

And, Despite Everything, They Resist! The Resilience of Latin American Democracies

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Democracy is in danger today in Latin America and the Caribbean, yet it resists. Despite its institutional fatigue, failures, incapacities, and the internal and external threats of powerful opportunists—who use its rules and institutions to gain access to power and then make them implode—democracy survives. Undoubtedly, like any human creation, it is perfectible, but demonizing its weaknesses or focusing only on what is wrong fuels those who want to impose their illiberal rules and procedures as if they were democratic.

The recent electoral experience has been very successful in at least two ways. First, electoral procedures work. The more than 220 national and local elections held since 1978 in 18 countries in the region have made it possible for citizens to decide on public affairs, to remove from power—and send home—those they want removed. The elections also allowed for political groups to manage their conflicts and for peaceful coexistence in diverse and plural societies.¹ Putting democracies into operation meant dusting off (or drafting from scratch) constitutional frameworks that ensured rights and guarantees, such as living in freedom, participating, exercising a public voice, controlling power, and rejecting violence. Hence, it was possible to establish what Przeworski (2019:) has called democracy, that is, that “political system that guarantees certainty in rules and uncertainty in outcomes.”

Second, elections are the agreed-upon mechanism for sharing political power. This powerful idea underpinned the fundamental compromises between historically antagonistic groups on making decisions and defining who governs. It is what shaped and guided the processes of (re)establishing democracies in at least 15 Latin American countries under the framework of the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1991). The state and the elites created an institutional structure—rules, procedures, routines, and symbols—to ensure that every citizen could express themselves and participate. And this effort, in itself, has been fundamental to Latin American democracies.

However, in recent years, many democracies have been eroding, or backsliding, under citizen approval (e.g., Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua in North and Central America; Hungary and Poland in Europe), electing leaders and parties that seek to change the rules of the game from within the system, protected by the legitimacy of the ballot box but affecting plural and democratic coexistence. Through free and competitive elections, people vote for leaders—and tolerate decisions and behaviors—explicitly seeking to deteriorate democracy. Unlike in previous decades, with violent coups d'état or systematic human rights violations, some countries are experiencing setbacks through other, more subtle ways of limiting rights and freedoms.

¹ According to data from the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America (1977–2022).

For example, in Venezuela, Hugo Chávez since 1998 and Nicolás Maduro since 2013 dismantled democratic scaffolding, leading to irreconcilable polarization and causing Venezuelans to leave the country. In Ecuador, during the decade of Rafael Correa's government, the levels of political pluralism declined. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, before the 2021 presidential elections, imprisoned, disqualified, or pushed into exile 19 precandidates and, on February 9, 2023, deported more than 222 political prisoners who had been held in conditions that violated their human rights. In Mexico, the government approved an electoral reform in February 2023 that seeks to dismantle, remove autonomy from, and financially stifle the electoral umpire. In Peru, Pedro Castillo tried to dissolve Congress in 2022. In Guatemala, the registration of candidates aspiring to compete in next year's presidential elections has been banned.

These democracies in crisis have within themselves their enemies, and even so, they resist. If it were not democracy, they could not be elected, and of course, critical and plural debates would be impossible. Democracies are battered, but still, for the moment, they survive (Levitsky and Way 2015; Bermeo 2016; Freidenberg and Saavedra 2020).

The Institutionalization of Electoral Democracy as an Antidote to Authoritarianism

The holding of competitive, free, fair, accurate elections with uncertain results is the sine qua non of a democratic system, which is why the continuity of these processes is fundamental for democracy's survival. Data from the electoral democracy index applied to 18 Latin American countries gives an account of how electoral processes have been institutionalized in the region (Coppedge et al. 2022). With a range of 0 to 1, the average location is close to 0.75. According

to calculations made by the Observatorio de Reformas Políticas en América Latina (1977–2022), party systems have become increasingly competitive and pluralistic.² Moreover, their level of fragmentation has increased in the past four decades, with the effective number of parties (NEP) at the national legislative level increasing from 2 to 4.5, making the political offering more diverse and inclusive.

Constitutional and electoral reforms in political rights have allowed more people to access more rights, particularly historically underrepresented groups. Through various affirmative action measures or adoption of the constitutional principle of gender parity, the entry of underrepresented and excluded groups into candidacy and decision-making processes has strengthened institutions. For example, in 17 of 18 countries analyzed in the past three decades, more than 45 reforms to the gender electoral regime have been promoted to enable women to compete more equally with men.³ These changes have brought about a powerful transformation in the descriptive representation of national congresses, where women reach a regional average of about 35 percentage points (ECLAC 2022), the highest number in the region's constitutional history.

