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Gustavo Westmann

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Crossroads of a Changing World

Maria Cândida Mousinho
Saulo Moraes de Assis
Daniel Pitangueira de Avelino
(Editors)

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Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão
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Maria Cândida Mousinho
Saulo Moraes de Assis
Daniel Pitangueira de Avelino
(Editors)

Whose Democracy?

Crossroads of a Changing World

FUNAG

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Foreword

Gustavo Westmann[1]

Democracy is under pressure, and the warning signs are everywhere. From rising political polarisation and waves of disinformation to mounting distrust in institutions, different nations seem to be drifting away from fundamental civil rights and political freedoms. This is pushing democratic systems to their limits.

Yet, in the very midst of these challenges, democratic ideals continue to mobilise citizens, inspire social movements, and shape demands for justice, inclusion, and accountability. It is at this critical juncture that this book, thoughtfully edited by Maria Cândida Mousinho, Saulo Moraes de Assis and Daniel Pitangueira de Avelino, makes its timely and necessary contribution.

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The outlook is concerning, but it also offers reasons for hope. In Europe, a significant share of young people believes democracy is at risk. In Latin America, only a minority expresses satisfaction with how democracy functions. Although India remains the world's largest democracy, concerns about democratic backsliding have intensified. In the United States, political polarisation, declining trust in Congress, repeated disputes over election legitimacy, and concerns about institutional gridlock have

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contributed to growing scepticism about whether democratic institutions can effectively respond to public demands.

In spite of these and other threats, the book reminds us that democracy is resilient. Demands for equality, dignity, reduced corruption, and environmental protection, among many others, will persist for as long as democracy exists. What should be under discussion is the quality of democracy, not democracy itself. If reality shows that free electoral processes are not enough to protect and ensure respect for basic human rights, equality before the law, social well-being, political pluralism, and popular control over elected governments, then democratic structures need to be reinforced, becoming more transparent, reliable, and fair.

While keeping a strong commitment to theoretical innovation, the editors managed to integrate insights from multiple disciplines to approach democracy as a field of ongoing conceptual struggle. At the empirical level, the book explores both the vulnerabilities and the adaptive capacities of democratic systems. Comparative analyses reveal how institutions respond under pressure, highlighting patterns of fragility and strengths. The approach to recent events demonstrates that democratic crises rarely remain confined within national borders; instead, they are increasingly influenced by transnational flows of ideas, strategies, and peoples.

Amid multifaceted challenges, the concept of democratic resilience emerges as a critical theme. Resilience is not merely the ability to withstand shocks, but also the capacity to adapt, reform, and renew democratic practices. This requires robust institutions, active civil societies, and a commitment to democratic values that transcends partisan divisions. It also calls for innovative approaches, such as paradiplomacy and local governance initiatives, which can revitalise democratic participation by bringing decision-making closer to citizens.

The book also explores how economic inequality, financial instability, and the perceived capture of political systems by economic elites undermine the egalitarian promise of democracy, fuelling political disillusionment. Indeed, it demonstrates how economic and social exclusion limit the full exercise of citizenship and make individuals more susceptible to simplistic narratives and authoritarian promises.

As we read through the chapters, it becomes clear that such complexities are aggravated by globalisation, which challenges traditional mechanisms of decision-making and accountability around broad global issues such as sustainable development, climate crises, and technological transformation, suggesting that democracy cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, it must be analysed in relation to the broader structures that shape contemporary relations and its capacity to address long-term, transnational problems.

Regional perspectives further shed light on the diversity of democratic experiences under discussion. In Latin America, for instance, the interplay of populism, authoritarian legacies, and fragile institutions reveals the ongoing struggle to consolidate democratic norms. The case of the United States illustrates how even established democracies are vulnerable to institutional crises and political violence, raising questions about democratic resilience and the ability of institutions to respond to existential threats.

Within the regional context, Brazil stands out as a particularly enlightening case. The attempted institutional rupture following the 2022 elections exposed both the risks faced by its relatively young democracy and the strength of its institutional framework. At the same time, it underscored the need for continued vigilance and deeper reflection on the factors driving authoritarianism in the country. The rejection of pluralism and the radicalisation of ideas have transformed democratic competition into antagonistic confrontation, weakening shared commitments to institutional rules. Similar cases discussed in the book demonstrate that there is no uniform model for democracy. On the contrary, it is a dynamic and context-dependent process.

The informational dimension of democracy is also addressed by the authors. While new technologies expand access to information and enable new forms of participation, they also create fertile ground for manipulation, disinformation, and political radicalisation, distorting the public debate, eroding trust in electoral processes and thus delegitimising democratic systems. The challenge of ensuring transparency and democratic accountability in the digital environment is now central to the survival of democratic norms. Freedom of expression and the right to information,

once seen as foundational guarantees, must be reinterpreted in light of these emerging risks.

Contemporary and provocative, the book does not shy away from complex and difficult questions. It addresses the resurgence of authoritarian ideologies, the normalisation of practices that gradually erode democratic norms, and the existence of "grey zones" between compliance and subversion within democratic systems. These reflections underscore that threats to democracy are not always overt; they often emerge incrementally and eventually become normalised over time.

