

The New Radical Right and Dissatisfaction with Democracy: Latin America in Comparative Perspective

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Traditional representative institutions are undeniably in crisis in many countries around the world. Despite a lack of consensus as to whether the crisis is irreversible or even exceptional, this global reversal of progress toward greater democratization has given rise to somewhat alarmist interpretations of the institutional disfunctions of regimes in which elites no longer act to guarantee basic democratic norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) or too much economic power is concentrated in their hands (Grayling 2017). The inability of political systems to channel demands and offer concrete solutions to problems of social concern, together with the expansion of critical citizens, has contributed to a radicalization of electorates. The far right has succeeded in “capturing social non-conformism in favor of different anti-progressive political escapes” (Stefanoni 2021, 9). This phenomenon tends to sharpen the perception of a crisis of democracy. The present article explores that perception, the global pattern of the far right, and the reideologization of the political debate.

The Radical Right as a Symptom of the Crisis of Democracy

The crisis of democracy is evident in questionings of the status quo given sharpened perceptions of social inequality; an unprecedented decline of electoral participation; rising distrust of institutions and governing politicians; and electors’ willingness to mortgage democratic ideals when they collide with pressing issues such as order and security, the increasing cost of living, or immigration. Even in Finland, one of the world’s most advanced democracies, citizens have become willing to trade liberal

democratic principles for progress on objectives of more immediate public interest (Saikkonen and Christensen 2022). In Europe generally, the weakening of democracy that has been perceived since the 1980s appears inseparable from the decline of social democratic models (Bandau 2021). In a context of slowing economic growth, social democratic parties have increasingly embraced fiscal orthodoxy and structural reforms.

This weakening of democracy is also fed by the new technological revolution, which has contributed to deregulation of political relations. Immediate access to information encourages individualism and makes citizens feel less need for intermediation. To an ever-increasing extent, the relation between citizens and the state has come to resemble a commercial transaction, weakening the essence of deliberation. Meanwhile, digital media has magnified the visibility of candidates who are in open conflict with liberal democracy.

Although there is a tendency to overestimate the electoral effect of disinformation through social networks (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021), Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 set off alarm bells. Three things reinforced pessimism about the future of democracy: the fact that his election occurred in the very cradle of modern democracy; the coincidence with Britain’s Brexit vote; and the electoral resurgence of what could be called a “radical” Right that undermines liberal democracy’s principles but also, unlike the “extreme” right which « rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule» (Mudde 2019, 7). As a sign of the growing normalization of those parties, in the

French presidential elections of 2017, Emmanuel Macron contested the second round against Marine Le Pen, who obtained 34 percent of the vote and then five years later received 42 percent. In 2017, Alternative for Germany came in third in the German federal elections, with the support of some left-wing voters.

Perceptions that the crisis of liberal democracy is sharpening also owe to the radical Right's entry into mainstream politics in Western Europe. In September 2022, Giorgia Meloni was appointed as Italy's new prime minister, the most extremely right-wing administration since the end of World War II. In October 2022, Democrats of Sweden, which remained outside the victorious right-wing bloc, became the parliamentary force with the second greatest number of votes. The ever-clearer normalization of these parties, despite the ongoing danger of their assuming their most radical positions once in power, has distinguished this latest wave of populism.

Various scholars have cast doubt on the notion that we are dealing with an exceptional and irreversible crisis, instead emphasizing the cyclical, contextual, and contingent character of perceived crises of democracy (Przeworski 2022; Zilinsky 2019; Corbett 2020). For starters, this is not a new problem. Since the end of the nineteenth century, many have seen political parties' transformative impact on governments as indicative of a crisis of representation (Manin 1996). In 1975, a report of the Trilateral Commission was published as *The Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies*. Since the 1990s, the scholarly literature has cautiously returned to the subject (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000), coinciding with the rise of the first wave of radical Right parties in Europe in the 1980s (Kitschelt 1995; Mény and Surel 2000).

Moreover, the magnitude and depth of the crisis that observers pretend to explain is unclear. The "deconsolidation" of democracy that Mounk and Foa (2016, 2017) sought to demonstrate by studying the perceptions of European youth, for example, was refuted by Zilinsky (2019), who showed that young people were actually not

dissatisfied with democracy. His study also tied democratic legitimacy to governments' economic and political performance.