The comparative experience points to a series of lessons learned. First, holding elections is valuable, but they must meet a series of demands and requirements to be considered democratic. It is a matter of holding elections and how they are held. Second, holding elections implies that citizens should be able to exercise their rights fully, not that rights are dead letter. It is imperative to move from formal to substantive equality. Third, having competitive, organized, and strong parties is a good idea and much better than not having parties. Fourth, it matters a great deal who votes, but also important are who can be a candidate and who finally gets

² See the Observatorio de Reformas Políticas en América Latina, 1977–2022, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, UNAM y Organización de los Estados Americanos, 2022.

³ Observatorio de Reformas Políticas en América Latina, 1977–2022. Only Guatemala has not promoted changes in the rules of the electoral gender regime, being the only country of the 18 analyzed that has not approved quotas or gender parity in registering candidacies.

to vote (it is about greater competitiveness and inclusion). Fifth, democracy costs money, so it is necessary to invest in efficient public financing and oversight systems to level the playing field. And finally, strong institutions—with autonomy, professionalism, and resources—are needed to ensure accountability.

Although political dynamics have posed significant challenges, the critical actors in the political system have learned to do their homework: electoral bodies to count votes, citizens to vote, and parties to compete, to lose, and even, in most cases, to accept the results.

The Erosion of the Liberal Dimension of Democracy

Although competitive elections are a primary condition for a system to be democratic, they do not cover all the dimensions of democracy. This political system is much more than that, although without competitive, free, and fair elections, it is impossible to achieve full democracy. In recent decades, the powerful idea that competitive elections are a tool to protect against authoritarianism has been cracking. Democratic political systems are under pressure.⁴ The evaluation of democracy shows that there are still pending agendas for democratization.

The indexes that analyze the liberal, participatory, deliberative, or egalitarian dimension (Coppedge et al. 2022) warn about these difficulties, given that they have regressed or hardly advanced in recent decades. And this is not a minor issue. Although electoral democracy is the most institutionalized of all (>0.5), the liberal dimension has been increasingly eroded in recent decades, going from more than 0.5 to 0.3, in a range from 0 to 1, according to the liberal democracy index applied to 18 countries in the region (Coppedge et al. 2022). In practice, respect for individual and minority rights has weakened; conditions for the free exercise of freedom of expression, the rule of

law, and the loss of autonomy of the judiciary and other autonomous bodies have been limited. As a result, opposition minorities in the legislature have been marginalized, the effective exercise of checks and balances has been diminished, and power has been personalized in the executive.⁵

The liberal dimension has been abandoned. The leading detractors of the values, rights, and practices implied by the liberal exercise of democracy come from the public authorities, opposition groups, and even sectors of the citizenry. Not only is there less political pluralism, but there are no longer civic spaces where those who think differently coincide. The citizens themselves promote this reductionism. The civic space has shrunk. Some people prefer not to talk about politics with those who do not know what they think. Nor do they want to argue with their friends or their families. People censor themselves, silence their voices, and speak among tiny bubbles of like-minded people.

What Threatens Latin American Democracies?

The road to democracy is neither linear nor direct. Threats have always been present, and the commitment of leaders and citizens to them has not been unconditional. These processes of deteriorating democracies manifest in very different ways. The loss of competitive conditions and rights is gradual. Many of the measures promoted by those in power do not necessarily entail serious democratic violations, but in practice, they slowly and subtly erode the legitimacy of institutions to strengthen the control of those in power.

The threats are different. First is the disloyalty of part of the elites—and the citizenry—to the fundamental commitments of electoral and liberal democracy. Even when the “norms of courtesy” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) had not settled (as in Honduras with the 2009 coup

⁴ As of February 2023, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba cannot be considered democracies.

⁵ In some formerly democratic political systems, this weakening has been dramatic in recent years, as in Brazil, El Salvador and Mexico (for substantive empirical evidence in this regard, see the data in Coppedge et al. 2022).

d'état, the chronic instability of Peru with the fall of several presidents, or the attacks on Gustavo Petro when mayor of Bogotá), the moods have become increasingly polarized—disregarding the other as a legitimate interlocutor—and disrupting practices regarding what is allowed and what is not in the democratic game. This decline is sustained within the framework of a new narrative regarding the content of what democracy is for them, as I have described in my book *The Populist Temptation* (2007).