Facing the existing threats requires multifaceted responses, reason for which the defence of democracy cannot be reduced to technical or reactive measures alone. It must be understood as a long-term political, cultural, and ethical project that involves the commitment of governments, civil society, academic institutions, the media, and citizens alike to renew values such as tolerance, pluralism and solidarity, in a continuous and collective endeavour within and beyond the national borders.

By bringing together diverse and complementary perspectives, the book makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates about the present and future of democracy. More than a diagnosis of contemporary challenges, it offers an invitation to reflect, to question, and to act. For scholars, practitioners, and engaged citizens, it serves as a call to share responsibility in imagining, strengthening, and renewing democracy in a rapidly changing world.

The path ahead is uncertain and fraught with risks. Yet history remains open. The reflections gathered in this volume call for a re-examination of democracy as both an ideal and a practice. They challenge us to move beyond static conceptions and to engage with democracy as an evolving project, one that must continuously respond to new realities while remaining anchored in its foundational principles of freedom, equality, and collective self-government. In doing so, they offer not only a diagnosis of the current crisis but also pathways for reimagining democracy in the 21st century.

Introduction
Whose Democracy? At the Crossroads of a Changing World

Maria Cândida Arrais de Miranda Mousinho[1]
Saulo Moraes de Assis[2]
Daniel Avelino[3]

Democracy moves through history without remaining intact: it transforms societies and, at the same time, is transformed by their crises, struggles, and aspirations. Such change, however, is not necessarily synonymous with progress. Democracy can expand the horizons of freedom and participation, but it can also experience setbacks, erosion, and ruptures.

As an idea, democracy engages with different philosophical traditions, conceptions of justice, and the values of each era; as a political and historical experience, it assumes different configurations according to societies, territories, conflicts, and relations of power. There is, therefore, no democracy outside history, nor is there a single experience capable of exhausting its meaning.

It is precisely because the only constant in life is change that our thinking about democracy cannot remain static. Revisiting its foundations does not mean abandoning them, but rather questioning them in light of realities that present new challenges and demand new responses.

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This book emerges from that effort: to contribute to the renewal of democratic debate, seeking to understand not only the democracy we have inherited, but also the democracy we are building and the possibilities we wish to pass on.

Rather than following a single definition, theoretical tradition, or geographical perspective, this volume brings together authors from several countries—including Brazil, Chile, India, Spain, the United States, and Uruguay—with diverse professional, intellectual, and institutional backgrounds. Academics, public figures, researchers, and specialists in technical fields and public policy approach democracy from different starting points, disciplines, and realities. This diversity is not incidental; it is an integral part of the book's intellectual premise.

Such plurality, however, is not limited to the origins or backgrounds of its contributors: it is also reflected in the ideas they bring into dialogue. If democracy presupposes plurality, disagreement, participation, and the coexistence of different perspectives, a book devoted to democracy should likewise make room for different ways of understanding it.

The chapters gathered here do not necessarily share the same premises, nor do they arrive at identical conclusions. They examine distinct problems, explore different dimensions of democratic life, and, at times, offer interpretations that need not converge in order to engage in dialogue. It is precisely in this plurality that a significant part of the strength of this volume resides.

The central question running through the book is not only what democracy means, but also what it means when viewed through the lenses of different societies, disciplines, and challenges—and to what extent these different experiences can broaden our understanding of its possibilities and limitations.

Some contributions revisit the conceptual and philosophical foundations of democracy, re-examining essential questions concerning legitimacy, representation, participation, freedom, equality, and the relationship between citizens and political institutions. The dialogue with classical and contemporary democratic thought—including thinkers such as Norberto Bobbio—reminds us that democracy can never be reduced to the mere

existence of elections. Understanding democracy also requires considering rules, rights, institutions, limits on the exercise of power, public debate, and the concrete conditions that enable citizens to participate effectively in collective life.

Other chapters shift the focus from theory to territory. Democracy is not experienced in the abstract; its institutions, tensions, and possibilities acquire different meanings depending on history, political culture, social structures, and regional trajectories. Examining democracy across diverse national and regional contexts allows us to understand both its universal aspirations and the diversity of its concrete manifestations, avoiding the assumption that any single historical experience should serve as the measure of all others.

Yet the contemporary democratic question extends even further.

Some of the most decisive forces transforming today's societies did not even occupy a central place in democratic theory just a few decades ago.

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies are reshaping information, political communication, public debate, and even the distribution of power. The growing algorithmic mediation of public opinion introduces an additional tension. The image of zeros and ones thus becomes a metaphor for our time. Polarization did not originate with digital technologies, but certain algorithmic architectures can amplify its reach.

Climate change raises questions of justice among countries, social groups, and generations. Energy transitions involve choices concerning development, access, inequality, territory, and sovereignty. Technological concentration, economic transformations, and the weakening of spaces for collective deliberation increasingly affect the environments in which democratic decisions are made.

Contemporary democracy must address not only the question of who governs, but also: Who controls data? Who shapes technological systems? Who bears the costs of climate change? Who benefits from energy transitions? Who participates in defining the rules governing emerging technologies? And whose voices remain absent from these decisions?