And how to measure democracies' deconsolidation? The Democracy Index, published annually by the *Economist*, uses four classic political-scientific categories for classifying regimes: hybrid (Karl 1995), authoritarian (Linz 2000), defective (Merkel 2004), and full. Countries' location in one category or another appears highly sensitive to contingent political factors. The end of restrictions tied to the pandemic is thus the main explanation for Chile, France, and Spain again figuring as full democracies and no longer defective ones. In Chile, currently among the ten top-rated countries in terms of democracy, the way the constitutional reforms were handled also heavily affected the country's score. Despite this positive result, Chilean politics is not immune to populism and radicalism from either side of the political spectrum.

To all appearances, the structural preconditions (Carothers 2002) that democratization theorists have identified as possible safeguards against the deterioration of democracy (e.g., economic welfare, existence of a civic culture, absence of major social divisions, institutionalized party systems) are not enough to thwart populism in the United States or Europe. Economic growth does not prevent inequality from generating high levels of disaffection; broad consensus on the values of liberal democracy does not allow countries to avoid the emergence of "illiberal" leaders; the institutionalization of party systems does not guarantee that traditional elites continue fulfilling their role as guardians of democratic norms. In short, the supposed preconditions do not suffice for averting democratic recession. As Corbett (2020, 186) notes, this outcome suggests that democracy is a "much more contingent form of regime" than transition theorists assumed, one moreover characterized by variable paths.

These preconditions aside, three principal structural factors contribute to explaining the democratic recession and drifts toward populism. First, parties' programmatic linkages with

society have weakened in the wake of economic and sociocultural changes (Katz and Mair 1995). Second, digital technology has modified the structure of the public arena, eliminating parties' formerly privileged role as channels of information and intermediation (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021). Third, traditional elites in many cases have contributed to empowering their most radical opponents. In effect, the decline of center-left and center-right parties is correlated with the rise of the radical Right (Gidron and Ziblatt 2019).

Critical attitudes toward democracies considered incapable of satisfying citizens' social expectations are another, much more contingent, factor relevant to explaining support for disruptive and extreme political offerings. Do the high rates of dissatisfaction with democracy also registered in Italy, Spain, and France constitute a common pattern for explaining the global rise and consolidation of radical Right political tendencies? What has been different about such rights in Latin America?

Regime Types and Dissatisfaction with Democracy

The crisis of democracy does not have the same magnitude or implications in all contexts. Latin America has four authoritarian regimes (Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Haiti). According to the 2022 Democracy Index, autocratic tendencies also constitute a risk for various countries in the region. Four countries ranked hybrid regimes—three governed by leftist populists (Mexico, Bolivia, and Peru) and one by a right-wing populist (El Salvador)—have registered setbacks. One of the worst performers is El Salvador, under the presidency of Nayib Bukele. Since March 2022, the Central American country has been under a state of exception imposed to fight gangs. Although this war has turned Bukele into the most popular leader in Latin American (greater than 80 percent), it has been accompanied by flagrant, generalized violations of human rights and has weakened the political system's internal checks and balances as well as freedom of the press. Over the past decades, Latin American democracy has thus experienced its greatest

setback, even though its average democracy score is the third highest after North America and Western Europe. Its relatively high overall position reflects the presence of three established democracies in the region: Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica (Democracy Index).

Grading countries on each of the five dimensions considered by the index—the electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation, and political culture—ensures consideration of disparate political-institutional conditions on which the magnitude of the crisis of democratic representation and the probability of leaders uncommitted to liberal democratic norms being hailed as “saviors” depend. In Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica, several historical conditions for the institutionalization of party systems (Mainwaring and Scully 1995) continue to be met, despite traditional parties' weakened social and territorial connections, a worldwide occurrence. Parties have not become mere electoral vehicles of personalist leaders in these three countries, as has occurred in other contexts where the political system is structured around single-party hegemonies of a populist and personalist stripe or is weak and malleable (Cavarozzi and Casullo 2002).

Certainly, however, this does not mean that these countries are immune from right-wing radicalism. In 2021, José Antonio Kast, leader of Chile's ultraconservative and libertarian-right Republican Party, founded in 2019, reached the second round of the presidential election, facing off against the ultimately victorious leftist candidate, Gabriel Boric. The Republican Party won fourteen seats in the lower house and one in the senate in the 2021 parliamentary elections, succeeding in positioning its project within the national political arena in little time and growing alongside the country's center-right Chile Vamos coalition. Chile also has another populist party of relatively recent creation: Partido de la Gente, or Party of the People, founded in 2019. It succeeded in placing third in the last presidential elections and is currently the largest party in the country. In Uruguay, the radical Right Open Town Hall (Cabildo Abierto) party, founded in 2019, is part of

the governing coalition. Like Party of the People, it avoids championing a discernible ideology on the left-right axis, instead emphasizing a message of “solving people’s real problems” in an effort to attract voters from across the political spectrum. In Costa Rica, Minister of Security Jorge Torres asked his government to follow in Bukele’s footsteps in light of the broad support that Bukele’s success against organized crime has elicited across the region.

