement until now. In spite of the significant citizen support both for his figure and his movement, this success is not proportionally reflected on the results of his administration, which, at best, become contradictory and deficient in areas such as security, fight against corruption, health, environment and science, among others.

There are two exemplary cases. In terms of corruption, comparative results for 180 countries indicate that Mexico turned from being ranked 138 in 2018 to 126 in 2023 as a consequence of the evasion of the accountability mechanisms implemented by the judicial system (Transparency International, 2023). In any event, if we compare the same indicator along different periods, it can be observed that, during the last 30 years, corruption has been a structural component of the Mexican political system, regardless of the party in power and even less of the personal ruling style, i.e., we are equally corrupt with a neoliberal political system than with a populist one.

This draws attention to the flag-ship that López Obrador used before and during his presidential campaign, as it was based on a head-on fight against corruption that would prevent the leakage of public resources while investing them on the improvement of services for the least economically favored sections of the population.

Regarding the health system, it is estimated that in 2018 the territorial coverage was 80%, but in 2023 it was reduced to 72%. The explanation of this change is multifactorial, but the most important fact is the reduction of the health budget, as well as the elimination of the Popular Insurance —covering the towns located in rural zones that lacked any kind of work-dependent insurance— to substitute it with the Institute of Health for Well-being (Insabi), which has not started to provide services yet (OCDE, 2023). It is worth mentioning that its initial delay was the result of the Covid-19 pandemic since the migration to Insabi was scheduled for the first semester of 2020. Instead, the current delay is the result of prioritization of a social policy through

scholarships, pensions and diverse types of aids, rather than the restructuring of the overall health system.

The aim of this work is to provide a minimal explanation of this blind spot which, after the election of June 2, 2024, has taken on an unusual relevance, though absent from the Mexican political debate. The following questions are raised: How can we explain the contradiction between the considerable legitimacy of his figure and movement and the discreet performance in diverse international settings, such as the fight against corruption, insecurity, or the exaggerated participation of the armed forces in Mexican public life? How does the Mexican democratic setting rate this exercise of public power in terms of democratic subversion? How do we understand then that, in spite of observing elements of transgression to the institutional democratic order, he maintains an ample citizen support, which was reinforced in the electoral process? Is this sufficient to support the hypothesis that the country is in a process of autocratization?

2. Three essential clues

There are three initial elements to highlight. First, the coming into power of López Obrador was accompanied by an enormous social consensus, as he was, at one point, the president with the highest number of votes in the history of the Mexican elections. His ascent was accompanied by the founding of the Movement of National Regeneration (Morena) as a civil association in 2011 and, subsequently, it obtained its registry as a political party in 2014. He participated for the first time in the mid-term elections in 2015, obtaining a discreet 8% of the votes. Further, in 2018, Morena and AMLO not only won the Mexican presidency, but they also obtained the majority of representatives at the Chamber of Deputies and won 11 of the 15 disputed governorships (Morena, s/f).

It should also be noted that the difference obtained when he won the presidency was close to 30% with respect to the second place. It is surprising that, although recently created, Morena swiftly achieved an identification with an ample representation of the constituency, which prompted the discussion of whether

this identification was the effect of voters against the system or against the government, since, at the beginning, it was thought that it was a vote of punishment resulting from the extremely poor results that the government of his predecessor, Peña Nieto, had offered (Abundis, 2018, pp. 29-32).

Six years later, the hypothesis that Morena has achieved something unfeasible is confirmed, i.e., capturing the anti-system constituency plus the anti-government constituency, considering the former as the voter who is identified with the *obradorist*, anti-neoliberal or anti-elite cause, characteristic of the contemporary populist belief; and the second one as the voter who questions or despises the three main *obradorist* opposing parties, i.e., the National Action Party (PAN), which ruled the country from 2000-2012, the PRI, which came back to power between 2012- 2018, and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). These three parties failed to understand the enormous changes that have taken place in the composition of the constituency regarding the social and cultural context, as they are regarded by the voters as

inefficient, with an outdated and repetitive discourse, while they are interested only in ancient politics, which is now related to the discourse of the democratic transition, previously intended as their own, without a real interest and a political strategy to enable the resolution of the serious problems of exclusion and inequality that persist in the country.

Public acceptance towards AMLO's figure and his party was evidenced in the past presidential elections on June 2 of this year, where the candidacy of Claudia Sheinbaum, running for the same party as President López Obrador, won with a higher voting rate than the rate he obtained six years ago. In fact, not only did it exceed the voting rate of the current president, but it obtained a "carro completo" [an overwhelming victory]. Although the data are provisional, within the Senate, Morena would have won between 57 and 60 senatorships of a total of 128 seats, obtaining an initial relative majority, which, with the additional seats from her allies, would be lacking only 3 to obtain a qualified majority, while the Chamber of Deputies will obtain 233 and 251 seats out

of a total of 500, whereby, adding the ally seats, the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM) and the Labor Party (PT), they easily reach a qualified majority (Taddei, 2024), through which they could push a series of constitutional reforms that could not be approved during the administration of López Obrador.

Claudia Sheinbaum's triumph is an expression that clusters together heterogeneous interests within Mexican Society, with a transversal vote that is not exclusive of the populations that benefited from the social programs of *obradorism* for the last six years. In the same way, Sheinbaum achieved an unusual democratic majority that could be the result of a response at a moment where the opposition parties did not have the capacity to present attractive proposals for the voters and were not able to untangle from classist and discriminatory pointing towards López Obrador's sympathizers. It is also true that the president was a central actor in the electoral process, becoming, literally, the candidate to be defeated in the electoral race, so the opposition directed its energies to the presidential figure for several weeks

of the electoral process, in an attempt to remove López Obrador from the race, although they never achieved their objectives. Meanwhile, AMLO systematically used the resource of morning conferences, which has been one of his most successful political tools, as it reaches a wide audience through a direct political communication model in which the intention of closeness to the people prevails through his statements and daily gestures. Therewith, he breaks politics' hierarchies and formalities, creating new power relations and giving sense to a sort of plebeian republicanism (Covarrubias, 2023).

These three moments mark a watershed in the history of the Mexican elections; first, by the performance of Morena as an effective electoral machine that reflects a significant change in the composition of the constituency and the party system; second, by the political use of the semantics of populism throughout the electoral campaign and along the administration that concludes this 2024 ; and third, by the large legitimacy ceiling of the president and his party, as shown by the previously referred data.

3. Privilege against undeserved disadvantages

In Mexico, the progress of democracy, as well as democratization, generated a wave of optimism with respect to the improvement of the economic conditions of the Mexican population. In the year 2000, it was estimated that approximately 31% of the population expected an improvement, while by the end of 2018, there was a significant increase, reaching 47% (Latinobarómetro [Latinbarometer], 2018). The hope for change contrasts with the events that took place during that period, as poverty did not diminish significantly, the salaries did not improve and democracy was entangled with a series of problems, such as corruption and violence, which hindered its consolidation.

In this context, the ascent of López Obrador to the presidency can be expected as a turnaround to these national circumstances and, specifically, to the question of who we are governing for. During the administration of Peña Nieto the idea took root that his decisions, both in the economic and labor fields, responded to the business elite,

while sacrificing the aspirations of the lower classes. Based on the data of the *Latinobarómetro* 2018, 88% of the respondents considered that he was a president that governed for the elites, while only 7% perceived that he was governing for all the people. This was confirmed by two events that impacted, in a negative way, the approval of the government of Peña Nieto: the disappearance of 43 teacher-training students in Ayotzinapa between the 26 and 27 September 2014, a zone which is located in the State of Guerrero, one of the poorest regions of the country; and the corruption scandal of the so-called 'Casa Blanca', a costly residence that was built for the by Peña Nieto's then wife, former television actress Angélica Rivera, by the main government contractor of Peña Nieto's government, when he was governor of the State of Mexico, prior to his arrival to power.

This negative perception changed during the two initial years of López Obrador's government, as 29% of the population responded that he governed for all the people and 67% for the elite (*Latinobarómetro*, 2021). Beyond the data, we would like

to draw attention to the responses that the government provided to the demands of the less-favored populations, which are representative of a democratic ethic where inequality and poverty cannot be ignored, because they are elements that hinder democratic development. This element opened an ongoing discussion on the inability of considering and developing Mexican democracy exclusively in terms of a political regime.

In fact, Mexican democracy is obliged to be thought of and structured also as a sort of double-sense society. First, it is compelled to provide an answer to the economic dimension, which is the ground where the perception of the improvement of the material living conditions comes into play. Second, within the symbolic operations of democracy, where the 'voice' of all those individuals who were not considered by the elites is perceived, or at least not to the extent of the expectation of change generated within society. Now, these voices count on the daily exercise of power and not only when they are invited to vote for the same elites that will invariably ignore them.

Within this scenario, the success of the social policy displayed by *obradorism* upon Mexican society is better understood. His social policy was established long before coming to power through the idea that became the slogan both for his campaign and his government: “For the good of all, first the poor.” This keystone is connected with the obradorist rhetoric of the 4T government, also used during his campaign and repeated today. The so-called “Fourth Transformation” is part of it, whereby the president places his national policy as a historical milestone, comparable to foundational events, such as the War of Independence in 1810; the period of Reform by the end of the 1850s decade—which gave way to the separation of property between Church and State—; and the Mexican Revolution that broke out in 1910, which had as a motor the distribution of land and a profound vocation for social justice.

The idea worked adequately to establish that the economic gap between the wealthy and the poor is the underlying cause of all those activities that harm the sociability and the dignity among people. Therefore, it is

indispensable to mitigate the effects of inequality, establish equal opportunities to encourage social mobility, strengthen social cohesion, generate economic development and ensure the persistence of democracy and peace. His discourse sets a rupture on the idea of liberal democracy that prevailed in Mexico, whose utility was dependent solely on the transference of power without considering the attention to unprivileged classes, whose civic responsibility lied exclusively in the right to vote, ignoring that they could not participate in other areas.

As a social policy, there is a state recognition of the homeless by *obradorism*, which is covered through a series of programs for monetary compensation, among which the following can be mentioned: 1) Pension for the wellbeing of the elderly, 2) Sowing Life Program, 3) Youth Building the Future 4) Benito Juárez Scholarships for the wellbeing of basic education 5) Pension for the wellbeing of the disabled, 6) Fertilizers for wellbeing, 7) Program for better housing, 8) Program for support of the wellbeing of fishers and fish farmers and 9) Program for the wellbeing

of children of working mothers. It is estimated that about 35 million homes receive a type of social program, which represents a change, both symbolic and real, of people's social relevance, in other words, their cognitive capacity, and their influence on the public setting are revalued, bringing a horizon of hope for a better future (Government of Mexico, 2024).

Perhaps these elements will contribute to understanding, in terms of democratic ethics, the ruptures that took place in López Obrador's government. This same ethics cannot set aside the way in which the privileged in Mexico have obtained huge fortunes, as well as the role that high corruption plays in all of this. Thus the need to associate the neoliberal governments (1988-2018) with corruption, as the acquisition of businessmen and politician's wealth was the result of an instrumental use of the laws, wherein ample sectors of the state structure were privatized (banks, steel companies, refineries, hotels, restaurants, chemical plants, telecommunications, ports, toll highways and education). In contrast, inequality, marginalization and poverty

were extended to the majority of the Mexican population. Moreover, an important fact to be considered is that in Mexico, as in most Latin American countries, the economic, social and cultural elites have maintained an almost symbiotic relationship with the authority in place, especially on the most intense period of neo liberalization of society, where they have always shown, in a bold way, their privileges and the way they obtained them. Assuming that with the emergence of democracy this relationship would change—which was not true—has resulted in one of the cornerstones of *obradorism's* political success.

In the same way, one of the central points of this situation was the growing wage precarity. In 1976, the actual minimum wage in Mexico was 378.51 pesos; however, with the rise of neoliberalism these were reduced, as their increase was not significant. As of 2000, with the arrival of the alternation governments, salaries were established at 45.24 pesos with Vicente Fox, 48.67 with Felipe Calderón and 63.77 pesos with Enrique Peña Nieto (National Commission for Minimum Wages, 2019).

With this negative condition of the purchasing power of workers, the increase of the minimum wage became a crucial element of AMLO's campaign in 2018. During his first year of government, the minimum wage went up to 104.56 pesos, in 2023 it reached 167.96 while in 2024 it is placed at 249 pesos (National Commission for Minimum Wages, 2023). The increase of the actual minimum wage is a political strategy to bridge the gap on inequality and combat the high levels of poverty: in 2018, it was estimated that 43.9% of the population lived in poverty, while this number was reduced to 36.3% in 2022 (Coneval, 2022).

That said, the increase in salary and the reduction of poverty contrast with the ongoing subcontracting (*outsourcing*). From the legal point of view, this practice was ruled out by the 4T government with the labor reform it implemented, but some of these practices are still in force, providing peculiarity to this particular moment. For example, at the maquila industry, the wage variation is related to the employer's specialization and mass production, but, above all, the labor conditions are precarious.

(Sánchez & Martínez, 2023, pp. 107-134). Subcontracting has had a negative impact on aspects such as the pensions, the housing fund and the lay-off compensations, together with other labor rights. In addition to the traditional subcontracting practices, the companies often opted for a second entity under their control (*insourcing*), which hired workers and managed their labor relationship. Under extreme situations, there were cases of fiscal fraud, as some of the companies relied on the so-called *factureras* [billing companies], which registered for tax purposes production operations that, in fact, did not exist (Brito, Carrillo, Gomis and Hualde, 2022). In April 2021, the *outsourcing reform* was passed in Mexico, which prohibited the subcontracting of personnel. After two years of its implementation, it has impacted the labor market. At the beginning of 2018, it was estimated that at least 5 million people were employed under *outsourcing* schemes before the reform, and, once it took effect, it is estimated that almost 2.9 million people got out of this condition. Notwithstanding its positive aspect, 3.5 million workers

are still hired on the *outsourcing* scheme (Morales, 2023).

Outsourcing has also had a positive fiscal impact, as Income Tax Revenue (ISR) on wages increased significantly in 2022. This was due, in part, to the fact that by migrating workers from outsourcing companies to their actual employers, employees could no longer be registered with minimum wages, or exceptionally low salaries, in comparison with what they actually earned (Morales, 2023). The deployment of policies in AMLO's government to benefit the abandoned populations represents an ethical and political change to combat inequality and poverty. In spite of these advancements, it is undeniable that there are still challenges in the labor market, such as the ongoing subcontracting practices. Although an improvement has been observed in comparison with the neoliberal period, salaries have not yet recovered their historical levels.

4. A democracy on the way to autocratization?

López Obrador's populist ruling style; his rejection of democratic institutions as the only way to express people's will; the

transformation of a variety of laws to strengthen the participation of the lower classes in political activities and guarantee the approval of his social and legal reforms; have drawn attention to the point of suggesting that the country is on the way to autocratization. This concept, recaptured from the work of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), helps explain the gradual change upon the institutions sustaining democracy, which is often carried out in a consensual way and under democratic principles, while aiming at the instauration of an institutionally uncontrolled and unbalanced term of office. (Aguilar, 2018, p. 14).