These questions reveal how democratic debate extends beyond the conventional boundaries of institutional politics, reaching increasingly decisive dimensions of the organization of collective life.

It is within this broader context that the book is organized into three parts.

Part I—"Democracy: Conceptual and Theoretical Discussions"—explores the intellectual foundations and evolving meanings of democracy. The chapters revisit its concepts, tensions, and foundations, offering critical reflections on legitimacy, institutions, rights, and democratic participation.

Part II—"Democracy in Regional Perspective"—brings the debate closer to specific historical and political experiences. By examining democracy from diverse national and regional perspectives, the contributions reveal both shared challenges and the importance of context in understanding democratic trajectories, their particularities, and the different ways societies respond to tensions between institutions, participation, and power.

Part III—"Democracy: Emerging Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges"—examines the transformations that increasingly shape democratic life in the twenty-first century. Technology, artificial intelligence, climate, energy, and other issues expand the democratic agenda, demonstrating that disputes over the future of democracy are also reflected in the choices we make concerning development, sustainability, and the technological organization of our societies.

The moment at which this volume reaches its readers lends even greater significance to these discussions.

Democracy has once again moved to the center of international debate. Questions that might previously have appeared predominantly theoretical have acquired renewed political and social urgency. Across the world, institutions face pressures arising from political polarization, inequality, growing technological disruption, disinformation, geopolitical tensions, and profound transformations in the global economy. At the same time, the emergence of new centers of power—including private and transnational actors—challenges established assumptions about representation, sovereignty, and participation.

Democracy is being tested not only in parliaments, elections, or political parties, but also on digital platforms, in the choices embedded in technological infrastructures and energy systems, within global institutions, and in debates about the future of the planet. The democratic question thus extends into spaces where decisions of enormous collective consequence are not always accompanied by equally extensive mechanisms of representation.

The democracy of the third decade of the twenty-first century therefore bears marks that distinguish it from the democracy of just a few decades ago. Nor do the transformations currently underway allow us to assume that it will remain unchanged in the years to come. Democracy is not a finished model, but a historical construction permanently confronted with a decisive challenge: to respond to change without abandoning the principles that make freedom, political equality, and life in common possible.

It is this experience in motion that we seek to portray from a plural and critical perspective. Not with the ambition of capturing democracy in its entirety, but rather of recording some of the reflections, concerns, and disputes that define our time, offering a point of reference that may help readers interpret the transformations yet to come.

The title and chapters of this volume invite readers to resist the idea of regarding democracy as a definitively secured achievement. Rights can be won and lost; spaces for participation can be opened or restricted; promises of equality can be reaffirmed or repeatedly deferred. There is, therefore, no contradiction between defending democracy and recognizing the need to transform it. Its vitality also lies in its capacity to respond to social change without renouncing pluralism, the freedom to dissent, participation, and the collective shaping of the decisions that guide our destinies.

This book does not seek to offer a single answer to what democracy is or ought to be. Instead, it brings together diverse voices, experiences, and fields of knowledge. This choice is not merely editorial: it expresses the conviction that understanding democracy requires us to practice precisely what democracy itself demands— plurality, dialogue, openness to

disagreement, and the recognition that no single perspective can exhaust the complexity of the world we share or the world we still aspire to build.

To record a particular moment in the life of something essentially dynamic is an arduous and inevitably incomplete undertaking. Yet it is also a responsibility that falls to us at this historical juncture. After all, we are not writing about a distant or unrelated reality: we are addressing the institutions that govern us, the rights we exercise or claim, the conflicts that shape our lives, and the futures whose consequences we will share.

At this crossroads of a world undergoing simultaneous and rapid transformations and transitions, the question that gives this volume its title returns with renewed force: *Whose Democracy?*

The purpose is not to identify an owner of democracy, but to question the relations of power, belonging, and participation that define its concrete existence.

Aristotle reminds us that, if freedom and equality are to be found in democracy, they are best achieved when everyone participates in government as much as possible.

If democracy is indeed a collective construction, the answer to the question guiding this volume can never be definitive. It must be expanded, contested, and renewed for as long as there are voices prevented from fully participating in its construction.

Ultimately, the most demanding meaning of the word "all" lies not merely in what democracy proclaims, but in those whom it effectively recognizes as subjects of its history—and as participants in shaping its future.

The Editors

Part I

Democracy: Conceptual and Theoretical Discussions

Legitimacy and Democracy: Reflections on the Challenges of Democracies in the Twenty-First Century

Saulo Moraes de Assis[1]
Maria Cândida Arrais de Miranda Mousinho[2]

1. Introduction

The legitimacy of political power was already a subject of debate at the dawn of modernity; however, it gained particular density in the sixteenth century with the provocative discourse of Étienne de La Boétie entitled *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1549). In this work, La Boétie questioned the foundations of established power and investigated what leads individuals to accept—or even desire—their own subjugation. In doing so, he opened a field of reflection on the ways in which political agents and institutions acquire and maintain political power.