Beyond the weakening of parties’ programmatic ties, various studies show that attitudes toward democracy help explain the rise of the populist right. In effect, an increasingly negative evaluation of the democratic performance of the countries of Latin America as a whole has been observed, although this does not necessarily signify a questioning of the regime types as such. In 2020, discontent with Latin American democracy reached 70 percent, up from 51 percent in 2013 (Latinobarómetro 2021, 38). In El Salvador, Perelló and Navia (2022) show that the key variable explaining the vote for Bukele was not so much parties’ programmatic inconsistency as it was dissatisfaction with democracy.

Before the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, Brazilians also registered the region’s lowest approval rating of their government (6 percent) and the least satisfaction with democracy (9 percent). Only two in every five citizens declared a preference for democracy over authoritarianism (Doctor 2019, 23). In 2013, the Lava Jato operation began to affect the whole political class, particularly the government of Dilma Rousseff, who was impeached and removed from office in 2016. Economic slowdown was inauspicious for attempts of the Workers’ Party to implement its “neo-developmental” model, and the country became polarized ideologically. In that context, in 2018, 80 to 90 percent of middle-class voters supported the candidate explicitly defending dictatorship, torture, machismo, and homophobia while legitimating his positions by claiming they reflected the will of the people. Bolsonaro also succeeded in capturing an important segment of Lula’s former electorate: those disenchanted with politics (Goldstein 2019).

Although the political-institutional conditions of Chile certainly differ from those of El Salvador and Brazil, satisfaction with democracy has been dropping there as well, falling 15 percent between 1995 and 2020 (from 33 to just 18 percent) (Latinobarómetro 2020). Since late 2019, the Republican Party has proved able to take advantage of a fluid context in which public opinion has become increasingly concerned with the decline of public order and increasing violence, as well as skeptical of the ability of Chile’s constitutional assembly to solve citizens’ problems. In that context, Kast successfully instilled a counter hegemonic narrative about the social uprising of 2019 and the writing of a new constitution.

In all three countries, albeit in varying ways, parties and traditional elites have been unable to contain the rise of populisms from the right: in El Salvador, because of the party system’s weak consolidation, which allowed an outsider to break through; in Brazil, because of the deconsolidation of the party system that preceded Bolsonaro’s coming to power (Goldstein 2019); and in Chile, because of the loss of a distinctive profile on the part of the center-right, whose programmatic moderation signified abandonment of the values of its traditional electorate. This programmatic weakening has followed a pattern similar to that of European right-wing parties in relation to their extreme pole (Bale and Rovira 2021).

The third factor that contributes to explaining the consolidation of the radical Right, albeit indirectly, is the affinity between populism and digital media. Populist leaders have amply demonstrated that they know how to take advantage of these new technologies, and better (and more) than traditional parties. The most emblematic case is that of Bukele. With nearly 5 million followers on Twitter, he usually announces new social policies through that channel. His messianic tone has paid off thanks to digital media in a regional context marked by the growth of evangelical churches. In Brazil, Bolsonaro launched his candidacy for reelection in 2022 under the slogan “Freedom, Truth, and Faith,” again with the evangelical churches’ strong backing. In both cases, the use of these

new technologies has been accompanied by reduced freedom of the press and prohibitions against moderating social media content, giving free reign to disinformation.

The communications of Kast's presidential campaign also included strategic utilization of social media. However, his campaign's use of populist rhetoric, in the sense of "challenge of the legitimate authority of the establishment" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 4), was more limited to a particular political conjuncture: the social and political crisis of late 2019. Kast counterposed "the politicians" to "the silent majority" that neither "marched" nor opted for "violence." He presented himself as the representative of the true values and principles of the right in the face of a governing center-right coalition so willing to make concessions that it ended up signing the agreement allowing for a new constitution. In addition to invoking a dichotomy between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," the modus operandi of such formations consists of activating major social divisions—of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion—in contexts where they do not appear to have played a decisive role in electoral decisions before such leaders emphasized them (this is what Layton and colleagues [2021] show to have happened in Brazil).

The idea that absence of major social divisions is a necessary precondition for democratic consolidation is worth revisiting here: the radical Right does not spring from already-existing social cleavages; instead, it politicizes certain lines of division. In that sense, the definition of populism as a "thin ideology" (Mudde 2019, 7) fails to capture movements and parties that use a direct and polarizing style of communication, but to defend "thick" values and principles.