The concern for the autocratization of the Mexican political regime is grounded on at least three aspects. The first one is related with the decadence of the intermediate structures of democracy, where the opposition political parties could not capture enough balancing votes to exert legislative influence on Morena's supremacy in Congress. Added to this is the discredit of civil organizations, whose aim is to assess government's performance, as they are either associated to government-opposing powerful

groups or related to corruption acts (although this has not always been proved), thus losing importance as channels of citizen demands, especially of the lower classes.

The second aspect is the *mise-en-scene* of *true* democracy and the attempts to transform the norms and institutions to enhance it. AMLO was able to associate the attention to inequality and poverty with the idea of *true democracy*, which is complemented with participation mechanisms, such as the popular consultation and the revocation of his mandate, which were put in practice with political aims. For example, in 2018, the referendum was aimed at deciding on continuing or replacing the new airport construction site; in 2021, the purpose was suing the ex-presidents and in 2022, the president convened a nationwide voting to renew his mandate, where the result was favorable, as a great majority of the participants voted in favor of the president's continuity. Beyond the success or failure of these mechanisms to become legally binding, they have contributed to the political integration to overcome one of the main issues of the Mexican democracy:

the disconnection of the population from the social and political transformation processes.

Regarding this aspect, some analysts observe signs of autocratization, as political legitimacy structures were built away from institutions such as the National Electoral Institute (INE) or the political parties. Moreover, the alert for autocratization arises from the group of reforms that the president wishes to approve before the end of his six-year term. Overall, he intends to eliminate the autonomous regulating bodies, reform the judicial power, reduce the public budget for political parties and eliminate the proportional representation that allows the minorities' representation. (Hernández, 2023).

The third, and last aspect, is the militarization of the country, which centralizes the operations of public security in the Army, the Marines and the National Guard, while including them in administrative activities and economic development. Therewith, he will be able to remove civil bureaucracy from previously assigned activities. In his respect, Sánchez and Álvarez point out that

[...] since June 2021, the Marine Secretariat (SEMAR) is in charge of the administration of the country's ports and customs, which is an activity that should correspond conjointly to civil authorities in terms of transport and taxation. Without any empirical justification, López Obrador sustained that SEMAR is the "most prepared to defend territorial sovereignty and combat the threats of smuggling and drug introduction" and with such claim, he removed one third of the attributions of the Secretariat of Communications and Transport (Sánchez and Álvarez, 2022, p. 9).

The armed forces have become an indispensable element in López Obrador's government, which is paradoxical, since one of his campaign pledges was sending the army back to their headquarters to end with the political confrontation with the drug gangs that, since 2006 and subsequently, had resulted in an undeclared civil war. While the Armed Forces are institutionally strengthened, the civil police forces are weakened, while being substituted from their main tasks, increasing their negative valuation and being pointed as corrupt organizations. The opposite is reflected in the presidential

discourse regarding the armed forces, as their patriotism and incorruptibility are praised, even though it is evident that several of its members, which are high ranking figures have been not only investigated due to their relationship with organized crime, but they are well known for their participation in the systematic violation of human rights and cases of forced disappearance. In recent years, the most emblematic case has been their participation in the disappearance of 43 students of Ayotzinapa in 2014 (Colectivo EPU, 2023).

The previously mentioned points, considered as part of the autocratization that Mexico is going through, could be qualified as part of the attack of the president to the institutions, but they coincide with a certain democratic condition, as the rules of the electoral competition are still in place, and the opposition has the possibility to gain representation and government. Civil and political rights are still as precarious as before AMLO's presidency. We consider that it is hasty to assert that the country is on the way to autocratization. The possibility is there, but, at the moment, our conditions

indicate that we are still a low-quality democracy.

Within the scenario of political dispute, the concept of autocracy is directed towards the proposal of change of regime by the obradorist administration. What is striking is the distance placed by the notion of autocratization with regard to other concepts such as dictatorship, authoritarianism and presidentialism, which were at the center of journalistic and intellectual discussion, before and during the first years of López Obrador's mandate. Upon the analysis of the uses given to the aforementioned concepts, it distances itself from its historical benchmarks. In the Mexican case, dictatorship, associated to the establishment of a political regime through deployed violence along all the sectors of society, does not refer to the seizure of power but to the modifications of the democratic institutions to control the judiciary system and the legislative power, and, on the other hand, encourage an alleged reelection of the president (Alemán, 2017). Conversely, authoritarianism appoints the capture of the legal institutions, to the concentration of power in one person

and a creation of electoral and economic uncertainty (Zamora, 2019).

In fact, these alerts were closely related to the proposals of president López Obrador to derogate the energy reform approved during Enrique Peña Nieto's regime. However, it distances itself from the idea of establishing a political regime with limited pluralism, in which there is no defined ideology, popular sovereignty is nullified, political participation is restricted in public spaces and the opposition is eliminated. The Latin American experiences of the 1970s decade could be included under this scenario. (Morlino, 1988, pp. 129-177).

Even though we are not against the modification of the concepts, as the scenarios provide them with new meanings, the underlying stories behind them cannot be ignored. Even presidentialism, popularized in Mexico in the 1970s, based upon the works by Cosío (1972 & 1974), which served as a starting point to explain the ruling of a governing class from the presidency with exceptional powers and the command of the hegemonic party (PRI), finally comes

down to the personal ambition to remain in power. The impression remains that the underlying causes behind the use of these concepts are the lack of recognition of a broad sector of the population that exert their freedom and believe that to achieve change, it is necessary for Morena to have a majority in the legislature. The opposition believe that this behavior is the product of a cognitive impairment caused by his own social condition, a sort of an authoritarian spirit, as a democrat would never build a majority without checks and balances on any government. However, this reminds us of the classical theory of Germani (1966, pp. 234 and 244) on populism in Latin America, where he suggested that people do not exchange "liberty for a plate of lentils."

5. Claudia Sheinbaum's advent

At the beginning of this year's electoral campaign, the populist cleavage against democracy was used in the presidential competition, but, gradually, it stopped being mentioned. The new focus, especially on the opposition side, was centered in pointing once and again the failures that

the current administration had shown in terms of corruption, insecurity, division of powers, voluntarism, among others, completely disregarding the referred cleavage between privilege and disadvantage. On the contrary, obradorist populism invested many of its energies on this cleavage, and apparently it worked, providing it with a massive vote for the ruling party candidate, which would express an endorsement of this governing style, as well as an expression that politics is capable of providing a tangible sense to the daily living of the majorities.

With this, the subjective dimension of politics is introduced, which is currently considered as a relevant variant when it comes to analyzing the results that are produced by populism, namely, populism in the Mexican political background. It is worth mentioning that populist politics provides a purpose to the daily experiences of people, such as the increase of the minimal salary, which allows to cover needs as simple as the basic foodstuff. It also involves highlighting the issue of inequality as a driver of democratic governments, despite the counter-democratic force produced by

that effort, which is, for its part, the greatest concern of the studies of the phenomenon and the opposition to *obradorism*.

Claudia Sheinbaum's triumph by a difference of more than 30 points over her opponent, Xóchitl Gálvez, has generated several reactions that point out to the idea that what happened there was a state election, thanks to the influence of President López Obrador throughout the electoral process, and the electoral use of social programs. However, what the polls reflected along the electoral process, including the exit polls on election day, was that the opposition candidate never had a real chance of winning the presidency of the republic, as she was always at least 20 points below Sheinbaum.

Discussing state elections would be worthless, as the idea that the opposition has promoted after the election, i.e., that everything was merely a state election, implies asserting that the INE, strongly supported during the whole electoral process, is an accomplice of the obtained results. Moreover, it is suggested that the army of citizens that participated as field officers are also accomplice and corrupt, as

it would imply that the voters were manipulated to the point of making it impossible to show an electoral preference as the one represented by Morena. On the other hand, it would also imply disregarding the recognition issued by most national and international observers, as well as by the main States with which Mexico maintains commercial and diplomatic relations, including the United States and most of the countries that compose the European Community, after the results were proclaimed.

Besides, what can explain that the two main opposition parties, PAN and PRI, were not able to respond to the Morenist outpost? As mentioned before, these two parties are important because they led the way for the transition to democracy, before and after the year 2000. However, currently, these parties have entered a critical process, especially the PRI, which obtained 5,736,420 votes, almost two million less than in 2018, when it reached 7 677,180 votes. As it goes, it could turn into what PRD is today, the main formally established left-wing party in the country, which in these elections lost its registry as a political institution, as it

did not reach the minimum 3% required by law to keep its registry. What is striking about the recent elections, in addition to the broad victory of Morena and its allies, is the electoral performance of the Citizen Movement (MC) party. It obtained approximately 10% of the votes, with 6 204,372 votes, more than five times the 1,010,891 votes obtained in 2018, placing itself tentatively as the third political force of the country, above PRD, which this year obtained 1,120,982 votes, as compared to 1,602,750 in 2018; the PVEM, which in 2018 obtained 1,051,480 votes and currently 4,676,912, tripling its votes; and the PT, which obtained 3,396,805 votes in 2018 and in the recent elections 3,882,671, and the PRI (Núñez, 2024).

It is worth mentioning that, in their current form, Morena and MC are two parties that did not participate directly in the transition to democracy; however, they are currently the parties that direct the Mexican political process. How can this change of party direction be perceived within the Mexican political system? It must be recognized that we are facing a milestone in the

political and social history of Mexico, which suggests the need to structure a new party system, as well as new rules that fit the political and social reality of Mexican democracy. Something is not adequately working if those who lost the election, whether populist or not, introduce the fraud narrative as long as the results are not what they expected. This is an indication of an issue in the institutional design of democracy that did not contemplate the participation of the antisystem parties, which turn into poles of attraction and lead the way to the major electoral preferences. It seems that the past June 2 elections indicate that we shall need to discuss if it is possible to guide the electoral preferences to be distributed among all the competitors for power, without excluding anyone and no one winning everything, which would lead us to the following question: does democracy need restrictions to the overflow that it generates?

At the same time, it is a hiatus by the fact that Claudia Sheinbaum is the first woman that will rule Mexico, at a time when female power has practically become a lever that keeps the collapse of democratic society

afloat, especially because it can dynamite machismo, which is one of the central features of Mexican politics, although the latter has always resisted being displaced and is far from dying.

6. Conclusions

Populism is one of the most discussed phenomena throughout the last decade in the field of political studies. Largely, this is due to the effects that it causes upon democracies' public life in diverse institutional and social domains. For example, it has been sustained that populism is a source of social instability and political polarization, while triggering the intensification of the divisions within Society, where its highest peak is the aggravation of the counter-democratic frame of mind. In any case, it is worth mentioning that populism is one of the options within the current political horizon, wherein there is also neofascism and liberalism as political forms that have taken force in recent years.

The identification of the potential causes that lead to political decadence (as populism is regarded) are not only registered in the level of political

regime, as variable structures, external factors, and the context where the change of regime takes place must also be considered. In the Mexican case, it has been constantly suggested that the country is on the way of becoming another Venezuela, that AMLO's populism, and now Sheinbaum's (though she will take office this coming October), is a return to the authoritarian past. Even in the most conservative public opinion circles, the establishment of communism is considered. These are ideas that provoke a certain hilarity, but in certain Mexican sectors, they are taken very seriously.

The elections of this last June 2 are a multitudinous gesture, in which the heterogeneous composition of Mexican Society appears again in the foreground, going beyond any reason, whatever this may be, that can be attributed to this unexpected decision power. It seems like Mexican people assume democracy as an *unmotivated* political celebration, where several demands are currently placed that call for social and economic inclusion. This is the main challenge for the game of powers that has set the scene

for the common life of Mexican democracy. Thus, the door is open for the citizens' pretense, or at least for the millions of citizens who voted for Morena, of building a different profile, both for the organized and unorganized life in the country.

At present, it is hasty to claim that the path towards autocracy is delineated; however, a new vigor to the democratic idea,

based upon the attention to inequality and poverty, as well as on the political participation of the neglected classes, is evident. The new president has the challenge of consolidating this idea with new institutions and values, while considering that it will be either a never-ending conflictive process or going back to the sac-rilege that democracy cannot do anything for the poor and its only aim is the restitution of power.

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The greys and shades of Costa Rican democracy at the cantonal level

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1. Introduction

COSTA RICAN DEMOCRACY is recognized as one of the most consolidated in Latin America. However, the country has undergone a process of decay of its democracy reflected on an increased electoral abstentionism (Alfaro, 2019a; Hernández, 2002; Lehoucq, 2005; Seligson, 2002). This article exposes the fact that such alienation from the formal participation mechanisms is not exclusive of Costa Rica, nor characteristic only of the electoral processes nationwide; it is also present in events developed at the local level.

Even though the first municipal elections carried out after the approval of the Municipal Code in 1998 were marked by a limited knowledge of the electoral process and the party proposals (Fernández, 2019), the subsequent local elections have not been characterized by a major participation of the population. In spite of the implementation of a series of reforms to the 2009 Electoral Code, which probably enabled a slight reduction of abstentionism, they have not contributed to the rapprochement of the population to the polls (Fernández, 2019). It is worth mentioning that the Political Constitution of Costa Rica does not establish the obligation for citizens to vote; thus, there is no type of institutional mechanism that obliges nor encourages people to participate in the electoral processes.

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In the same way, the situation in Costa Rica is similar to the current state in the other Central American countries with respect to the level of citizen participation in the local elections. For example, at the municipal elections in Nicaragua in 2021, the percentage of abstentionism reached 82.7% (Olivares, 2022). In the cases of Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Panama, the information on electoral abstentionism at the municipal elections varies depending on the source consulted, but, overall, the participation in this type of elections is around 50% of the constituency (Sonneland, 2018).

The information available on this issue identifies some characteristics of the municipal electoral participation in Costa Rica. First, the electoral results are the expression of the end of the two-party system, and of the emergence of the multi-party system at the local level (Alfaro, 2019b), which has led to a weakening of the National Liberation Party (PLN), historical winner of the elections, and winner of the current elections, as well as the flourishing of new local elites with municipal representation (Guzmán, 2019). Secondly, the

rural cantons show a higher representation as compared with the urban ones (Alfaro, 2019b; Beltrán, 2019), as the local governments can have a higher incidence in the solidification of politics in these territories, in relation to the Costa Rican state, which has been characterized by its administrative centralism.

Thirdly, if voting is understood as a habit, the longitudinal studies show that only 8 out of 100 individuals have attended municipal elections in a constant way (elections developed in 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2016) (Alfaro, 2019b), which evidences the difficulty for these elections to be consolidated as a deep-rooted practice among the Costa Rican population. Fourthly, Beltrán's work has pointed to the existing contradiction between trust in institutions and discontent with them, due to their incapacity to attend the basic needs, thus explaining the retreat in the political-electoral participation at the municipal level (Beltrán, 2019). Finally, Díaz has stressed that variables such as age and primary political dissemination, wherein conversations with relatives, friends and colleagues take

place, increase the probability of going to the polls (Díaz, 2020).