By asserting that, although the means of coming into power are diverse, "still the method of ruling is practically the same" (La Boétie 1549, 21), La Boétie unveils the persistence of structures of domination that, regardless of their origins, tend toward the reproduction of inequality and obedience. Although his radical critique of authority was regarded at the time as naïve, his text inaugurated a reflective tradition concerned with what confers legitimacy upon political institutions and with the conditions under which power may be considered just, necessary, or tolerable. This critical thread runs throughout modern political philosophy and remains one of the central issues in contemporary debate.

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The question of legitimacy has become a structuring axis of contemporary political thought. In a context marked by a crisis of representation, the erosion of trust in institutions, and the advance of forms of authority that are not necessarily democratic, politicians, intellectuals, and analysts converge in their search for criteria capable of distinguishing the legitimate exercise of power from its mere imposition. Revisiting this debate requires careful attention both to its process of historical construction and to the contributions of authors such as Max Weber, who associates legitimacy with socially accepted types of domination; Jürgen Habermas, who links legitimacy to communicative rationality and democratic consensus; and Karl Popper, whose defense of the open society highlights the importance of continuous institutional critique as a mechanism of legitimation and resistance to authoritarianism.

It is, however, in Norberto Bobbio that this study finds its central theoretical foundation. Anchored in the liberal-democratic tradition, his perspective allows legitimacy to be understood not merely as a legal or sociological attribute, but as an essential critical instrument for analyzing democratic institutions, processes, and promises in times of uncertainty. According to Giuseppe Tosi (2019, 230), Bobbio is one of the principal references in assessments of the current state of "political liberalism and [his] critical stance toward populism, which he regarded as a form of plebiscitary democracy with authoritarian traits." This perspective invites reflection on how to give substance to a notion of legitimacy in light of the contemporary challenges facing democracies.

2. Legitimacy in Bobbio

Norberto Bobbio (1904–2004), one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, developed a complex and multifaceted understanding of legitimacy, a notion that occupies a central place in his analysis of contemporary democracies. In summary terms, legitimacy may be understood as revolving around the broad idea that "the exercise of power [must be] in accordance with laws" (Bobbio 1987, 142). Since there is a direct relationship between legitimacy and the effective functioning of institutions, defending and grounding a democratic regime involves

more than advocating for free and fair elections alone; it also requires the continuous and transparent functioning of political institutions that ensure citizen participation and the protection of fundamental rights. Bobbio thus states:

> I merely mean that in our particular historical situation political contest is fought according to certain rules and that respect for those rules forms [...] the basis of the legitimacy of the whole system, a basis that so far, despite everything, is still inviolate. Thus those who raise the possibility of an alternative politics cannot avoid expressing their verdict on these rules, or stating whether they accept them or not, what they intend to replace them with if they do not accept them, and so forth (Bobbio 1987, 63).

Bobbio places the idea of revision at the center of his philosophy. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish a critique of the legitimacy of political institutions from mere political opposition. Opposition plays a fundamental role in the legitimation of institutions and political actors because its existence is contingent upon the legitimacy of power and the decisions possible through respect for the law.

Legitimacy is crucial to the functioning of democracies, as it provides the foundation for acceptance and support of institutions and political power. Its consolidation occurs to the extent that institutions succeed in guaranteeing justice, fundamental rights, and effective citizen participation. When these pillars falter, public trust is undermined, opening space for institutional tensions. This principle also extends to relations between states: the legitimacy of collective decisions depends on respect for shared norms and cooperation among nations. Consequently, the defense of multilateralism emerges as a natural extension of democratic values. Understanding this link between domestic and international legitimacy is essential for a more accurate grasp of Bobbio's contribution to democratic theory.

2.1. Legitimacy and Democracy

Different forms of government may seek the sources of legitimacy in different places; to be concerned with democracy, however, entails

assigning central importance to its mechanisms of legitimation. Legitimacy constitutes an essential condition for the proper functioning of any democratic system, operating not merely as a legal requirement, but also encompassing ethical, social, and political dimensions that guarantee citizen support and acceptance of the system.

Bobbio's notion of minimal democracy is characterized "by a set of [primary] rules which establish *who* is authorised to take collective decisions and which *procedures* are to be used to choose them" (Bobbio 1987, 17). This minimal definition seeks to ensure both the legitimacy of those who govern and the collective status of decisions, which must also be validated by the consent and trust of the governed. Thus, democratic government is legitimated to the extent that it faithfully represents the interests of the people and respects fundamental liberties. However, "'Omnicracy', or the rule of everyone, is an ideal upper limit" (Bobbio 1987, 24). History demonstrates how historical circumstances and the practical demands of governance can lead societies to positions between this ideal and the minimal definition.

Based on Bobbio's ideas, it is possible to identify elements inherent to the notion of legitimacy in a democratic system. First, legitimacy depends on citizen participation in the political process. Democracy cannot be viewed merely as a regime of periodic elections; rather, it is a system that guarantees continuous and active citizen involvement. In a representative regime, citizens must be effectively engaged in decisions that affect them. Such participation aims—note the emphasis on the verb aim—to be "efficient, direct, and free" (Bobbio 2004, 191, our translation). Participation is not merely a right but also a basic condition because it enables citizens to influence political decisions and express their needs and demands. In this context, Bobbio acknowledges that, even in the most developed democracies, participation is "neither efficient, nor direct, nor free" (Bobbio 2004, 191, our translation), a notion that sheds light on the challenges contemporary democracies face.