Second is the use of democratic elections to vote for autocratic leaders. People seek leaders with a novel and irreverent antipolitical discourse that will save them from “the usual politicians.” Hence, populism is an alternative identity choice within a democracy (Casullo 2019). People delegate to “healers” (Przeworski 2019); they trust what they choose even when promised magical solutions to solve their structural problems and feed and enhance preexisting divisions that distance individuals from each other and radicalize positions. The rhetoric of “us” against “them” is stoked. As Zacarías (1997) showed years ago, Latin Americans use elections for public decision-making, even if they prefer leaders with values contrary to democracy.

Third is the absence of sound economic and social results of democratic governments aimed at generating well-being and dignity for most people. The governments of both ideologies have been unable or unwilling to be efficient and equitably redistribute symbolic and material public resources (e.g., education, health, salaries, welfare). This has resulted from the wrong policies of governments elected in democracy; an insistence on the use of privileges that usually benefit an exclusionary, individualistic and arrogant political class that has little empathy for social problems; and corrupt and clientelist practices that have colonized the state, transforming it into a space of dispute for a few owners of power.

Even when policies are the responsibility of governments, the attribution of responsibility is transferred—directly or indirectly—to the political system. People blame poor performance on democracy. Citizens support democracy less and less, and they are less satisfied with the political regime. Even in 2022, this satisfaction showed its most significant drop over previous periods. Levels of trust in institutions (government, congress, judiciary) and political actors (parties and armed forces) have been declining since the 1990s (Freidenberg and Saavedra 2020).⁶ Without government efficiency, there is no legitimacy.

Fourth is the change in the rituals and meanings of doing politics democratically. The new ways of relating politically involve the rejection of the other as a political equal, the abandonment of fundamental commitments to human rights as well as the electoral process, the rigged interpretation of the Constitution, animosity against the referee (who time and again is accused of fraud even without evidence), the questioning of electoral results and their excessive judicialization as a strategy to maximize options for power, the misuse of data and false information, and the denial of empirical evidence and disinformation as part of the daily way of understanding and doing politics.

Fifth is the strategic manipulation of formal rules (rule changes, control of time, procedures, and deadlines). Data from the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America (1977–2022) show that the rules have been adjusted to ensure that those who govern retain their positions of power. Although there are differences between countries, some 297 reforms have been made in 18 countries in the past four decades to more than 11 critical dimensions of electoral systems. The reformist hyperactivity of several countries (Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Dominican Republic) generates uncertainty in the game's rules and undermines the contest's fairness.

⁶ See also the website of Latinobarómetro (Santiago de Chile), <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>.

Sixth is control of the narrative regarding what a true democracy is under the supposed division between “good” and “bad” people. The dispute is political, discursive, and symbolic. This debate is not new, but it forgets what democracy is not: a system only for a few, in which a leader—or a small elite—determines who can and cannot participate and in which validity results only when “I” win, under the rules I want. Calling systems that allow such practices democracy is a conceptual and political confusion that misleads and confuses about the meaning and essence of democracy.

Seventh is the lack of alternatives in the opposition and the problems of representation in traditional political parties, which still do not understand that they do not understand and cannot connect with the citizenry. It seems more like a systemic crisis of the traditional “responsible party” linkage model, which unfortunately never really took root in Latin American politics (Freidenberg and Levitsky 2007). These problems are evidence of a disconnection between the old politics and the citizenry, even though the latter usually elect politicians who appear to be new but who, in practice, do nothing more than repeat the old methods and tricks of politics as usual.

Eighth is the strategic use of disinformation by antidemocratic actors, including to influence public opinion by disseminating false news through social networks and the press, manipulation of official statistics, and denial of the results of implementing public policies—this also poses threats to democracy. In addition to misleading the population, this manipulation is a considerable challenge for those trying to enforce evidence-based policies, as they can generate strategic alteration of data, which hinders political control over rulers and evaluation of the results of their policies, and also conditions people’s voting decisions.