Cultural Backlash 2.0 and Growing Normalization

The latest waves of the radical Right share two characteristics: a growing tendency toward demarginalization and normalization, and an understanding of themselves as part of a global "counterrevolution"—in the words of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán—against the return

of communism through "cultural Marxism." These political formations have arisen as a reaction to the latest phase of the "silent revolution" analyzed by Norris and Inglehart (2019), one marked by societies' increasing liberalization. That dynamic has been expressed through the "wokeism" that began as a movement to denounce discrimination toward minorities and came to encompass social inequalities more broadly, including those linked to gender and sexual orientation. This activist consciousness intensified from 2017 onward with movements like #MeToo and the resurgence of feminist struggles. It is in response to those mobilizations that the radical Right seeks to foment an identity-based, nationalist, and nativist counterproject. In Europe, various leaders fill their rhetoric with past national grandeur: from the millenarian Hungary of Orbán to the Iberosphere of Vox that winks at the memory of the Spanish Empire. Their civilizational anxieties are revealed, too, through the racist conspiratorial theory of the "great replacement" of the European population and "its" civilization by other, nonwhite groups, especially Arab Muslims.

In a context of economic and political crisis accompanied by growing security concerns, the radical Right of Chile, Brazil, and El Salvador has advanced ideas of national restoration and even national salvation with a theological tinge, echoing Trump's call to "Make America Great Again."

In the discourse of the leaders of the Latin American radical Right, such "restoration" has also taken an antiemancipatory turn in response to the advances of progressive causes. Bolsonaro has not missed the opportunity to attack LGBTQ+ and feminist movements, proposing a bill banning what he called "gender ideology" and announcing that references to feminism, same-sex relationships, violence against women, and Marxism would be removed from school textbooks. Vox proposed the same in Spain. For his part in Chile, since April 2022, Republican Party founder José Antonio Kast has headed the Political Network for Values, which seeks to halt the advance of minority rights. Its 2017 program also proposed overturning the current abortion

law, which has depenalized interruption of pregnancy only in cases of rape, danger to the life of the mother, and fetal unviability.

Through anticommunist international organizations such as the Madrid Forum, the Political Network for Values seeks to establish itself as a counterweight to progressive enclaves like the São Paulo Forum or the Grupo de Puebla, impeding “cultural Marxism” around the world. Thanks to the radical Right’s global connections, ideological projects have acquired a certain unity and coherence, transcending cultural and institutional nuance. The main issues on which the discourse centers are immigration, security, corruption, and foreign policy (Mudde 2019), in Europe as well as in Latin America. Within that global network, narratives concerning foreign policy have played a key ideological role, spreading conspiratorial theories that tend to simplify reality by targeting the enemy: above all, international agencies, leftist governments, and the authoritarian regimes of China and Cuba. This new ideological framing thereby blames globalism for its imposition of cultural Marxism (Guimarães 2023).

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The principal characteristic of this last wave of the radical Right has been its growing normalization (Mudde 2019, 20). That normalization has contributed to sharpening perceptions of democracy in crisis. First, several leaders have succeeded in tilting public opinion to the far right, coming to power or enjoying substantial electoral gains in Europe and the United States. Second, in Europe, those political formations have leaned more toward the Left economically, defending a “chauvinist welfare state,” and distancing themselves from their initial neoliberal orientation (Forti 2021). Third, they have adopted more centrist positions on values issues, to the point of appearing “gay friendly.” This normalization, and the fact that radical Rights have increasingly decided to play on democratic terrain, makes alliances with the mainstream right more probable and publicly accepted.

Unlike comparable formations in Europe, those in Latin America have been distinguished by their ultraconservatism on values issues and libertarian economic positions, as well as a specifically Latin American, antidemocratic defense of the region’s past military dictatorships. For this new radical Right, the adjective *populist* fails to capture the ideologization of political debate inherent to a crusade against alleged cultural Marxism.

All in all, the program of reducing the state and rolling back rights for minorities resonates little with popular demands and does not fundamentally explain the recent rise of several leaders on the right. Their pro-order agenda played a much more decisive role in the electoral success of Bolsonaro and Bukele, and in the Republican Party’s consolidation in Chile. In Argentina, the right’s radicalization around the current president of the party Republican Proposal, Patricia Bullrich, shows that the current context remains propitious to the emergence of leaderships offering “heavy-handed” security positions (Luna and Rovira 2021). To avoid ceding terrain to them, we need a “democratic praxis” (Petersen 2022) that is capable of capturing and canalizing commonsense demands without skipping over the times or rules of representative democracy.

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