Considering this background, this article offers an overview of the political-electoral participation on the municipal elections, highlighting the municipal electoral process that took place on February 4, 2024. The article supports the thesis that, in spite of the prestige of Costa Rican democracy, the analysis of the political-electoral participation at the cantonal level enables the dimensioning of the greys and shades of this democracy.

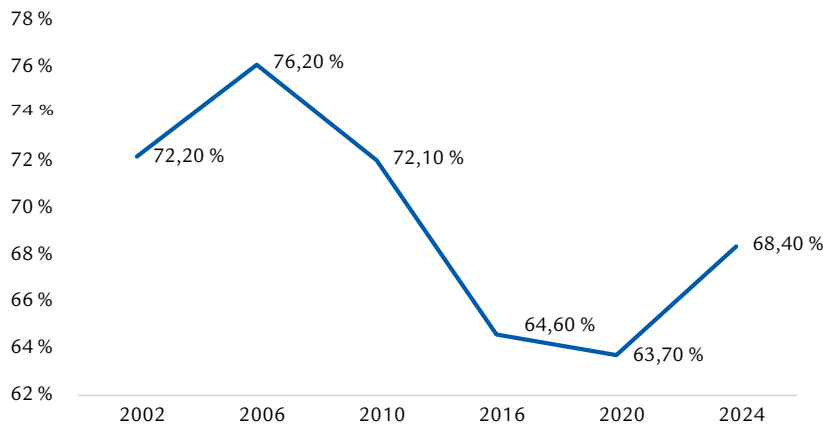
2. Political-electoral participation in municipal elections

In 2002, the mayor post was elected for the first time through popular voting in Costa Rica. It was also the first time that municipal elections took place in a different date from the national elections (Fernández, 2019). This change was made, first, to avoid the “trawling vote,” as many people had the tendency to vote for the same party, both for the national government as for the local government, without an adequate reflection or differentiation of the levels of government,

which affected the parties at the local level. Secondly, while separating the electoral processes, the aim was for citizens to understand the importance of the local elections, providing an adequate space for political groups to expose their plans and proposals for their respective cantons, without being blurred by electoral discussions at the national level.

As shown in graph 1, the average percentage of abstentionism in the 2002 municipal elections was 72.2% , and this increased to 76.2% in the 2006 elections. However, as of 2010, the average abstentionism descended to reach its lowest point in the 2020 election, where the average abstentionism was 63.7%. There are no systematic studies that explain the increase in citizen participation at the municipal elections during such period. Notwithstanding, at least two reasons can be tentatively noted: in the first place, as the municipal election was consolidated with time, Costa Rican citizens started to pay more attention to it, which has contributed to an increased attendance at the polls.

Graph 1
Average percentage of abstentionism in municipal elections. Costa Rica,
2002-2024



Source: Own work, from data provided by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

A second reason could be that, since 2016, the election date of the municipal authorities was modified. These elections used to take place in December of the year when the national election was celebrated. After the reform, they are celebrated two years after the national voting process. This change enabled the Supreme Election Tribune (TSE) to have more flexibility to prepare the electoral process, providing the political groups with the possibility to build their proposals and resettle their local structures, especially for the national level parties. Moreover, a wider

timetable between the national and local elections will allow citizens to ‘take a break’ from the political-electoral dynamics, and thus have a better disposition to approach the elections.

In spite of the previously exposed, for the 2024 municipal elections, abstentionism reverted the previous behavior and increased to 68.4%. For the 2024 elections, several changes were implemented in the electoral process that were likely to affect the attendance to the polls. The first one was the limiting of mayor reelection for two consecutive periods. Before this reform, those

who were elected as mayor could be reelected indefinitely for the charge, a disposition that was quite criticized, as it hindered the rotation of political representation for such positions (Ovares, 2024). The clearest example is the one of Johnny Araya Monge, who held the position of Mayor of San José (capital of the country) from 2002 to 2024. Given the relevance of the canton's mayor, his lack of participation in the elections could be the cause for the lower attendance to the polls. However, it could generate the opposite scenario, i.e., the impossibility of the reelection could increase the competitiveness of the electoral process and generate a more attractive situation for the constituency.

Another important change was the obligation of the parties to comply with horizontal and vertical gender parity. This reform aims at providing women with enhanced opportunities to occupy mayor positions, as in the past, only vertical parity was required, so the parties would appoint women exclusively for vice-mayor positions. The implementation of this provision led to an increase in the number of elected women for mayor

positions, moving from 8 in 2020 to 22 in 2024. This measure was considered controversial by some political parties, as the TSE allowed the participation of the *Pueblo Soberano* [Sovereign People] and *Aquí Costa Rica Manda* [Here, Costa Rica Rules] parties, both self-proclaimed as “ruling party supporters” or “rodriguist” (presented as political groups representing President Rodrigo Chaves), as they did not comply with the horizontal parity. This situation prevented the government from having representation in those elections (Angulo, 2023; Quiros & Bolaños, 2023).

In light of the previous scenario, several data will be analyzed below on the cantonal political organization and the local socioeconomic context, aiming at determining whether there is a relationship between them to explain the increase in abstentionism at the 2024 municipal elections.

3. Why (not) voting at the municipal elections?

The TSE declared that the management of the 2024 municipal elections was the most complex in the history of Costa Rica (TSE, 2023), both for the handling of

84 independent electoral processes (one per canton) and for the application of the horizontal and vertical gender parity provision. Additionally, 161 groups, including national, provincial, cantonal parties and political coalitions, were registered to participate in the elections, making this process the one with the largest number of political groups in the history of the country.

This article seeks to determine whether the increase in the number of political parties is accompanied by greater electoral participation. From the works of Maurice Duverger (1954), it has been established that the multiparty system can offer a larger number of options to citizens, which could help people to identify at least one party that is close to their interests, thereby going to the polls. Therefore, the aim is to establish if there is a correlation between the increase or decrease of parties that participate in the elections and the increase or decrease of abstentionism by canton, while comparing the electoral processes of 2020 and 2024.

It is also worth determining if the Human Development Index (HDI) of the cantons is

associated with the rate of electoral participation. Further studies have shown that in previous elections there is no correlation between the HDI and the rate of abstentionism at the cantonal level (Chavarría, 2014). In this case, we take on a different approach, as we are not aimed at determining whether or not there is such correlation between the HDI and the levels of abstentionism by canton at the 2024 elections; our aim is to establish whether or not there is a correlation between the HDI and the increase or decrease in abstentionism by canton, comparing the 2024 and 2020 results. A limiting factor that we encountered is that there is only HDI data available by canton for the 2020 election (PNUD, 2023), so there is no updated information to determine the changes in this variable.

A third variable to analyze is the growth in the cantonal electoral roll. In Costa Rica, it has been demonstrated that the changes in the electoral roll due to internal migration are very low, almost imperceptible, from one election to another (Solís *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the changes in the electoral roll are rather

the result of demographic events, i.e., the incorporation of new voters (young people that reach the legal voting age) and voter death. Alfaro has shown that for Costa Rican citizens, the habit of voting weighs heavily in determining their possible attendance at the polls; in other words, the more elections an individual has participated in, the more likely they are to go to the polls (Alfaro, 2019a). In a similar vein, it is possible to establish that in those cantons where there is an increase in the electoral roll between 2020 and 2024, abstentionism will also increase, due to the fact that this group of new voters has not developed the habit of going to the polls.

In the first place, there is a statistically significant correlation between all the studied variables (table 1). There is an inverse correlation between the variation in political parties and the variation in abstentionism by canton ($r = -0,159$), i.e., as the quantity of parties increases between the 2020 and 2024 election, there is a tendency for abstentionism to decrease. This correlation is also reflected in academic documents; thus, the higher the electoral choices, the more likely that the constituency will find an adequate option for their interests, thus increasing the probability that they go to the polls (Duverger, 1954).

Table 1
Pearson Correlation Coefficient for studied variables

Variables	V1	V2	V3	V4
Variation in number of political parties	1	0,016**	-0,159*	0,066**
Electoral roll variation		1	0,219*	-0,214*
Abstentionism variation			1	-0,197*
Cantonal HDI				1

*Sig >0,05 **Sig >0,01

Source: Own work.

In the case of the variation of the electoral register, there is a significant positive correlation with the increase in abstentionism ($r = 0,219$). In other words, the incorporation of new voters increases abstentionism. This reinforces the importance of the voting habit among the Costa Rican population. In this way, in the cantons where the number of voters increases, this figure represents young people that have not yet developed such habit, resulting in an increased abstentionism (Alfaro, 2019a).

Finally, it has been found that there is a significant negative correlation between the HDI and the increase in abstentionism. In other words, in cantons with a lower HDI, abstentionism tends to increase. Even though it was pointed out that on other occasions no significant correlation had been found between HDI and abstentionism in municipal elections (Chavarría, 2014), we can assert that there is a clear correlation between the variation (increasing or decreasing) and abstentionism. The previously shown behavior is in line with other electoral studies, which highlight that poor socioeconomic conditions undermine the probability of going to the polls. (Trein *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, even though there is a significant correlation between the analyzed variables, in all cases, these can explain less than 10% of the case variation. Therefore, it should not be considered that the changes in the register composition, the political organization or the socioeconomic conditions of the canton can attest to the variation in abstentionism between the 2020 and 2024 elections. Thus, it is necessary to find other elements to explain the political-electoral behavior of the Costa Rican citizenry at the local level.

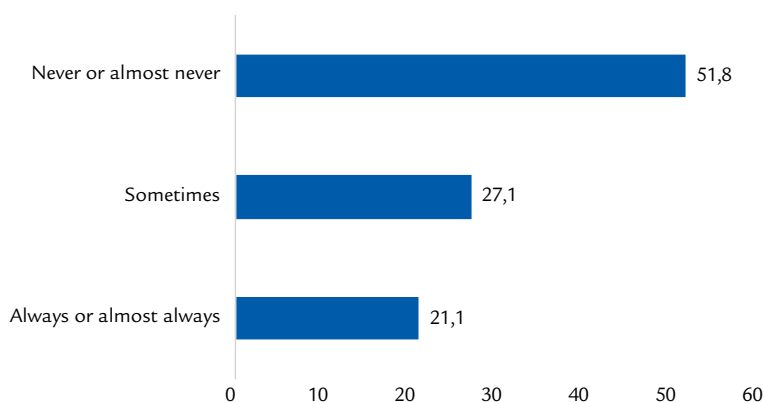
In the first place, we can suggest the existence of an overall lack of interest towards politics, driving people away from the polls. Diverse studies have shown that discussing about politics on a daily basis is a variable that helps to explain people's political-electoral behavior (Aguirre, 2011; Echeverría and Meyer, 2017). It has even been found that, in the case of Costa Rica, political diffusion is a factor that influences the probability of going to the polls at both national and local levels (Díaz, 2020; Díaz-González & Cordero, 2020).

In that sense, in a survey carried out by the Instituto de Estudios Sociales en Población [Institute of Social Studies on Population] (Idespo) of the National University (UNA), whose data were collected a few days before the 2024 municipal election, the participants were asked about the frequency of their discussions on politics with people around them. Thus,

51.8% stated that they never or almost never discuss about politics, 27.1% expressed that they do it sometimes and 21% do it always or almost always. The fact that almost half of the population does not discuss about politics in a frequent manner could be interpreted as a sign of detachment from politics and public affairs in general, thus leading to the increase in abstentionism.

Graph 2

Frequency with which the respondent discusses about politics with people around them. Costa Rica, February 2024 (n = 1171)



Source: Idespo-UNA (2024).

Secondly, the great number of political parties that participated might have prevented the population from deciding, thus leading a group to refrain from voting. This observation is contrary to the previously exposed data,

as the greater number of parties is associated with the decrease in abstentionism. However, as noted, the explanatory power of the performed correlation is extremely poor, there being a considerable quantity of cases where

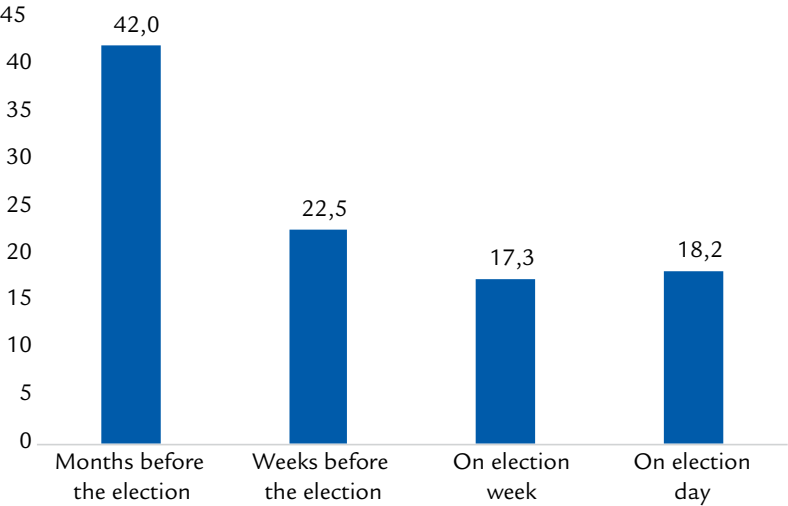
the increase in the electoral offer can be closely related to an increase in abstentionism. Several studies have shown that, at best, the population possesses a limited rationality, making it difficult to handle a great quantity of information, while analyzing it and deciding who to vote for as per their political preferences (Elster, 1989; Marín, 2019, 2019). Therefore, an increased electoral offer does not necessarily contribute to a strengthening of democracy; on the contrary, it makes it even more difficult for

the citizenry to elect who to vote for, thus refraining from voting.

The previously mentioned post-electoral study assembles data about the moment that the citizenry decided to vote at the February 4 municipal elections (graph 3). 42% stated that they had made the decision months before the day of the election, 22.5% had made the decision weeks before the election, 17.3% had decided the week before the election and 18.2% made the decision on the day of the election.

Graph 3

Percentage of the surveyed population as per the moment when they decided about their vote for the February 4 municipal elections. Costa Rica, February 2024



Source: Idespo-UNA (2024).

Thus, 35.5% of the population decided who to vote for on the municipal elections between a week before and the day of the elections. The behavior of the *tardy voter* has been identified in the national election processes in Costa Rica. This is a voter with low interest in politics who seems to have less information on the electoral process. (Pignataro, 2017). This situation, added to the large number of parties present in the 2024 local elections reinforces the idea that it was difficult (at least for a sector of the electorate) to decide on how to vote.

Several studies on political culture have shown that the act of voting is one of the most important elements in the political conception of the Costa Rican population, both regarding their construction of the idea of democracy as within their national identity (Díaz-González *et al.*, 2018). In this context, going to the polls for the municipal elections could be linked to the

compliance with civic values and responsibilities, instead of a reasoned act that seeks to exert an influence on local politics.