The Virtuous Circle and the Resilience of Democracies

Democracies urgently need to be reset. I propose that we bet on promoting a virtuous circle that contributes to strengthening their resilience.⁷ This idea of resilience is essential. It would help to see the glass as fuller than it seems. Resilience has to do with the ability to respond to the needs and demands of the citizenry, always respectful of liberal values and rights. Also, it links to adapting to crises, to continue complying with the requirements of procedural and liberal democracy, to have the tools to respond to the contextual and systemic problems and long-term change they face, and to deepen the democratization of other dimensions (e.g., participatory, deliberative).⁸

The virtuous circle involves three axes. First is the institutional shielding of elections, electoral governance, and the actors of representation. The attacks against democracy have nothing to do with holding elections but instead with how they are organized and the guarantees they generate. Autocratic leaders want to continue holding elections but to organize them with their own rules and institutions. Competitive elections are an antidote to authoritarian practices. They imply a series of virtues, such as allowing to enter into the discussion who governs at any given time; respecting the rights of the majority while protecting the voice and interests of minorities; facilitating political control, renewal of ideas, and accountability; and as Przeworski (2019) points out, carrying out “the emotional feat of throwing out the rascals.”

Institutional armoring also implies state capacities, adequate respect for political rights and civil liberties, and state control over territory. It is impossible to have electoral governance and democratic institutions where there are no state or sufficient security guarantees for candidates.

⁷ The virtuous circle is inspired by the plenary table “The Resilience of Democracy in Latin America,” at the Third International Seminar “Reforms to Political Representation in Latin America,” organized in Mexico City on September 28, 2022, with the participation of Francisco Valdés Ugalde, Delia Ferreira Rubio, Margarita López Maya, and Eduardo Núñez.

⁸ As Boese and her team (2021: 886) point out, resilience implies having “the ability to avoid a substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices.”

Countries such as Mexico, Paraguay, and Brazil no longer count on the state's being able to guarantee the legitimate monopoly on the use of violence in many municipalities, where even narco-politics functions as a new state. Electoral democracy must operate under the rules of law. Without them, it is impossible to speak of democracy.

In this equation, the strengthening of the parties is also vital. As Welp (2022) argues, "without parties, there is no democracy, but with these parties, there is no democracy either." Latin American experiences have been clear about the damage that the personalization of politics, the absence of intermediaries, and strong programmatic links have wrought for political processes. It is a lie that there can be democracies without strong parties. Peru is an excellent example. The focus there continues to be on demanding better parties that genuinely function as "guardians of democracy" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 31), as actors capable of reflecting the genuine diversity of interests in today's society.

The second axis is the equitable distribution of universal public goods to all citizens. This strategy for strengthening democracies implies a strong commitment to policies that generate well-being and dignity for citizens with material and symbolic resources, innovative ideas, and courageous actions. How can people be asked to commit to a political system that does not help them live better? It is impossible for people to love democracy if it does not contribute to improving their living conditions. Democracies, through governments, must be able to provide material and symbolic benefits to citizens.

Third, active strategies for civic education require time, collective intelligence, and resources to promote training programs that improve citizens' capacity for agency, tolerance, critical thinking, respect, moderation, cooperation, and collaboration. This task implies the recovery, or the creation, of civic spaces where people who think differently can meet and engage in dialogue. Hence, the fight against autocracy can

be fought only by the citizens themselves, who, convinced of their power, ensure that no one limit their rights.

And, Despite Everything, They Resist

Democratic politics must peacefully manage conflicts over ideas, resources, identities, and policies. The answer to the problems of democracy is more democracy. If fists, bullets, or stones replace votes, then democracy is in crisis (Przeworski 2022). This must be avoided. It is not enough to vote and be elected; rules, institutions, and rights must be respected. It seems a paradox, but those same democracies that cost so much to routinize are intensely questioned by sectors that do not quite fit into the liberal logic of democracy.

That system, which guarantees the possibility of expressing different ideas, is the one that allows those who do not like it to delegitimize it and seek to overthrow it from within. Many actors criticize the system from power after winning elections and with the legitimacy given to them by citizen support. The democratic regression is not only the responsibility of autocrats; other leaders are also responsible. The political, social, economic, and media elites must urgently engage in an exercise of self-criticism. But so must the citizenry. People should rethink how to make the struggle for democratic values and peaceful coexistence the only possible game in the city.

Being able to say all these things—without fear of something happening to you—gives democracy its advantages. That ability to select some to govern and to remove them when they no longer represent us makes democracies. That ability to rotate power and renew leadership is fundamental. That key Mexican idea of "effective suffrage, no reelection" makes much more sense in this context. The novelty is that now it is the people themselves who can elect someone who does the opposite and, in doing so, put democracy itself at risk. However, despite all these evils, for now, democracies are holding their own.

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