The second element presents legitimacy as dependent upon representativeness. A system is legitimate when political institutions reflect the will of the people. Crises of social acceptance of power can

arise precisely when representative institutions fail to reflect the real demands of society, creating a disconnect between rulers and the ruled. Representativeness thus ensures that diverse social voices are heard and that political decisions are made on behalf of all, not merely an elite. Bobbio (1987, 105) reminds us that:

> The liberal state is one which has consented to the loss of its monopoly of ideological power by conceding civil rights, foremost among which was the right to freedom in religion and political opinion, and to the loss of its economic power by conceding economic freedom, and has ended up retaining solely the monopoly of legitimate force, whose exercise is however limited by its recognition of the rights of man and by the various legal constraints which historically gave rise to the *Rechtsstaat* or juridical state. By means of the monopoly of legitimate force [...] the state has to ensure the free circulation of ideas, and hence safeguard society from domination by any sectarian religion or orthodoxy, and guarantee the free circulation of wealth and hence put an end to the interference of the state in the economy.

Respect for civil rights and liberties is another indispensable condition for a democratic system. No democracy can be considered legitimate if it fails to protect fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression, association, and the press. Respect for civil liberties is one of the foundational elements that distinguishes democracy from other forms of government and ensures that power is exercised in a just and equitable manner. The recognition of civil rights creates space for plurality. The concern here lies in the fact that the liberal state brings about the achievement of freedom and political pluralism, yet in a manner somehow constrained by democratic and legal principles.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that a democracy is sustained through the consent of the governed, which is not unconditional. Such consent depends on the government fulfilling its promises and acting in accordance with democratic principles; however, at present, this no longer appears to be sufficient—particularly in light of the overwhelming speed of digital technologies. Democratic legitimacy, therefore, is not static;

it must be continuously renewed through responsible, participatory, and transparent action on the part of those in power, as well as through the active participation of citizens.

Corruption, institutional inefficiency, and social exclusion lead to a crisis in the social acceptance of power when the needs and expectations of citizens are not met by the existing political system. In democratic regimes, this dynamic can lead to disillusionment with the democratic process itself. Eventually, it can result in the erosion of trust in institutions, creating an environment conducive to the emergence or reemergence of authoritarian movements, as evidenced by historical waves.

Discussions surrounding the concept of legitimacy, or the social acceptance of power, are a cornerstone of democracy. For a democratic system to be legitimate, its two foundational elements—participation and representativeness—must coexist. Legitimacy is not guaranteed; rather, it must be continuously cultivated and reinforced through solid, transparent practices. When these elements are compromised, democracy risks entering a state of crisis that endangers its survival.

2.2. Legitimacy vs. Legality

The clear distinction between the concepts of legitimacy and legality, especially in the context of democracies, constitutes an essential component of Bobbio's analyses. Though interrelated, these concepts carry distinct meanings and implications within the sphere of political power and democratic institutions. In political discourse, "legality" is understood as "a requirement of power; hence, it is said that a power is legal, acts legally, or bears the hallmark of legality when it is exercised within the scope of, or in accordance with, established or at least accepted laws" (Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino 1998, 1: 674, our translation). In a democratic context, legality is essential to maintaining order and ensuring the regular functioning of institutions. Elections, for example, must be conducted according to each sovereign state's specific legal rules to be considered valid. Likewise, the exercise of power must comply with the constitution and existing laws.

Although there is no global standard for conducting elections, each sovereign state regulates its electoral process based on its political history, legal traditions, and institutional arrangements. These procedures may differ in terms of periodicity, suffrage design, party-finance regimes, or the role of technology in vote counting; nevertheless, principles such as equal participation, freedom of expression, equal weight of the vote, integrity and transparency of procedures, and mechanisms of oversight are widely accepted as foundational to the democratic process. The full realization of democracy requires not only formal equality, or the guarantee of the right to vote, but also substantive equality, or the effective production of representation and political influence through voting. Moreover, it must be recognized that, while democracy requires competition among political actors, unchecked competition can suppress minorities if safeguards, such as the inclusion of socially vulnerable groups, are absent. Legitimacy does not arise merely from the fact that "a vote has taken place," but rather from conditions in which multiple voices participate in the democratic process, voters have access to diverse, fact-based information, and there are effective mechanisms to review and contest irregularities.

Legality is a fundamental requirement for the stability of any political system as it ensures that power is exercised within agreed-upon and publicly known limits. However, this should not be confused with legalism, the opportunistic or instrumental use of the law. As Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino (1998) noted, "legitimation cannot rest on belief in legality; [...] the legitimation of the political authority of the state must seek another foundation" (Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino 1998, 1: 405). Legitimacy is therefore linked to the acceptance of power based on criteria that include justice, moral validity, and governmental effectiveness. In other words, a regime may comply fully with legal norms yet still be questioned in terms of legitimacy if it lacks public support and trust.