The post-electoral study elaborated by the Idespo consulted about the factors that influenced on the citizenry regarding their motivation to attend the elections (table 2). 97.3% of the people who attended the elections were motivated by their civic responsibility to vote, 85.8% agreed that they were motivated by their concern for specific community issues, 64.1% were motivated by their affinity with the political proposal of a certain political party and 61% were interested in changing the current political party at the municipality. On the other hand, the factors that influenced less on the motivation to participate at the election were the participation in community groups (36.9%), supporting a party that currently serves at the municipality (31.9%), and family or personal ties with a particular candidate (18%).

Table 2

Percentage of the population surveyed as per factors that motivated their participation at the February 4 municipal elections. Costa Rica, February 2024

Factor	YES	NO	n
Comply with my civic responsibility	97.3	2.7	651
Concern for specific community issues	85.8	14.2	650
Affinity with the political proposal of a certain political party	64.1	35.9	645
Interested in changing the current political party at the municipality	61.0	39.0	646
Participation in community groups	36.9	63.1	651
Supporting a party that currently serves at the municipality	31.9	68.1	646
Family or personal ties with a particular candidate	18	82	651

Source: Idespo-UNA (2024).

The above data allow us to infer that the elements associated with civic responsibility and civic values are those that have the greatest impact in motivating people’s attendance to the polls in municipal elections. However, the motivation generated by the problems that affect the community and the affinity with the political proposal of the parties cannot be ignored, though they have a lower incidence rate.

4. Conclusions

The Costa Rican electoral system is one of the most solid, both in Latin America and at the global level (Bou Valverde, 2010), and it has been one of the fundamental

pillars for the development of its political and democratic stability (Díaz-González, 2022; Lehoucq, 1996, 1997; Miranda, 2017). Nonetheless, this situation does not imply that there are no flaws and factors to be improved in Costa Rican democracy (Lehoucq, 2005; Seligson, 2002). Upon observing the electoral process at the local level, the situation is much less auspicious than at the national level, while the rates of abstentionism are kept above 60%. As demonstrated herein, the local electoral processes that are independent from the national elections are quite recent in Costa Rican history, while, during the two decades

that have been analyzed, they have just started to consolidate as a fundamental space for democratic political participation for the Costa Rican citizenry.

This article explored several possible explanations to the phenomenon of abstentionism in municipal elections, and, although it is noted that certain variables, such as the number of parties, demographic changes and socioeconomic conditions of the population affect voter turnout in these elections, none of them has a broad explanatory power. In view of the foregoing, other plausible explanations were explored in relation to the characteristics of the constituency and the political culture of the Costa Rican population. It was found that these variables could have a better capacity to explain why the population does not vote at these elections, as, notwithstanding the importance of voting on the political identity of the Costa Rican citizens, the population shows, at the same

time, a detachment from politics, which could lead them to refrain from casting their vote.

Notwithstanding the above, the municipal electoral processes could contribute to strengthening Costa Rican democracy while diminishing the issues and the loss of credibility of the parties at the national level. Since it is a closer space, people could perceive, more directly, how their political actions generate changes in their environment, thus motivating them to improve their participation. At the same time, this closeness could encourage the groups to reach agreements to address community issues. This potentiality is observed in the greater number of parties at the local level, which, albeit not having had a strong incidence on the increase in electoral participation, it could be taken as an indicator of people's interest in getting organized to achieve a political incidence in their community.

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Politics in times of Twitter¹

Natalia Angulo²

Social events are not static objects that have already been made in some part of reality and whose properties and incarnations are revealed immediately by the media with a greater or lesser fidelity.

Eliseo Verón

1. Citizen approximations to the concepts on the web 2.0: participation, discussion, and democracy

THIS DOCUMENT ATTEMPTS to acknowledge discourse production and the sense of info-communication as a mechanism of political incidence in platforms such as Twitter. Moreover, it lays out the analysis of the opacity that exists between activism and political participation, while pointing out the strategic ambiguity that characterizes participation, democracy, and discussion on the website.

Evidently, the existence of experiences that have turned into processes of political incidence set in motion by social media is recognized, and these have been inevitably materialized in the offline environment. However, this study is not centered on the causes, but rather on the need to understand the process whereby a multidimensional understanding of political participation by a group of Twitter users is configured and articulated in relation to their perceptions of conversation and democracy, based on specific experiential frameworks.

1 Parts of this document come from the author's doctoral thesis, *The face of the citizen 2.0: the fictions of political discussion and participation in social media, based on the construction of a typology of Twitter users on the account of Rafael Correa, former president of Ecuador*. National University of Cuyo-Argentina.

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As findings progressed, we adhered to the position that there is a new group of enunciators that occupies this mass media space (Slimovich, 2018) and that attempts to articulate publicly (as a sort of field of permanent tension and dispute) by presenting their opinions, channeled through conflict circulation and adopting positions that reflect both individual and collective interests.

Considered as sociopolitical and media subjects, people express attitudes and unleash actions, as politics has been digitized and its players have been mediatized.

2. From opinion to incidence: notions of tangible participation

With respect to the analyzed categories concerning the ways Twitter users obtain information and the inquiry-opinion on the notion of influence; it is worth highlighting that mediatization of politics has had a significant impact on the processes of deliberation and analysis regarding events of common interest. Social media have turned into vehicles of propaganda for public figures and, specifically in the

case of political class, have shifted attention towards sensationalism and drama.

In this regard, Georges Balandier (1992) suggests that “media dramatization aimed at a wide audience tends to occupy the place that was once occupied by the popular press, literature or theater” (p. 13). Thus, one of the main characteristics observed is that platforms such as Twitter represent an information sphere that conflicts with traditional media, since they suggest an ideal discourse of swiftness, truthfulness, and accuracy relying on primary sources of information, while facilitating the insertion into what Eliseo Verón (2002) would call the “construction of the event.”

This implies that the platform itself, due to the way it has been socially constructed, causes a change in the information culture of a certain social group that has access to connectivity and technological equipment. Given that the means to exert political influence for this group of people is through their opinions and their social vigilance with regard to the execution of public policies, this reflects the motivations by which the Twitter community tries to

position itself in the story and in its narration. They take on a supervisory role through an information verification artifact and a sort of real-time “record sheet” of the actions performed by the political class (mainly), which is well received by a good part of people who use this medium to review information and follow political action.

Entering into the topics (and note, it's not about entering the conversation) through opinions means having a space in the construction of reality by using the event that has been narrated in a certain medium because, as Verón (2002, p: 6) suggests, “the information media are the place where industrial societies produce our reality”. Thus, Twitter recreates and contributes to this idea of inclusion, by bringing together some characteristics of a specific type of ‘good journalism,’ such as objectivity, immediacy and the verification of sources.

Who would these sources be, in addition to the official ones? Of course, citizens, and Twitter draws upon this fact quite well. According to the interviews, in the logic of information consumption, another form of

incidence would be articulated with the production of information. Although traditional media had defined standard routines for information publishing, the information dynamics of social media has encouraged a different production in terms of frequency, significantly impacting the news production process itself. However, and despite the fact that the traditional media adopted a different logic, those who received the news, who, indeed, before social media, could not go beyond mere reception, soon discovered that they could take on the role of informants and build their own news.

Apparently, for the interviewees, there is a clear articulation between opinion and incidence, where the latter is only possible thanks to the existence of the former. This causality is likely to be the result of a process of pre-construction of the event (Verón, 2002) by the traditional media that, historically, according to the process of selection and editing of information, decide what to report, how often, with what sources and the types of discourses used. People who enter Twitter (and remain on the platform) reinforce info-communication

practices that determine the ways in which incidence and participation are understood.

Political incidence, as per its traditional meaning online, takes on different forms. Of particular interest, are the ways of understanding incidence both as a concept and as a social practice to intervene in the formulation, implementation, or modification of public policies by citizen initiative or pressure. This last part shall define the actions through Twitter, to the extent that different types of action would be considered as possibilities of influencing public policy. In these terms, incidence is an end that is leveraged in different media, and one of them—the one that has best known how to capitalize on the need to expand citizens' voice—has been Twitter. Moreover, over the years, it has been consolidated in the collective imagination as the most relevant social and political medium.

In the strict sense of the term, influencing accounts for the individual or collective capacity to generate pressure and influence on different power groups to make effective or materialize a citizen's demand. However, not every pressure, nor every fire on

Twitter is capable of generating impact, especially because those episodes of pressure, which the organizations set to call online crises, survive in the public arena for three to five days and then are overshadowed by other episodes. This, in effect, has led to not all actions being taken seriously. In the off-line field, the situation is more or less similar in terms of a society that presents serious difficulties in recovering the citizens' voice and addressing the need for effective policies. Thus, it should not be surprising that distortions only migrate from one environment to another.

An encouraging forecast on social media, performed over 20 years ago, anticipated that with the information and communication technologies the capacity of political involvement, participation and incidence was going to improve substantially, and thus, our societies would be more just, egalitarian and democratic. However, evidence shows that the virtual field is capable of not only recovering the old defects of democratic traditions, but also expanding them, as this time the imagined exceeds reality and there is a sort of agreement, a normalization, with respect

to the idea that with social media it is possible to change the world, which in practice is at least debatable, especially if its influence cannot be reflected in concrete actions in the offline environment.

Meanwhile, one cannot disregard interesting experiences which demonstrate that it is possible to drive political action processes from social media, not only on Twitter. These experiences are also amplified, generalized and, even worse, presented as applicable formulas in different contexts and under different economic conditions, with heterogeneous political systems and cultures, as pointed out by Yanina Welp (2009, p. 72), who states that “this scenario, which reflects the European and North American tendencies, is not transferable to the Latin American situation, which presents other characteristics.”

The discursive tensions around political incidence are associated with the ways of understanding the political action and participation itself. However, this issue takes second place as, in some way, the possibility of expressing an opinion publicly, as well as (supposedly directly) with

authorities and groups of political or economic power, places opinion as a form of generating action and, therefore, a change. The virtual environment turns into a scenario in which the opinions are increasingly similar in tone and discursive resources, turning incidence into a banner of struggle once it became possible to express an opinion in the sphere of public opinion on Twitter.

Is it possible to apply the principle of precaution to the current societies, whose common trait is the action based on “not knowing” or “not being certain”? The question is rooted in the assertion made by Daniel Innerarity (2009, p. 47), who points out that “the paradox is thus being produced that knowledge society has done away with knowledge authority.” Perhaps the answer to this question could, in fact, refer to the idea that not knowing is not only a random condition, but also an example of managing ignorance as a means of survival.

This situation is aggravated by a special type of legitimized discourse and, furthermore, armored with an apparent statistical *scientificity* on habits and practices in the use of social media. However, in reality, it is based on

the logic of metrics that encourage the consumption of content management manuals in accordance to technical recommendations. The most interesting thing is that all kinds of tools have been configured based on mathematical operations and formulas that seek to account for human behavior in the virtual setting, and as Innerarity (2009) points out, uncertainty grows because this knowledge and the resulting contradictions increase the levels of distrust in the abundance of information that populates the web.

3. Democracy's Fiction

In general, democracy 2.0 or e-democracy, has been characterized by the use of technologies and their platforms in processes of citizen empowerment, aiming at controlling and surveying government or authorities' actions at all levels, in relation to transparency, public opinion, and decision-making issues. Around these considerations, precepts have been defined that have led governments to promote processes of institutional strengthening from the technological field, thus allowing citizens to explore several opportunities for intervention in the construction of the

public sphere through electronic media. In this context, we live in a time when much of what is said about ICTs has its share of fiction and tactical simulacrum.

Truth and fiction are not mutually exclusive, nor do they act in opposition. Both coexist in propositions in which fiction does not compete with the truth, does not distort it nor does it vindicate the false; rather, fiction represents a reality based on external events, anecdotes, the empirical and the imaginary. Fiction has occupied a privileged place in literature, but also in the approach to certain social phenomena, as part of different philosophical and sociological theories. Fiction has occupied a privileged place in literature, but also in the approach to certain social phenomena, as part of different philosophical and sociological theories. Within this framework, fiction presents us with the possibility of including participation, discussion and democracy through the ways they are represented to a group of people interested in giving their opinions on national political events.

If, until the early 1970s, a certain notion of fiction predominated, for Jean Baudrillard

(1978, p. 5), the main result is the simulacrum, which “does not correspond to a territory, a reference, or a substance, but is the generation by models of something real without origin or reality, i.e., the hyperreal.” This is where fiction finds its explanation and its limits and gives way to a dimension in which reality is constructed through constant channels of unreality. The imaginary, whether true, false or neither, gives way to the fiction of reality, articulated through simulacra that build worlds, hierarchies, and artifices.

Thus, fiction is built upon certain strategies for shaping reality and filters into everyday life to collectivize statements, such as those related to social media and their role in the democratization of speech; their participation in overall political processes, and their role in discussions, as generators of public opinion. The simulacrum is an exercise in recreating fictional situations that find their rationale in a broader and more complex order: in this case, politics. Baudrillard points out that for the political class, it is not unusual to assume that “the domination of a simulated space is at the basis of power,”

and that “politics is not a function, a territory or a real space, but a model of simulation whose manifest acts are nothing more than the effect accomplished.” (1979, p. 29).

In this context, fiction is related to what Guy Debord called “the integrated spectacle,” which combines the diffuse nature of modern capitalism and the concentrated nature of bureaucratic capitalism. This is because it is equipped with a whole machinery of consumable commodities (material and immaterial), through “unified practices... that have achieved, in our time, the economic transformation of the world, and, at the same time, the radical transformation of perception” (2007, p. 21).

The testimonies from the base study, from which this section is derived, recover the sense of the collective, which is viewed through the social pressure that can be exerted via Twitter, which is then interpreted as collective participation. This may not be stemmed from a focus on democracy on Twitter, but rather of democracy as a problem, given its instrumentalization and the growing heterogeneity of its understanding, its definitions, and

practices that are labeled as democratic. In general, the debate has been more focused on the media and institutions, which are seen as responsible for strengthening democratic processes, rather than on the principles that govern democracy, especially those related to decisions made for the collective well-being.

The model systems around representation are closely related to this discussion because what filters into social groups about freedom, equality, and justice extends to the point where subjective experience accommodates these concepts, linking them, creating new ones, qualifying and articulating them with other precepts. In this sense, we understand the statement that “it has never been seen more clearly that it is a question of sectioning the Real to open up the Imaginary” (Baudrillard, 1978, p. 28). In this case, to section off the notion of democracy to adapt it to an imaginary of democracy 2.0 or 3.0, influenced by the “benefits” of a web platform.

Now, listening, as such, responds to certain elements that are usually neglected or omitted. Aldo Ameigeiras (2006), quoting Estermann, points out that

“*listening* is much more than *hearing*. *Listening* is an attitude, a way of being that engages the human being in its entirety [...] it has to do with willingness, the readiness to open up and let oneself be invaded by the voice of other” (1996, pp. 120-121). In this spirit, what happens on Twitter might not necessarily be a listening exercise, but rather a strategic shielding (a simulation of listening) to protect the popularity of the ruling class.