The distinction between legitimacy and legality is particularly relevant for democratic analysis. In a democracy, legality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for legitimacy. Situations may arise in which parliamentary majorities approve measures that, while legal, violate minority rights or fail to reflect social demands; under such circumstances, the legitimacy of the government may be contested. In this context, Bobbio

warns of two possible radical responses—civil disobedience and veto power—within scenarios of political decision-making that may undermine governability and legitimacy even within a formally democratic legal order:

> In the case of civil disobedience, for example, one could cite a situation where the number of people who refuse to comply with an order issued by the authorities, or for that matter a parliamentary law, is so great that it makes repression practically impossible. As for the veto, it can happen that a single vote or the vote of a single group is decisive in forming a majority, something that happens publicly every day in Italy in the coalitions of the Christian Democrats with minor parties, which hold the balance of power needed to convert a relative majority into an absolute one. (Bobbio 1987, 77)

Although this passage refers to the Italian democratic context of the 1980s, it points to two enduring dangers deeply embedded in political life. The first concerns how the loss of legitimacy in decision-making can lead to civil disobedience, the weakening of state authority, and, in extreme cases, the collapse of the political system. The second relates to how the formation of highly influential political groups may hinder institutional functioning and compromise the progress of political decisions. Promoting legitimacy in a democracy is therefore crucial to preventing the erosion of legality from becoming the operative norm, making public approval and conformity with democratic values, such as justice, equality, and the protection of human rights, fundamental guides for political praxis.

Throughout history, democracy has faced many challenges, such as the exclusion of large parts of the population, the persistence of colonial and slaveholding structures, political instability marked by coups and authoritarian regimes, the concentration of economic power, and crises of representation. The consolidation of democracy is often a fragile and incomplete process, influenced by particular social, economic, and cultural contexts. However, this fragility is intrinsic to democracy itself because it reflects the historical and social dynamism that allows democracy to mature, strengthen, and undergo profound transformations. Contemporary

conditions have not eliminated earlier challenges. Rather, they have introduced new elements of tension and complexity into the debate.

Contemporary democracies face a distinctive set of adversities that profoundly affect their legitimacy. Among the most salient are pluralism, globalization, and digitalization. Each of these factors points toward a decentralization of political power, an expansion in individuals' capacity for organization around increasingly specific demands, and the heightened agency enabled by digital interconnections.

Pluralism is a constitutive element of modern democracies, which are based on the coexistence of multiple interests, values, and identities within society. Bobbio raises the following question: "So what does it mean to say that democracy must come to terms with pluralism?" To which he offers a direct response: "It means that the democracy of a modern state has no alternative but to be a pluralistic democracy" (Bobbio 1987, 59). Nonetheless, pluralism can also generate tensions and challenges to legitimacy, particularly in contexts of excessive polarization or when certain groups feel marginalized or underrepresented. As Bobbio cautions, "There is no reason why there should not exist a non-democratic pluralist society and a non-pluralist democracy" (Bobbio 1987, 58). In other words, pluralism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. When democratic institutions fail to adequately reflect social diversity, their legitimacy is called into question. Democratic legitimacy may be threatened if pluralism becomes a source of division and exclusion rather than inclusion. The proliferation of agendas and social actors must not contribute to the fragmentation of the public sphere and requires the political system to have a greater capacity for negotiation and for accommodating demands.

Although not without controversy, globalization is frequently identified as another factor affecting democratic legitimacy. In this regard, Daniel Sarmento observes:

> The structural shift in the international order is one of the most visible causes of the definitive demise of the idea that the state holds a monopoly on the production of legal norms. Indeed, as the national-state loses vigor, swallowed by the unstoppable force of economic globalization, supranational

> bodies of power are strengthened. (Sarmento 1999, 24, our translation)

Attention must be paid to the transfer of the notion of legal norms—and the presumption of legality inherent in them—to the realm of legitimacy. Even so, it seems reasonable to accept the thrust of the critique that economic, political, and cultural interconnection among nations has expanded the boundaries of governance, but has also brought new challenges. After all, globalization has redefined the contours of state sovereignty and imposed on national democracy the need to operate within an increasingly interdependent decision-making space, and the phenomenon of deglobalization—marked by the resurgence of nationalism and protectionism—adds new uncertainties and volatilities, making the interplay between democracy, the economy, and geopolitics even more complex.

Decisions that have been referred to supranational bodies—which are less open to scrutiny by elected governments—should not be understood as a criticism of multilateralism. On the contrary, multilateralism is an indispensable tool for addressing challenges that transcend national borders. The concern here relates to legitimacy, which certain groups perceive as eroding: its republican authority depends on mechanisms that render it accountable to citizens, such as deliberative transparency, accountability procedures, instruments of transnational civic participation, and clauses of subsidiarity and reversibility that limit permanent delegations of sovereignty. The issue, therefore, is not to restore an isolationist notion of national sovereignty, but to democratize it to the extreme, so that citizen agency—understood in Bobbio's terms as the holder of rights and duties regulated by law—remains effective even when decisions cross borders.