The new popularity indicators are those that often define certain shifts in the political decisions of governments. Hence, the simulation of listening, through different fictional acts, can foster the idea that what citizens say is recorded to build policies for collective well-being. However, as Debord (2007, p. 29) states, “the spectacle is not identified with simple looking, not even when combined with listening. It is that which escapes the activity of men, the reconsideration and correction of their works. It is the opposite of dialogue.”

Twitter, like Disneyland, operates as “an immense stage and perpetual travelling; it needs the old imaginary resource made of child-like signs and truncated

illusions” (Baudrillard, 1978, p. 27). From this perspective, the uniqueness of certain experiences to mobilize public opinion within this medium, and, with it, putting pressure on the decision-making system, has been recognized. However, it is evident that there is a certain advocacy for the platform, beyond its real scope and outside the tactical threads that are woven in the midst of political maneuvers.

Finally, testimonies refer to democracy as a space for deliberation, opinion, and debate on issues of public interest. This might be the product of a traditional approach to deliberative democracy in its remastered version within the virtual field. As is known, deliberative democracy alludes to the possibility of a harmonious coexistence of points of view (considering different social, ideological, and even moral codes) regarding what is appropriate for societies.

With Jürgen Habermas as a main representative of deliberative politics, a way of understanding the process by which policies, laws, and institutions are legitimized as part of a democratic system has been instituted, provided that these processes are rooted

in communicative and argumentative acts (i.e., with ample analyses and discussions) to achieve collective agreements and consensus. Notwithstanding, Mauro Cerbino (2018), who retrieves Nancy Fraser’s (1997, p. 139) criticisms to Habermas, remarks that the critique “claims the fact of not having contemplated, together with the bourgeois public sphere, other discursive arenas in which socially subordinated groups configure and enable the elaboration of discourses contrary to the dominant ones.”

Considering deliberation as an argumentative, informed, evaluative process of relevance for transcendental decision-making, we must ask ourselves to what extent citizens are sufficiently informed to debate, question, challenge, or affirm one proposition or another. The work of Daniel Innerarity, Antoni Brey, and Gonçal Mayos (2009), which addresses the societies of unawareness, ignorance, and lack of culture respectively, show the minimal or non-existent preparation of individuals to speak responsibly, especially in processes that imply nationally relevant decision-making. The authors discuss the developed

ability to manage and flow within ignorance as a competence written in fine print, characteristic of informational societies.

This issue is related not only to a lack of interest. Rather, the lack of interest originates in other issues associated with the bombardment of information across the media and the difficulty of processing such data, making it challenging for information to become knowledge. As suggested by Mayos, “the lack of preparation or willingness of citizens to take charge of all the complex intricacies of the public and political spheres is the cause of the current lack of political culture and democratic weakness” (2009, p. 54).

Is knowledge democratic, especially at a time when education and all kinds of training processes reserve the right to think about professionalization in increasingly technical and specialized fields? The trend towards specialization goes against general knowledge which, without being perfect, used to provide at least the possibility to have an ample analytical view on issues of collective interest. When we talk about specializations and expertise, we refer to the array of

mechanisms through which the political project of capital or cognitive capitalism operates.

It is hard to affirm that social media are the new agoras of discussion. Perhaps they are indeed spaces for opinions and expressions of all kinds, but not necessarily for debate and informed proposals. It seems rather that these statements are the product of the lightness with which the advertising discourses of the media companies are bought, as well as from the political class that builds a whole seductive setting around these spaces, and their potential as democratic highways. In societies of spectacle, economic practices on production systems define what is real, also configuring new cognitive frameworks that stabilize over time. In fact, Alan Badiou points out that “economy is entrusted with the knowledge of the real. She is in fact the one who knows” (2016, p. 12).

Therefore, fictional acts regarding more democratic processes on web platforms, especially Twitter, become so credible and easy to process because they come from specific experiential frameworks, with social exchanges and dialogues that are

not necessarily informed, while being influenced by types of interactions and responses, such as memes, emoticons, graphs, or phrases that do not necessarily contribute to debating or decision-making. The simulation of democracy is effective within these media as long as there is an exchange of opinions, delivering a message directly to a public figure, or even when messages that are carefully inoculated by economic or political power groups must be filtered.

Simulating democracy follows a political and economic reason that connects with the fact that “the ultra-specialized and ICT-dependent knowledge society, threatens its citizens with obsolescence in all fields in which they are not professional experts” (Mayos, 2009, p. 57). Thus, the sense of commonality is at risk because we are no longer capable of thinking beyond the individual interests, which all too often disguise themselves as collective. If the idea is to influence through the attention and acceptance of the decisions of civil society, those decisions would not have been taken within the framework of broad and plural reflection processes.

As Jose Van Dijck (2016) tells us, in 2009, even Facebook tried to leverage the sense of democracy by inviting users to influence policies of rights and responsibilities through their opinions and votes. However, the restrictive terms of this participation determined the levels, timeframes, and forms in which people were allowed to intervene. This demonstrates that the simulation generates its own scenarios, always propitious and nourished by its contradictions. Democracy becomes a discursive instrument to publicly sustain actions and decisions based on popular consultations that serve as a pretext and, therefore, fail to be either popular or representative.

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Popular consultations and referenda in Ecuador (1978-2006)

Alejandro Molina¹

1. Introduction

POPULAR CONSULTATIONS AND referenda are considered mechanisms of direct democracy, aimed at enhancing citizen participation in representative democracies (Altman, 2019). This improvement aims to increase citizens' confidence in democratic political systems and in the quality of political representation (Zovatto, 2007). Among the most important mechanisms of direct modern democracy, popular consultations and referenda are the most used, especially by presidents (Altman, 2010).

First, we will provide an overview of the regulatory framework that is applied to the mechanisms of direct democracy in Ecuador. Subsequently, the methodological details of this research, the question that we intend to solve, and the hypothesis raised will be exposed. Further on, a brief context of each of the governments, popular consultations and plebiscites; the political and electoral participation registered in such electoral events; the reasons by which the consultations and referenda were called; and the general percentages of approval (or disapproval) of the voted questions, as well as the percentage of approval of the presidential performance at the moment of each event of direct democracy, will be provided.

Thereupon, we will measure and correlate both the percentage of approval and the presidential performance with the percentage of approval in the voting to the questions of the different events of

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direct democracy in Ecuador since the return to democracy in 1978. This is aimed at evaluating what is mentioned in the literature on the relation between presidential popularity and the approval or disapproval of referenda and popular consultations convened by the Executive power. Finally, results will be presented, conclusions will be discussed and released with respect to the research question and the hypothesis.

2. Research question, hypothesis and methodology

First, it is important to note that the popular consultations, referenda, and plebiscites held in Ecuador between 1986 and 2006 will be investigated. We will also mention the referenda of 1868 and 1978 but only for context, since, for the analysis proposed for this research, they shall not be covered in depth, both lacking a fundamental variable: the approval of the presidential performance. The former, because it was a nineteenth century referendum (the first that took place in the republican era), and the latter, because it was an initiative of the military government and the

mechanism that set the stage for the return to democracy.

Subsequently, referenda, popular consultations or plebiscites were carried out in 1986, 1994, 1995, 1997 and 2006. It is important to emphasize that only those mechanisms of direct democracy that have been convened by the president will be investigated, leaving out those activated by the citizenry, as is the case of the various referenda between 2000 and 2001 on decentralization issues in various provinces of the country (Ojeda, 2000; Supreme Electoral Tribunal, 2001; Burbano, 2003; Noboa, 2004; Bastidas, Burbano and Ortiz, 2017).

Methodologically, this will be a quantitative-descriptive investigation, correlating and assessing the link between presidential approval ratings, the outcomes of referenda, consultations, and plebiscites, and electoral participation. The correlation between the approval of presidential performance and the election outcome of direct democracy mechanisms has been established in the literature (Welp and Serdült, 2009; Altman, 2010; Lissidini, 2015; Ruth, Welp and

Whitehead, 2017; Linares and Welp, 2019; Welp, 2020).

Nor the causes or the how of those results will be discussed in detail. The pertinence of the literature will be the only topic covered; thus, it will be a descriptive investigation. Moreover, an additional piece of information is added to be investigated: the correlation between the approval of the presidential performance and the political-electoral participation of citizens in electoral processes related to direct democracy.

Approval ratings for presidential performance are taken from the website of the Executive Approval project of Georgetown University.² On this page, the historical results of several public opinion measurement companies in Latin America, including the main ones in Ecuador, can be found. The measurement of the approval of the presidential performance, which includes the cities of Quito and Guayaquil, in addition to the historical series of this variable between 1978 and 2018, is regarded. The average of both sites was calculated, being the largest cities in the country

and for which information on this issue is available. The previous measurement date closest to the consultations, plebiscites, and referenda was used.

On the other hand, the average of the percentage of approval of the questions carried out in referenda, plebiscites and consultations was calculated to compare the three variables to be correlated: approval of presidential performance (AGP), approval of questions (AP) and the political-electoral participation of citizens (PPEC). AGP is the result of the surveys applied by Cedatos with the already mentioned characteristics. AP is the average of the percentage of approving votes (YES) obtained by each electoral event (in each case, the option sponsored by the presidents was always YES). Finally, the political-electoral participation of citizens is the percentage of electoral participation of citizens who attend to exercise their right to vote in popular consultations, referenda and plebiscites.

The proposed hypothesis is that the higher the approval of the presidential performance, the higher the percentage of positive approval of the questions posed in referenda, popular

2 See <http://www.executiveapprovaldata.org/>

consultations or plebiscites. This hypothesis is proposed in accordance with the literature. On the other hand, the research question, also according to the literature, is to what extent the approval of the presidential performance would be linked to the electoral percentage of approval obtained by the questions posed by presidents in Ecuador, between 1986 and 2006. In this realm, we hope to set the ground for the mechanisms of direct democracy in Ecuador.

3. Legal framework

Each country conceives in a particular way what is understood, specifically and precisely, by direct democracy (Pozo, 2020). The Ecuadorian electoral legislation defines these mechanisms as follows: based upon the Code of Democracy (article 195) and the Organic Law on Citizen Participation (articles 19-24), a popular consultation is a mechanism that enquires about a specific issue to citizens through an electoral process. Presidents, autonomous governments and citizens themselves have the power to convene it. In theory, the convening authority gathers information from citizens' opinions

on specific issues; however, the results of popular consultations are not binding.

Referenda, on the other hand, are mechanisms for consulting the electorate, which can be initiated by either the National Assembly or the President. These are also developed through an electoral process. The main difference with popular consultations lies in the fact that referenda are binding in nature, especially in the case where the opinion of the constituency on a constitutional reform or amendment related to an issue relevant to the nation is to be obtained. Referenda are defined and regulated in Articles 441 and 444 of the Ecuadorian Constitution.

4. Referenda, plebiscites and popular consultations in Ecuador (1868-2002)

Ecuador is a country that has convened referenda or popular consultations, especially since the end of the twentieth century. The first referendum took place in 1868 by President Gabriel García Moreno, with the objective of approving a total change of the Constitution. This referendum was approved with about 13,600 votes in favor

and 540 against (Ayala, 2016; 2017). The subsequent referendum in Ecuadorian republican history took place in 1978, more than a century later, as a result of a strong crisis of legitimacy that led to the third return of democracy in Ecuador. Before 1978, the country was ruled by the Superior Government Council, formed by the commander of each branch of the Armed Forces (Mills, 1991). This Council planned a referendum to approve or reject two constitutional drafts that would transition the political system towards a democracy, along with the drafting of a law on elections and political parties (Argones, 1985 and Freidenberg, 2016).

Two constitutions were drafted, which were voted on January 15, 1978 (Hurtado, 1999). At the moment of that electoral event, the electoral roll registered 2,088,874 people and 812,076 voted, which indicates that the electoral turnout was 8.73%. Of these figures, 32.15% (582,556 people) voted for the constitutional Project that only partially reformed the old Constitution; while 44.57% (807,754 people) voted for the Constitution to be reformed in its entirety. 23.29% of null votes (about 422,000)

and 1.6% of blank votes (about 29,000) were cast (Mills, 1991 and Freidenberg, 2016).

The third referendum that took place in Ecuador (the first one under a democratic political system) was carried out under León Febres Cordero's presidency on June 1, 1986. Based upon the literature, Febres Cordero's Government was undergoing a severe political crisis caused by several factors, so he tried to use the referendum as a political tool to reduce the impact of the crisis and revert an adverse scenario (Álava, 1986; Pachano, 1996 and Montúfar, 2000).

In principle, Febres Cordero tried to convene a referendum to achieve a constitutional reform with five questions. However, in the end, he could only call a plebiscite with a single question: "Compatriot, do you wish independent citizens to have full rights to be elected without the need to be affiliated to any political party, thus confirming the equality of all Ecuadorians before the law? Yes or No." With an electoral registry of 4,255,346 people, 3,130,361 (73.56%) participated. After this first presidential stroke under a direct democracy mechanism, 1,779,697

valid votes were cast for the NO option (56.85%), while the YES option only received 781,409 votes (24.96%). 211,206 null votes (6.74%) and 358,049 blank votes (11.43%) were cast. By August 15, 1985, the acceptance of Febres Cordero's government performance remained at 30%, on August 15, 1986, at 25% and on August 15, 1987, at 29%.

The fourth and fifth referenda, the second and third of the democratic stage, were carried out during the Government of Sixto Durán Ballén. The first was held on August 28, 1994, and it contained seven questions on political and economic-political issues. This referendum was aimed at implementing measures that intended to vary the national economic system, which would have a greater tendency towards free market than towards a welfare state.

With an electoral registry of 6,175,991 people, voter turnout was 64.38%, that is, 3,975,588 voters participated. Of the seven questions, there was one in which the president was defeated: "Should legislators manage funds from the State Budget?" This question obtained a rejection of 83.40%. In the other

questions, although approved, the average percentage of approval was 53.72%. If question n.º 3 were disregarded, the average approval rating would rise to 59.91%. On the other hand, the presidential approval on August 27, 1994, one day before the elections, was 38.78% in Guayaquil and 28.28% in Quito. If the average between the two cities were calculated, the result would be 33.53% of presidential approval.

The fifth referendum took place only fifteen months after the first one, convened by the same government of Durán Ballén. After the mid-term elections, in which 50% of the deputies of the National Congress were renewed, the correlation of forces between the Executive and the Legislative became more unfavorable for the Government. In addition, the conflict between the president and the opposition parties in Congress worsened to the point that the Executive ended up blocked in the legislative body. Due to these issues, among others, the president called another referendum, with a truly short margin of time, compared to the first one (Mejía & Polga-Hecimovich, 2011).

The institutional design of the new direct democracy event combined eight popular consultation questions and three referendum questions, i.e., eight non-binding and three binding questions, aiming at reforming the Constitution. The consultation questions dealt with economic, political, electoral, and social security issues, as well as the time of compliance with the provisions of the consultation questions.