Democracies must thus find ways to respond to global pressures without sacrificing democratic control or citizen sovereignty. It is worth recalling Bobbio's preference for the term "citizen" over "the people":

> I have often said that when we refer to democracy, it would be more correct to speak of the sovereignty of citizens, rather than sovereignty of the people. 'People' is an ambiguous term, which has been used by all the modern dictatorships.

> It is an abstraction which can be deceiving: it is not clear what sections of the individuals living on a given territory constitute the 'people'. Collective decisions are not taken by the people, but by the individuals it is composed of, whether they are many or few. (Bobbio 2005, 96)

Citizen sovereignty is inextricably linked to social participation, and the digitalization driven by the technological revolution has had a profound impact on the legitimacy of contemporary democracies and has transformed the dynamics of political communication and citizen participation. This is due to the exponential expansion of information circulation and the reduction of barriers to public debate, altering the way citizens interact with politics and institutions at an alarming speed.

The same infrastructure that empowers social mobilization also facilitates the spread of misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and extremist discourse. The logic of digital platforms, driven by engagement metrics, can prioritize polarizing and emotionally charged content, distorting democratic debate and eroding trust in institutions. Furthermore, the asymmetry in access to and the capacity for critical use of digital technologies accentuates political inequalities, creating new forms of exclusion and concentration of power. While, on the one hand, digitization can strengthen legitimacy by increasing transparency and facilitating new forms of political participation, on the other, it can erode it by amplifying misinformation, promoting polarization, and weakening rational public debate.

Bobbio did not witness the full emergence of the digital age (and certainly the full realization of the digital age has not yet been achieved), but his concerns about the crisis of the public sphere remain central: democratic legitimacy can only be sustained if the public sphere is characterized by informed and pluralistic debate. Today, the proliferation of fake news and the use of algorithms that amplify biases, reinforce prejudices, and create echo chambers compromise the quality of public deliberation, undermining trust in institutions and thereby weakening democratic legitimacy itself.

The concept of the "political public sphere" (Habermas 1991; 2007) complements Bobbio's analysis, suggesting that the fragmentation of public communication into ideological bubbles can hinder the building of consensus, which is essential for democratic legitimacy. Digitalization, therefore, presents a dual challenge: while it can democratize access to information, it also requires new forms of regulation and education to preserve its legitimacy.

For Bobbio, democratic legitimacy is not limited to formal compliance with the law: it equally requires citizens' trust in the institutions that govern them. For him, in the 20th century, there was a dual movement—the strengthening of international bodies alongside "steady weakening of the state's power within individual nations, except in those states where military power has gained the upper hand over political power." (1987, 143). In light of this ambivalence, a dual normative task is required: on the one hand, to strengthen international bodies—as indispensable instruments for addressing transnational problems and providing assistance to states lacking administrative or normative capacity; on the other, to rebuild domestic governance through policies of institutional strengthening, transparency, and citizen participation.

Another issue that stands out as a significant manifestation of the crisis of legitimacy in contemporary democracies is the rise of populism, which can be seen as a response to the perception that traditional political elites no longer represent the interests of the majority of citizens. Populist leaders often position themselves as outsiders who promise to restore the true voice of the people, challenging established institutions and, often, democratic norms. Populism can emerge in dangerous contexts, where the legitimacy of institutions is deeply questioned, and where there is a widespread sense that representative democracy is not functioning as it should. Populist leaders frequently attack the independence of the judiciary, press freedom, and other safeguards, claiming that these institutions are colluding with certain groups that are out of touch with citizens' interests. This attack on institutions can escalate, weakening the foundations of the democratic system and leading to extreme polarization of society. One response to this attack would be to combine institutional defense with inclusive reforms that directly address social concerns.

Populist leaders tend to concentrate power, and one consequence of this can be the erosion of citizen participation. Bobbio emphasizes that the active participation of citizens is intrinsically linked to the legitimacy of a democratic system. In a note to the book *The Future of Democracy* (1986), Marco Aurélio Nogueira comments on Bobbio: "For him, democracy is, in essence, a method of government, a set of procedural rules for the formation of collective decisions, in which the broad participation of stakeholders is both provided for and facilitated" (1986, 5, our translation).

The erosion of political participation is a condition for questioning the system's legitimacy, as the government may be seen as less representative and less accountable for the commitments made to the population. The creation of innovations that enhance the level and quality of political participation is fundamental and may represent a response to this scenario—though challenging, given the rapid digital transformations permeating this discussion.

The growing complexity of political processes, coupled with misinformation and inadequate political education, can lead to citizen disengagement and alienation. Crises of legitimacy in contemporary democracies have structural and complex causes that manifest through an increasingly multifaceted reality. These issues are symptoms of a broader problem: the disconnect between democratic institutions and the citizens they are meant to represent and serve. This disconnect has been exacerbated by shifts in social and technological dynamics that debates on the subject have failed to keep pace with due to the rapid rate of these changes.

To address these crises, it is crucial that contemporary democracies renew and reinvent themselves, seeking to restore trust in institutions, promote greater inclusion and political participation, and resist authoritarian and populist tendencies. Democracy can only survive if it can maintain legal and moral legitimacy, responding effectively to the needs and aspirations of citizens in a fair and inclusive manner.