The consultation took place on November 26, 1995, with an electoral registry of 6,577,974 and a participation of 3,978,407 voters (60,48%). The eleven questions were long. Moreover, they contained lengthy annexes that hindered their comprehension (Durán Barba, 1998 and Durán-Ballén, 2017). Besides the political crisis, this factor prevented the constituency from capturing, in a better way, the spirit of the questions and the president was defeated in the eleven questions. None of them was approved. The average of approval in the consultation was 41.54%, nine points below 50%, which evidences the electoral calamity suffered by the government of Durán Ballén. As of November

19, 1995, the approval of the presidential performance was at 35.05% in Guayaquil and 12.24% in Quito. On average, it could be considered that approval was at 23.65%, almost 10% less than in 1994.

The sixth electoral event of direct democracy took place during the presidency of Fabián Alarcón, who came to power in the midst of a political crisis unleashed by the “unconventional” behavior of former president Abdalá Bucaram, who was dismissed by the National Congress in February 1997, without having yet completed a year in office. Alarcón, at the time president of Congress, was appointed President of the Republic by the plenum of the latter (Mejía and Polga-Hecimovich, 2011 Burbano and Torre, 2020). Due to the serious crisis caused by the dismissal, as well as by the “atypical” means of other political parties of the Ecuadorian political spectrum (except for the PRE, Bucaram’s party), Alarcón held a popular consultation on May 25, 1997 (Trujillo, 2019; Burbano and Torre, 2020).

It was an extensive consultation made up of fourteen questions, yet less complex than Durán Ballén’s previous one. The

questions were of a political nature and of profound reform of both the electoral system and the convening to a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution. With an electoral registry of 6,662, 003 voters and a 61.19% turnout, the consultation was approved in all its questions, with an average approval of 62.23%. On the other hand, the approval of the presidential performance, as of May 11, 1997, was 57.73% in Guayaquil and 77,32% in Quito, with an average of 67.53%.

The seventh and last event of popular consultation that will be discussed is the popular consultation convened by President Alfredo Palacio on November 26, 2006, together with the second round of the presidential election that was held on that same year. Moreover, Palacio also reached the first seat of the nation due to “atypical” acts within a democracy. While he was vice-president, Congress appointed him in place of the ousted president Lucio Gutiérrez. This origin highlights the source of the weakness that characterized Palacio’s government since its start. Gutiérrez’s dismissal was due to the political crisis unleashed by the attempt

to substitute Supreme Court justices with judges that were close to the presidential figure.

Due to the political weakness at the start of his government, Palacio tried to call a referendum to reform the Constitution, but he found himself with the same actor that hindered his ambition, i.e., Congress and the parties that were against his government due to the “economic unviability” of his proposals. In the end, he wasn’t able to pass a popular consultation that proposed exclusively social issues, such as the improvement of education and public health, on top of the increase in social spending through oil revenues.

For this popular consultation, the electoral registry was constituted by 9,021,773 voters, of which 6,813,421 (75,52%) participated. Being easily understandable, the proposed questions obtained a high margin of approval and the citizens perceived that they were widely favored. The average approval of the three questions asked was 65.78%. However, being a consultation, it was not immediately applicable or binding. In the second round of elections, Rafael Correa was elected president on

November 15, 2006. The presidential performance approval on November 5, 2006, i.e., 11 days before the consultation, was at 23.4%.

5. Discussion of results

Table one below displays the details of the results obtained in the observation of the five electoral events developed with direct democracy mechanisms.

Upon developing a Pearson correlation, which contributes to verifying how two variables behave with each other, either directly or inversely, only the behavior is observed, as opposed to causes and effects. The results of such correlations vary within a range between -1 and 1, in which 0 and -1 is inversely proportional and 0 and 1 is directly proportional.

While applying this correlation between the AGP and AP, a value of 0.37 is obtained, which responds to the research question posed. This shows that there is a low direct correlation, that is, the higher the approval of the presidential performance, the higher the positive approval vote for the questions raised in consultations, referenda, and plebiscites. This correlation aligns with what the literature proposes. However, for these electoral cases (1986-2005), the literature's claims are accurate only to a limited extent, and it would greatly contradict the proposed research hypothesis.

The case of the last consultation presented in this research is of outmost interest, i.e., the one carried out by President Alfredo Palacio in 2006. It can be observed that, even though

Table 1
Correlation variables: percentages of AGP, AP and PPEC.

Year of election event	1986	1994	1995	1997	2006
AGP (%)	29	33,53	23,65	67,53	23,4
AP (+) %	24,96	53,72	41,54	62,23	65,78
PPEC (%)	73,56	64,38	60,48	61,19	75,52

Note: Prepared by the author based on data from the CNE and the Executive Approval Data project.

the correlation of both variables has an occurrence of close to a third, in the case of the 2006 consultation, the approval of the presidential performance is the lowest, and the average percentage of voter approval of the questions is the highest of all the events studied. This is a case that fully contradicts the literature. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the questions posed in the consultation were trivially acceptable for the population and were not complex or highly controversial within Ecuadorian society.

The second correlation between AP and PPEC was found to be inverse and even lower than the previous one (-0,11). This would mean that, the lower the percentage of votes for positive answers to the questions posed by the Executive, the lower the percentage of citizen participation at the elections. However, it is an extremely low correlation, which would indicate that both variables have almost no relationship with each other.

Finally, the third correlation is between AGP and PPEC, which resulted in -0,48. As can be verified, it is the highest correlation of all those calculated

and with an inverse result. This implies that, the less approval of the presidential performance, the higher the voter participation. This correlation is average, but its result is surprising, as it is greater than the correlation expressed by the literature. A plausible explanation thereof is that the citizenry, feeling disappointed by the performance of the ruler that convenes the referendum, popular consultation or plebiscite, has the possibility of punishing such ruler with their vote and, therefore, turnout would increase. This may also indicate electoral accountability, a fundamental factor of modern democracies. This result is consistent with the meager correlation above, since with this third correlation, it is observed that voter turnout does increase if one votes against the presidential questions and not at the time when one votes in favor of the questions.

6. Conclusions

After having developed three correlations that are related to popular consultations, referenda, and plebiscites in Ecuador between 1986 and 2006, it was possible to achieve a series of results that suggest more-in-depth- research

on these issues of direct democracy in Ecuador. Three variables were proposed to observe the correlations between them and thus move forward with this research.

First, the correlation raised by the literature on direct democracy electoral events in Latin America was posed. The first two variables, the voter approval of the questions raised in the electoral events of direct democracy, as well as the approval of the presidential performance, resulted in a low direct correlation of 0.37; that is, the higher the approval of the president's performance, the greater the positive vote. Based on this approach, the literature takes on the right path, but only on a small scale.

The second correlation examined was between the positive approval of the questions posed by the president and citizen

participation in each one of the exposed events. Despite having been inverse, this correlation is virtually non-existent since its result was -0.11. In other words, there is no relation between positive voter approval of the questions and citizen electoral participation.

Finally, the third correlation developed was between the approval of the presidential performance and citizen electoral participation. This was the most surprising result, although consistent with the second correlation. The correlation provided an inverse result, at -0.48, which indicates that the greater citizen electoral participation, the lower the vote for the approval of the questions posed by the Executive. This could be the reflection of an exercise of citizenship in terms of vertical accountability, a fundamental element of contemporary democracies.

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Guardians of democratic order: The Armed Forces in Ecuador's Political stability (1996-2016)

Horacio Palomeque-Rodríguez¹

1. Introduction

THIS PAPER PRESENTS a descriptive analysis of the role played by the Armed Forces in Ecuador's democratic regime during the period from 1996 to 2016. Drawing on the conceptual framework of Robert Dahl (1989), Adam Przeworski (1998), Philippe Schmitter (1993), Guillermo O'Donnell (2007) and Joseph Schumpeter (1996), we begin by outlining our understanding of democratic regimes. This theoretical analysis will allow us to define, clearly and precisely, what we perceive as democracy, which will be fundamental to explain the role of the Armed Forces in Ecuador's democratic regime during the period in question.

Subsequently, the legal provisions defining the role of the Armed Forces are explained, referring to the Constitution of 2008 and the Organic Electoral Law, known as the Code of Democracy. In this section, we will examine how these regulatory frameworks establish the roles and responsibilities of the Armed Forces within a democratic context and how these institutions should operate according to democratic principles. The regulatory analysis will be contrasted with the previously defined conceptualizations of democracy, allowing for a critical assessment of the theoretical expectations regarding institutional reality. This differentiation is essential for identifying possible discrepancies between normative mandates and the actual practices

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observed in Ecuador's political-military sphere. Moreover, this contrast becomes essential to understanding how the Armed Forces have engaged with democratic institutions and influenced the quality of democracy in Ecuador.

This initiative is based on the hypothesis that the Armed Forces have acted as the “guardians of democracy”, a scenario in which the democratic regime is “guarded,” as explained by Robert Dahl: “A permanent alternative to democracy is for the government to be overseen by ‘tutors’, ‘custodians’ or ‘guardians’ of society” (quoted in Haro, 2017). This hypothesis is supported by several authors who observe in the actions of the Latin American Armed Forces, since the return to democracy, an apparent disinterest in political power beyond their regulatory functions (Candela-Cerrada & Daniel-Rea, 2021). The literature states that “the Armed Forces have shown themselves to be sympathetic to the achievement of ‘permanent national objectives’ through ambitious political projects, while trying not to get involved with factional politics or particularistic interests” (Arseneaux 1999,

Loveman 1994 cited in Kruijt & Koonings, 2002, p. 9).

In this sense, the aim is to contrast the chronological evolution of three variables that observe the quality of democracy, extracted from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, to examine how the indicators of democratic quality have been related to the functions emanating from the regulations (Political Constitution of Ecuador of 2008 and Code of Democracy) that regulated the functions of the Ecuadorian Armed Forces during the 1996-2026 period. The present empirical analysis shall identify trends and changes in the quality of democracy, offering a detailed vision of the evolution of the role of the Armed Forces in the Ecuadorian democratic context.

The relevance of this study lies in the deep understanding it provides of the interaction between the Ecuadorian Armed Forces and the democratic regime. By the combining theoretical analysis with an empirical assessment of democratic quality indicators, this paper aims to make a significant contribution to the field of Political Science while providing tools for researchers

and policymakers interested in the stability and consolidation of democracy in Latin America. In addition, this study seeks to lead the way to comparing the case of Ecuador with experiences from different countries, regions, and historical periods, thus opening new lines of research on the relationship between the Armed Forces and democracy. Thus, we hope to stimulate a broader academic debate on the role of military institutions in the promotion and protection of democracy. Overall, this line of inquiry is intended to identify the specific characteristics that enrich the understanding of the impact of the Armed Forces on different democratic regimes and offer lessons applicable to other contexts.

Upon the conclusion of the descriptive analysis, conclusions will be presented that clarify the role of the Armed Forces within the Ecuadorian democratic regime and how this role has presumably influenced the permanence and quality of democracy. These findings will provide a thorough understanding of the interrelation between military functions and democratic evolution in Ecuador.

2. Democratic Regime

To define what we understand as a democratic regime², it is necessary to delve into the concept of democracy. This exploration will be tangential, given that democracy is a topic with numerous angles of study, multiple definitions, and diverse approaches to analysis. While democracy is the political regime par excellence on a global scale, its nuances encompass a wide range of interpretations and manifestations.

In line with this, we will consider the concept of polyarchy, which defines a political order characterized by the presence of essential principles³ to clas-

2 A regime or system of government is a set of models that determines the methods of access to the main public offices; the characteristics of the actors admitted or excluded from such access; the strategies that the actors can use to achieve access; and the norms followed in making public commitment decisions. To operate adequately, the ensemble must be institutionalized, that is, the diverse models must be habitually known, practiced and accepted by most, if not all, actors (Schmitter & Terry Lyn, 1993).

3 a) Freedom of association, b) of speech, c) of voting, d) eligibility for public service, e) the right of political leaders to compete for support and to fight for votes f) diversity of sources of information, g) free and impartial elections, h) institutions that guarantee that the government policy depends on votes and further ways of expressing their preferences (Dahl, 1989, pp. 14-15).

sify a government as polyarchic. Polyarchies can be considered relatively democratic regimes; in other words, “polyarchies are substantially liberalized and popularized systems, that is, highly representative and open to public debate” (Dahl, 1989). A polyarchy is defined as an “ideal” political system in which all individuals can participate actively. In a polyarchic system, the government itself promotes and facilitates political participation.

Álvarez, Cheibub, Limongi, and Przeworski (1996) introduce the concept, considering that better economic performance contributes to the consolidation of institutions that foster polyarchic regimes. “We consider as democratic all those regimes based on elections in which the opposition has a certain possibility of winning and accessing power. We opt to call dictatorial any regime in which the existence of this possibility is doubtful.” (Álvarez *et al.*, 1996, p. 90) At this point, we should already have a notion of what we consider a democratic regime.

A democratic regime is a political system that exists “as long as its leaders are selected through transparent, honest,

and periodic elections, in which the candidates compete freely for votes and virtually all the adult population can vote” (Dahl, 1989). In addition, as explicitly stated by Schumpeter⁴ and implicitly by Przeworski⁵, democracy “also implies the existence of civil and political freedoms of speech, press, assembly and association, essential for political debate and for conducting electoral campaigns” (O’Donell, 2007, p. 28). Schmitter differentiates democratic regimes from authoritarian regimes in the following way:

Democracies have the capacity to modify their rules and institutions consensually, in response to changing circumstances. They may not immediately produce all the aforementioned benefits, but they have a greater opportunity to do so eventually when compared to autocracies (Schmitter & Terry Lyn, 1993).

4 The democratic method is that institutional system of gestation of political decisions that realizes the common good, allowing the people to decide for themselves on the issues in dispute through the election of the individuals who congregate to carry out their will (Schumpeter, 1996).

5 “Democracy is a system in which there are parties, interests, values and opinions; there is competition that is organized through rules, and periodic winners and losers” (Przeworski, 1998).

In this sense, we can affirm that Ecuador is undergoing a democratic regime. However, some authors would argue otherwise, considering the overthrows of presidents and the constitutional changes that have occurred, all in the “name of democracy”. As Pachano (2012, p. 39) states:

the overthrow of three presidents in Ecuador [...] could be sufficient elements to deny any possibility of recognizing [it as a democracy]. However, two considerations lead to a more nuanced interpretation of these events and force us to look more closely at the characteristics of this regime [...] first, that the overthrow of constitutionally and democratically elected presidents in the current constitutional order did not entail a change of regime or alter constitutional validity, and second, that most of these conflicts were resolved within the existing constitutional framework and always in the name of democracy. Most of them adhere, to varying degrees, to the polyarchic guidebook. In all of them, there are formal guarantees to (a) establish preferences, (b) express those preferences, and (c) receive equal treatment in their consideration.

Once it has been established that Ecuador operates under a democratic regime, we will analyze the role of the Armed Forces according to the current regulatory framework. We start with the Political Constitution of Ecuador, which defines and limits the role of the Armed Forces within the Ecuadorian democratic regime. On this issue, we can find relevant data such as the following:

- i. The following may not be candidates for popular elections: members of the Armed Forces and the National Police in active service (art. 13, paragraph 8).
- ii. The powers and duties of the President of the Republic, in addition to those determined by law, are the following: to exercise the highest authority over the Armed Forces and the National Police, and to appoint the members of the military and police high command (art. 147, paragraph 16).
- iii. Members of the Armed Forces and the National Police in active service may not serve as Ministers of State (art. 157, paragraph 3).
- iv. The Armed Forces and the National Police shall be obedient and non-deliberative

and shall carry out their mission in strict compliance with civil authority and the Constitution. (art. 159)

- v. Voting shall be optional for /.../members of the Armed Forces and National Police.

These points clearly show that the Armed Forces constitute a special population group within the Ecuadorian democratic regime. For instance, suffrage is optional for them, though they fully enjoy their rights; their freedom of speech is subject to the obedience that they owe to their highest authority, i.e., the President of the Republic, who, on the other hand, is in charge of designating the members of the high command. They are directed by the Minister of Defense and the operational control is in charge of the Joint Command of the Armed Forces; finally, they may not serve in public posts as Ministers of State or popular election posts while in active service.

In that sense, we find that the Armed Forces face restrictions not imposed on the rest of the population. This does not mean that they are out of the democratic regime; on the contrary, according to Article 158 of the

Constitution, they are called upon to preserve democracy and defend territorial sovereignty and integrity. Moreover, they stand as the strong arm of the State, appointed to keep public order, and enforce political power through the use of force, reaffirming their role as the sole possessor of the Weberian *monopoly of the legitimate violence of the State*.

The Armed Forces and the National Police are institutions for the protection of the rights, freedoms, and guarantees of citizens. The fundamental mission of the Armed Forces is the defense of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Internal protection and the preservation of public order are exclusive functions of the State and the responsibility of the National Police. Members of the Armed Forces and the National Police will be trained under the principles of democracy and human rights, and they shall respect the dignity and rights of individuals without any form of discrimination and with strict adherence to the legal system (Constitución de la República del Ecuador [Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador], 2008).

Though limited in certain situations of active participation

in government affairs, the Armed Forces are not excluded from involvement in the democratic regime. On the contrary, they play a particularly important role. On the one hand, they participate in the defense of national and international sovereignty and, specifically in the case of Ecuador, they have proclaimed themselves as the guardians of political power (Candela-Cerrada & Daniel-Rea, 2021). In situations of democratic disruption, they have maintained public order until new elections defined the new holders of power, thus reinstating democratic order (Haro, 2017). On the other hand, they are the entity that oversees the compliance of institutions that form the foundation of polyarchy.

The Organic Electoral Law of Ecuador, or Code of Democracy (2009), establishes that the Armed Forces will cooperate with the electoral body to “guarantee security and order during electoral processes, ensuring that duly registered observers are provided with all the necessary facilities to carry out their task” (art. 179).

At this point, we can assert two important issues: 1) in Ecuador, several presidents have

been overthrown⁶; however, it can still be fully regarded as a democratic, polyarchic, and non-authoritarian regime; and 2) Within the Ecuadorian democratic regime, the Armed Forces primarily fulfill functions of defending national and international sovereignty, protection of rights and freedoms, as well as acting as guarantors of the democratic regime, safeguarding the constitutional order, and ensuring free and fair elections.

Table 1

Quality indicators of democracy related to the functions of the Armed Forces

Quality indicators of democracy	Functions of the Armed Forces
Access to justice	Protection of rights
Freedom House Rule of Law	Protection of rights and freedoms
Free and fair elections	Guarantors of the democratic regime, free and fair elections

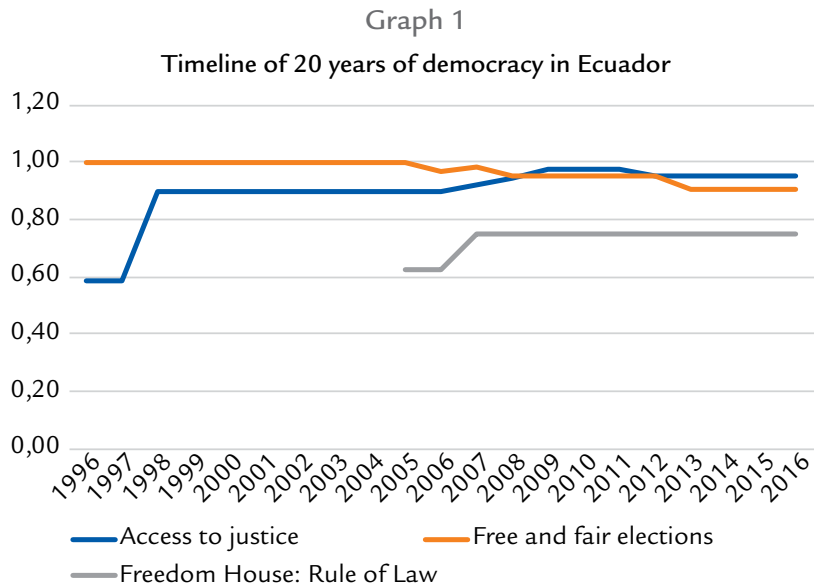
Source: Varieties of Democracy.

Table 1 shows the indicators observed to demonstrate the quality of democracy during these

⁶ It can be studied in greater depth in Pachano, *La calidad de la democracia en los países andinos* (2012) [*The quality of democracy in the Andean countries* (2012)].

two decades. It is important to point out that, even though the Armed Forces do not have a direct influence on laws and decisions related to democratic governance, their participation is essential for ensuring a transparent process and enabling the transition of power, so that the losers recognize the winners, thus preserving the democratic order. Although it may seem tangential, the participation of the Armed Forces is crucial to guarantee trust and, in turn, political representation.

Graph 1 shows how, over twenty years, the indicators of the Democracy Quality Index related to the functions of the Armed Forces and the preservation of democratic order have varied. During the first ten years, with the exception of access to justice, there was little variation, as evidenced by an almost straight line from 1996 to 2006. However, in the period from 2006 to 2016, the indicators show significant changes, as presented below:



Source: Varieties of Democracy.

The main variations can be observed in the *access to justice* indicator, which experienced a sharp increase from 1997 to 1999. Afterward, it tended to stagnate, suggesting that a limit may have been reached in the country's ability to fully guarantee access to justice. Another variation in the indicators has remained stagnant since 1996; in 2007, it decreased marginally, then stagnated again but at lower levels than those of the first decade studied. The *rule of law* indicator, on the other hand, increased slightly between 2005 and 2007, subsequently also tending to stagnate.

Although the functions of the Armed Forces do not establish a direct causal relationship with the variations observed in the indicators of *access to justice* and the *rule of law*, their performance over the past two decades may have contributed to the relatively stable behavior of these indicators, which in turn has supported the continuity of the Ecuadorian democratic regime. The *access to justice* indicator experienced a sudden increase between 1997 and 1999, followed by stagnation, which could suggest a limit has been reached in the state's ability to ensure universal access to justice. In

contrast, the *rule of law* indicator has remained relatively stagnant since 1996, with a slight decrease in 2007 and a subsequent upturn, although it has not reached the levels observed in the first decade studied.

In this context, the duties of the Armed Forces as guarantors of internal order and national security may have played a key role in the relative stability of the indicators. By keeping a peaceful and stable social environment, the Armed Forces have contributed to creating a favorable environment for the development of democratic institutions and the strengthening of the Rule of Law. It is important to highlight that this relationship is not causal, i.e., it cannot be asserted that the Armed Forces are the sole or the main cause of the stability of the indicators. However, their actions during the studied period have undoubtedly been a factor that has contributed to maintaining order and ensuring the correct performance of democratic institutions.

Even though the Armed Forces are not political actors in a polyarchy, their role and functions are somewhat related to the principles of this system of government. Below is a summary of how these

principles are interrelated with the functions of the Armed Forces:

1. Free and fair elections: In a democratic context, the Armed Forces must guarantee the security and neutrality of the electoral process, avoiding any type of interference or pressure on voters or electoral authorities. Their function of maintaining public order and national security must be exercised with impartiality and respect for civil and political rights, without interfering with the free expression of the popular will.
2. Universal suffrage: The Armed Forces are not directly involved with the right to vote, which is a fundamental right of all citizens. However, their role in protecting public security and the Rule of Law is crucial to ensure that all citizens can exercise their right to vote in a free environment, free from coercion or intimidation.
3. Right to run for public office: The Armed Forces are not involved in the selection of candidates or in the electoral process. Their role is limited to ensuring the protection of candidates and electoral institutions, avoiding any type of interference that could affect political competition.
4. Freedom of Speech: The Armed Forces do not have the right to censor or restrict citizens' freedom of speech. Their role is limited to protecting public order and national security, ensuring that freedom of expression is not used to incite violence or hatred.
5. Access to alternative sources of information: The Armed Forces are not involved in access to information. Their role is limited to protecting journalists and the media, preventing any form of intimidation or attack that could affect freedom of expression and access to information.
6. Freedom of association: The Armed Forces are not involved with the establishment or operation of civil organizations. Their role is limited to protecting public order and national security, ensuring that the activities of civil organizations are not used to incite violence or hatred.

3. Conclusions

As a first conclusion, it can be asserted that Ecuador is a democratic regime, as it possesses the institutions characteristics of a polyarchy, as defined by Robert Dahl. Ecuadorian

institutions—including free and fair elections, universal suffrage, the right to run for public office, freedom of speech, access to alternative sources of information, and freedom of association—are fundamental for classifying a country as a polyarchy and, thus, as a functional democracy. Therefore, it is concluded that, even though the Armed Forces are not political actors within a polyarchy, their role and functions are in fact closely related to the basic principles of this government system, contributing to their long-term preservation. Above all, their functions in guaranteeing public security, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms are essential for the effective operation of a democracy.

Ecuador has demonstrated a notable capacity of institutional and regulatory adaptation in response to diverse political crises. Throughout its recent history, it has faced presidential overthrows and other political disturbances that have challenged its democratic stability. However, instead of collapsing, the Ecuadorian political system has been able to transform and adjust its rules and institutions through consensual

processes, which is an indication of democratic resilience.

A key aspect of this process has been the role of the Armed Forces. Instead of acting as a destabilizing factor, they have assumed a role of guardians of constitutional democratic order. They have intervened during moments of crisis to preserve stability, avoiding prolonged political intervention and returning power to civilian authorities as soon as consensual conditions and democratic order have been reestablished. This behavior is fundamental to the preservation of a democratic regime since it guarantees continuity of civil governability and prevents the establishment of military authoritarian regimes. It is important to stress that, in a polyarchy, the Armed Forces must be subordinated to civilian power and controlled by the democratically elected government. Any attempt by the Armed Forces to interfere in the political process or usurp civilian power would be considered a serious threat to democracy.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that, although the Armed Forces have certain restrictions on suffrage, holding state minister positions, or running for public office, this does not hinder their

participation in the democratic regime. They act as guarantors of rights and freedoms and cooperate with the electoral body to ensure transparency and the celebration of free and fair elections. All their actions are aimed at the preservation and defense of the democratic regime.

By analyzing the indicators related to the functions assigned to the Armed Forces by the current constitution, it can be concluded that the stability observed in these indicators suggests that they have complied with their role in an effective manner. This compliance has been fundamental to preserve the democratic order in Ecuador from 1996 to 2016. Their intervention during moments of political crisis has been essential in preventing institutional collapse and ensuring the continuity of the civilian government. Their role as guardians of constitutional order, avoiding permanent political intervention and returning power to civilian authorities, has been a stabilizing factor. This has allowed the country to navigate through presidential overthrows and other political disruptions without deviating into an authoritarian regime or collapsing into anarchy.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that these results are not entirely conclusive or definitive. The democratic stability observed in Ecuador during this period may be influenced by various factors, including the performance of other state institutions, the behavior of other political actors, and the active participation of civil society. Therefore, while the role of the Armed Forces seems to have been significant, a more holistic view is needed to fully understand the dynamics at play.

This conclusion opens the door to future research that could delve deeper into the analysis of the role of the Armed Forces in democratic stability. Comparative studies with other countries in the region, detailed analyses of specific cases of military intervention, and an exhaustive evaluation of other contextual factors could provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding. In addition, investigations exploring public perception of the role and legitimacy of the Armed Forces could also be valuable for a better understanding of how these dynamics are interpreted and valued by Ecuadorian society.

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Globalization as a cause of the crisis of political representation

Giuseppe Cabrera¹

1. Introduction

WESTERN SOCIETY IS undergoing significant changes , among them, the rise of populist and nationalist parties, which have resulted in a major crisis of political representation. The objective of this study is to link globalization to the crisis of political representation in the West, as well as identify the key explanatory variables of this phenomenon and explore the consequences of this link .

This paper seeks to answer the following question: Is globalization the cause of the crisis of political representation in Western societies? To undertake this task, we have used a critical perspective to define globalization and provide some definitions of it. Subsequently, we will review another key concept: representation. While defining it, we will explain its importance to the notion of citizenship, trying to explain the crisis that it has faced over the past years. Finally, we will cover the variables that have been the cause and the consequence of the processes of globalization and representation. With that aim, we shall concentrate on the deterritorialization of the state, understood as the loss of state sovereignty, the economic and financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of nationalisms and populisms. As we shall see, all these variables are independent and cannot be separated, i.e., one cannot be understood without the other.

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This paper does not attempt to point out that globalization is the only cause of the crisis of political representation, but one that is added to those that the specialized literature has already pinpointed, namely, the crisis of the party system, populism, the rise of illiberal movements, among others, which have been, and shall be, studied by other authors.

2. Political representation and its subsequent crisis

We shall start by defining what we understand by political representation within this work. In this context, democracy, as we know it today (distinct from the Greeks), derives from the idea that representative governments have emerged from liberal revolutions at the time (Manin, 2015, pp. 11-16). Therein, the legislative organs take on special relevance to understand the current model of representation of our democracies. Maurizio Cotta states that “the parliamentary institutions of the contemporary era are an ‘invention’ of Western liberal democracies and have been received (and adapted) by other regimes, based on their model” (2007, p. 266). Thereon,

the idea of representation is linked to the concept of legislative power. Cotta (2007, p. 267) points out: “the most politically significant attribute of the definition of parliaments is, in fact, their representative character,” which is implemented as a political system through representative democracy, exerted by means of political parties. Thus, the crisis of political parties turns into a legislative crisis, and thereby, a process of political alienation from the entire democratic system. As stated by Sartori (1998, p. 2), “although representation and representativeness refer to different issues and are different concepts, the understanding of representative politics depends on both”. Therefore, the crisis of representation cannot be understood without embracing the crisis of the political party system.

For Fenichel “while the political representative may ignore or even disregard the opinion of the electorate, they must provide rational justifications for doing so” (1985, p. 247). However, the justifications become problematic if they are repeated, as “the modern representative acts within an elaborate network of pressures, demands and

obligations” (Fenichel, 1985, p. 244); in addition, he/she reacts to pressures from certain groups and ignores the demands of others, which generates a type of response. According to Chomsky (2008), at the moment when “in a democracy, popular organizations, trade unions, political parties and others, could formulate solutions and pressure political representatives to put them into practice, and there is no sign thereof”, the crisis of the system starts to manifest itself as a reaction to the lack of state and traditional political party response, generating the current crisis of representativity and generating fertile ground for antisystem movements. Sartori (1998, p. 6) argues: “the key is that the crisis of representation is the result, to a large extent, of primitivism and of our expectation that representation will give us what it cannot, or should not, give us.” In this sense, neither direct nor participatory democracy provide solutions to the crisis of representation, because the problem is caused by demanding from the system something that it should not provide us. The issue is not the disconnection between *inputs* and *outputs* but entering demands that cannot be met.

The crisis of representativity does not majorly affect the institutions of democracy, nor does it question their pertinence; however, it does affect political parties and their questioners, representing a really high risk. Political parties are fundamental pillars of democracy; the mere casting of votes does not constitute a democracy. The government direction must depend on the personality of the parties, their programs and the quality of their leaders. A balanced conjunction of parties with the general interests of the community, accompanied by the Constitution, shall build citizens’ trust in the democratic system, which the parties must defend (Bolaños, 1980, p. 131). However, it has been evidenced that traditional political parties do not carry out that defense; on the contrary, they generate rejection towards the party system, which is the focal point of the crisis of representativity.

The consensus achieved during the 1970 and 1980 decades with regard to the welfare state and the parties as positive entities would collapse when the model of German party-system was questioned, widely spread throughout Europe with

bipartisan congressional democracies, which were left behind. The crisis of the party systems in Europe has finally atomized the integration of the congressional organs in an intent to get rid of the hegemonic parties, forgetting that “political parties, through an ideological criticism of political action and civil unrest, have exerted an influence, often decisive, on the transformation of the legal institutions” (Hurtado, 1983, p. 238).

For this reason, the institutions themselves are accountable for providing the solution to the crisis of the representative system, such as the party system, and not the adoption of new models or forms of democracy, such as direct or participatory democracy. Thus, for Sartori “population growth makes proximity impossible, and representation can cope with these figures much better than direct mechanisms” (1998, p. 6). For him, the solution to the representative crisis lies within the representative system itself and not in the alternative decision-making processes, which go beyond the foundational delegation of representation. As an alternative, the vision of representation, according to Fenichel

(1985, p. 246), is that: “perhaps when we rate a governmental body or system as ‘representative’, we are conveying something broader and more general about the way in which it operates as an institutionalized agreement,” not only rating the quality of the political parties in the exercise of representation and the degree of representativity of congress derived from the electoral system in an isolated way, but providing integral solutions to address the issue of the representative crisis, which should not be substituted, but improved.

3. Globalization from a critical vision

In this section, we analyze globalization as a category that transcends the concept of interdependence of economies in global markets. Empirical evidence demonstrates that “periods of more intense globalization tend to coincide with periods of high capital profitability [...] These periods have been followed by periods of great political and economic instability”, (De Sousa, 2018, p. 26). According to this author, it is not mere coincidence but causality that political representation has

entered into a crisis: periods of globalization bring about political instability. We will put forward arguments to demonstrate that the mentioned instability, as displayed in the field of representation, is a factual event. Likewise, we shall prove its causal relationship with the process of analysis of globalization that De Sousa initiated in 1989 and ended in 2008, followed by a period of interregnum of reconfigurations through which we would transit nowadays.

Globalization is more than the economic theory that supports it; it is also externalized as a noble cultural process, because “the cosmopolitan construct of the global citizen is another attempt to privilege morality over politics” (Mouffe, 2011, p. 108). This morality, built upon by the West, defines what the citizen must be and the common values that expand unequivocally. Moreover, it is supported by the creation of supranational organizations that “by justifying the right of the international institutions to undermine sovereignty to defend the cosmopolitan law, deny the democratic rights of self-government to the citizens of various countries.”

(Mouffe, 2011, p. 108). The rules are not only imposed by supranational organisms under common frameworks, such as the European Union, but also by international organisms, such as The United Nations, in the face of which there is no higher appellate body. All nations depend on them, although in many cases they respond to the interests of the central nations, disregarding the peripheral states. These organisms of international imposition draft international treaties and agreements that, though international law demands that they be approved and ratified by each country, are often invoked in the name of democracy and freedom. These international regulations “involve the drafting of laws and their imposition, legitimized from an increasingly partial and exclusively western perspective” (Mouffe, 2011, p. 109), ignoring the cultural context of the diverse regions of the planet.

Considering a critical perspective of economic globalization (neoliberalism), it can be observed that with the advent of liquid modernity—or postmodernity for some— and globalization, capitalism also changed the state,

i.e., it went from a solid form to a light form of free mobility. This dynamic has enabled the proper scenario for the propagation of the speculative system of financial capitalism and the collapse of the stock market. (Bauman, 2017) With light capitalism, scenarios have changed: the more instability in the relation capital-work, the better the profit for their relation. Currently, capitals travel light; they just need a suitcase, a phone and a computer, and can operate from anywhere in the world. The domiciles of the companies are established in the first world, while their factories are located in the most unequal zones around the planet.

Currently, the wealth of nations is not measured by the quality of its labor force, but by the extent they can seduce global capitals and their cold mercenary interests (Bauman, 2017). The idea that the irrevocable quest for foreign investment is a non-negotiable policy of economic growth has been established. One of the frequent questions in electoral campaigns is the way a candidate shall generate direct foreign "investment."

There is a divorce between labor force and its sources of subsistence. While Ford believed that his policies of cost reduction would allow the workers to acquire one of his vehicles, in the new industrial order, the alienation of companies that delocalize and seek economies under crisis or emergent, where exploitation processes are enabled, such as in Asia, among which China has been an example of companies with North American capital and cheap labor, has been observed (Bauman, 2017, pp. 149-155). We are even at the point where there is a tendency to dispense with any labor force in capital relations, generating more income, and, therefore, having more plutocratic interference over government policy, allowing financial capitalism over Fordist capitalism and generating wealth on financial speculation and not on Marxist surplus value. (Laval and Dardot, 2013, pp. 200-206). This influence has grown to the point that "the power of financial institutions reflects the ever-increasing shift from a productive economy to a financial economy. This began with the liberalization of finance during the decade of the 60s, the fundamental cause

of the current scourges represented by the financial crisis” (Chomsky, 2008), a direct consequence of the change from capitalist economy of production to one of “imposition of financial speculation on the real productive base” (Cálix, 2016, p. 16).

It has been suggested that this transformation is more than a mere consequence; it could be a pre-conceived action to create a planned crisis. Even though the risks of the subprime credits were clearly perceived, the sphere of financial and real-estate speculation was inflated, anticipating that, upon its explosion, they would receive previous approval from the United States Congress and Senate to pass a law for the bailout of the banking system and the assistance from the United States Federal Reserve, with tax funds that would never be returned to the state reserves.

The bank holiday in Ecuador demonstrated the effects of financial speculation, standing as a laboratory of incubation that allowed the United States magnates to know that the procedure results in a triple gain for the bank system: gain on the credit granted, the one obtained through the

eviction to thousands of families along the United States, and, finally, through the bailout of the banks with public funds, which, on a promise of loans, were never paid. The processes of Ecuador (1999), Argentina (2001), USA and Spain(2008-2009) benefited financial capitalism worldwide, demonstrating that “financial liberalization leads to disaster [...] that liberalization is a serious blow against democracy” (Chomsky, 2008). So, even though the contexts of the crises were different in each nation, the convergence point lies in the speculation generated by financial capitalism. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the loss of value of the ruling gold and the labor force, in parallel with the deregulation of the bank system of previous years, facilitating the speculative bubbles, which eventually burst, whether by the lack of liquidity of deposits, as in the case of Ecuador, or by the inability to pay during the real-estate crisis in the United States.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, “the new conservatism has succeeded in presenting its program of dismantling the welfare state as a defense of individual liberty against the oppressive

state” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2015, p. 220). After the crisis of 2008, upon the issuance of the austerity policy, the Troika imposed social cut-off programs, especially upon those southern European nations that were more severely blown by the crisis, such as Spain, Portugal and Greece. The European social democracy could not cope with the crisis. This caused gaps for the left-wing populisms to enable the *sorpasso*,² with episodes such as *Syriza* in Greece, *La France Insoumise* or the intent of *Podemos* in Spain.

However, notwithstanding the risks in the way of globalization that we are going through and to which we have stated our objection, Chantal Mouffe believes that “the mistake is to believe that neoliberal globalization could be better resisted on a national scale. It is only at the European level that one can begin to conceive of a possible alternative to neoliberalism” (2011, p. 136). This, considering the nationalism of the right and left-wing, which is more radical within the process of the European Union. In this

context, Mouffe (2011, p. 125) on Massimo Cacciari, points out that the latter “suggests a model of globalization built around a certain number of large spaces and genuine cultural poles, and insists that the new world order must be multipolar.” This multicultural globalization could become the space of resistance in the war on positions; as per a term by Gramsci, to confront the current neoliberal globalization.

4. The rise of nationalism and populism in Europe

The collapse of the welfare state, the economic crisis, the subsequent application of austerity and corruption have transformed political alienation into a crisis of representation. Moreover, the increase in the number of immigrants along the borders of the EU, accompanied by thousands of refugees seeking asylum in a context of economic turmoil, deprivation and unemployment, has reinforced alienation, leading to the emergence of extreme nationalist and populist political parties. It can thus be concluded that, the inability of the states to solve both global and national challenges has allowed the rise of these new political actors,

² Italian term which means “advancement,” used during the general 2016 elections in Spain to describe the possible scenario of *Podemos*, surpassing the results of the traditional PSOE.

who have capitalized on voter dissatisfaction.

“As a result of European political management, a large sector of citizens consider governments as incapable of satisfying their needs, focusing on satisfying the interests of the economic elites” (Martí, 2018, pp.148-149). Moreover, the lack of sovereignty has repercussions on the discredit of the European Union, leading to the emergence of Eurosceptic parties. It should be said that, although populism is perceived, in general terms, in a pejorative way, it is not always the case. This is the perception of Mudde and Rovira (2019), who argue that in authoritarian contexts, populism can expand democratic causes. Chantal Mouffe (2011) defines left-wing populism as an alternative to the growing European far-right, while Ernesto Laclau (2005) assimilates it as an indivisible part of politics itself. In addition, the populist phenomenon must be understood not as an ideology, but as a way of doing politics that, in Laclau’s terms, is capable of adopting the ideological elements of both the left and the right.

As per Martí, the new actors, can be classified in the following way:

- **Parties of the alternative left**

These are parties that break with the traditional European left and take the Latin American progressive model as an example. They seek change of government through an inclusive, interclasses and participatory discourse, with a deep populist, anti-system and illiberal base.

- **Nationalist right**

In response to both economic and social crises in recent years, the European far right has adopted a narrative based on national identity versus foreign identity, thus creating a dichotomy of “us” versus “them”. Its objective is to increase the number of followers. Not only do they use this dichotomy, but they also play with the “up” and “down” axis to blame Europe for the loss of state sovereignty.

Populism is built upon antagonistic relations between two groups that are relatively homogeneous in their internal structure, thus dividing society into “the people” and the “elite”. This

imaginary setting establishes an antagonistic relation between the groups due to opposed interests, which emphasizes the conception of popular or national sovereignty, depending on the response generated by populist politicians of the right or left (Pérez and Llaneras, in *El País*, 2016). Thus, “the exaltation of this ambiguous ‘people’ can adopt a variety of forms” (Laclau, 2005, p. 20); from the popular translation given by *Podemos* in Spain, or *Syriza* in Greece, to the ethnic context given by Geert Wilders in the Netherlands or Marine Le Pen in France, providing us a “populism lacking doctrinal coherence and with different nuances and parties, movements” (Maugé, 1980, p. 272).

Nationalism shows populist traits, but the reason for differentiating between what could be called a right or left-wing populism lies in the evocation of popular sovereignty by the left, while in the case of nationalist right the ethnical or cultural element is used to evoke a national sovereignty. However, there are multiple similarities, “what Trump and *Podemos* have in common is their claim with respect to the elites having failed the people

and having usurped democracy. As a result, they claim that the people must ‘recover their country’ voting for them” (Pérez and Llaneras, *El País*, 2016), as they are the only ones anointed to enable the radical transformation of Society or going back to the greatness of the past.

In sum, the crisis of representation has resulted in the creation of new political parties and movements. The dissatisfaction derived from the falls of the welfare state, the loss of sovereignty, the economic crisis and the European austerity policies created the conditions for a crisis of representation and, thus, new forms of representation whose long-term consequences remain to be seen.

5. Conclusion

Globalization, conceived as a series of cyclical processes, produces interregnums of reconfiguration of forces that cause political instability, reflected in the representative system. Neoliberal globalization has provoked the dismantling of the welfare state, the collapse of financial capitalism and the crisis of representation. These circumstances justify the inexorable relation between

globalization and the crisis of the representative system.

The neoliberal globalization system has extended its influence on the cultural sphere, legitimizing processes of imposition by international organizations, to the detriment of national and popular sovereignty. This has provoked the rejection from various sectors, at both ends of the ideological spectrum, which questions the type of globalization we are experiencing and suggests whether global multiculturalism would not be better.

To a large extent, the crisis of representation is due to the pressures to which the modern representative is subjected, since the latter not only represents the interests of his/her constituents, but also the interests of other actors, such as pressure groups that finally have more weight in the ultimate decision of the political representative.

The State has lost weight and sovereignty within its borders due to the process of deterritorialization in favor of transnational corporations and supranational organizations. Thus, citizens perceive that the decisions are made offshore, delegitimizing, once

again, their own representatives. The turning point came with the financial crisis of 2008, which affected, above all, citizens in areas such as the increase in unemployment and precariousness.

The incapacity of representative democracy to face these challenges, hand in hand with other factors, such as migratory crises, corruption and oligarchizing of the parties, triggered an increased discontent towards the political class. For that reason, new political parties with populist and nationalist labels appeared, threatening institutions, democratic policies, and even diplomatic relations.

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The current challenges of democracy in the region reflect problems such as worn-out institutions, economic scarcity and the rise of insecurity. The evidence presented in these articles suggests that the formality of free, plural, transparent and periodic elections is no longer enough to conceive equitable societies. Firstly, the spaces for opinion and participation have lost depth, having an immediate, yet short-term impact. Secondly, the same framework of democracy has become a vehicle for extreme-right, populist and authoritarian regimes that often win elections by vast majorities.

This book outlines the approaches of Costa Rica, Mexico and Ecuador on issues such as the quality of democracy, globalization, the instrumental use of popular consultations and plebiscites, the incidence of social media on politics, participation in local elections, the role of the Armed Forces, and the perception of regimes with high approval but low efficiency.

The outlook is not promising, but we believe that studying the challenges of democracy may be the first stage towards its renewal. These proposals aim to foster debate and provide foundations for conceiving fairer regimes.

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