3. Institutions and Democracy: An Ongoing Challenge?

Norberto Bobbio offers a crucial perspective on the role of democratic institutions in preserving legitimacy. This perspective takes on new

dimensions when applied to the field of international relations, marked by economic and social asymmetries as well as the capture of decision-making spheres. For Bobbio, institutions are not mere formal structures; they are essential for the realization of democratic principles and for the reproduction and maintenance of political and social order. In this context, Bobbio argues that:

> It is also appropriate to specify [...] that while democracy as a method is indeed open to all possibilities, it is equally adamant in demanding that its institutions be respected, because all its advantages as a method hinge on this respect, and among these institutions it is the political parties alone which are authorized to act as intermediaries between individuals and government (Bobbio 1987, 20)

In democratic states, political parties continue to play an essential mediating role. However, their ability to translate social demands into public policy has been eroded by processes of political precariousness and by forms of capture by private interests. At the international level, Bobbio's reflections urge us to view multilateral organizations not merely as technical arenas, but as normative institutions whose legitimacy depends on representativeness, transparency, and clear links to domestic and transnational democratic mechanisms. These organizations help regulate interstate relations and implement norms that reverberate in the lives of societies—from labor rights to environmental policies—which is why their democratization is a political and ethical imperative.

When the legitimacy of international institutions comes under question (whether due to opacity in negotiations or an inability to respond to humanitarian and health crises), a democratic deficit emerges that cannot be resolved with mere technocratic rhetoric. The perception that certain international organizations are ineffective, or the suspicion that their decisions reflect the interests of dominant powers, fuels skepticism and nationalist and neoliberal narratives that seek to dismantle collective governance. Crises such as the Syrian conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate how failures in social protection erode trust in global institutions.

To preserve and strengthen their legitimacy, international institutions must reflect social diversity, continually adapting to transformations and incorporating effective mechanisms for the representation of countries of the South and for accountability that correct asymmetries and limit capture by private interests. Reforms such as the reconfiguration of the UN Security Council, the democratization of international financial agencies, and the creation of transnational deliberative forums are necessary—albeit insufficient—steps to address the inequality that characterizes contemporary global relations.

Bobbio's interpretation of the role of institutions in maintaining legitimacy serves as an important analytical tool for evaluating international institutions, especially when they operate in a context marked by the reproduction of capital rooted in global asymmetries. To preserve their legitimacy, they must act with a genuine commitment to justice, transparency, and effectiveness. In an interconnected global landscape, the legitimacy of supranational bodies will depend not only on their formal representativeness but on their capacity to redistribute power and resources, redress historical inequalities, and protect shared assets (i.e., health, climate, and social rights). Only in these circumstances will it be possible to sustain an international democratic order that moves beyond the mere technocratic management of global governance.

As a further point for reflection, it is worth noting that Bobbio's critical analysis resonates, on this point, with some of Hans Morgenthau's (2003) ideas regarding the limits of moral norms in the face of power dynamics. Ultimately, both Bobbio and Morgenthau compel us to confront the following question: how can democratic legitimacy be sustained in a world of asymmetries and interdependencies? The most progressive response involves rethinking institutions, strategies for global solidarity, and mechanisms of economic regulation that prioritize social protection, redistribution, and the de-commodification of essential goods. Current approaches to reflecting on democracy in the 21st century must also look to the past to reinvent themselves; after all, democracy is a reflection of the dynamism of the very society that builds it. It is through this social dynamic that democratic legitimacy is consolidated—or undermined—

based on its commitment not only to economic issues, viewed in isolation, but also to the guarantee of human rights.

The relationship between legitimacy and the protection of human rights is also a fundamental point for understanding how violations of these rights can generate crises of legitimacy. The dominant rhetoric presents the concept of human rights as neutral and universal, but this narrative obscures its selective political use: throughout history, Western powers have mobilized the discourse of human rights to legitimize interventions in rival countries, while remaining silent in the face of violations committed by allies. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018), the proclaimed universality conceals a geopolitics of law, in which the application of norms depends more on power relations than on universal ethical principles, and "human rights and democracy may be invoked but only as a form of deception" (2018, 21). For Bobbio, it is "through the link between peace and human rights that the perspective of the governed and of citizenship is established as a principle of democratic governance" (2004, 10[3]), i.e., the legitimacy of a democratic system is deeply linked to respect for human rights and social justice.

Although democracy may formally guarantee civil and political rights, it does not in itself ensure the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights. Norberto Bobbio (1987) drew attention to the gap between the promise and the realization of rights, but authors such as Amartya Sen (1999) and Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruza, and Tithi Bhattacharya (2019) took this further by introducing the idea that structural inequality and economic exclusion erode the very meaning of citizenship. Neoliberal logic, by prioritizing markets and weakening social protections, can become an anti-democratic force, weakening the state, limiting redistributive policies, and transforming human rights into commodities accessible only to those who can pay. Thus, it is emphasized that violations do not stem solely from authoritarian regimes, but also from democracies captured by corporate interests.

Norberto Bobbio also maintains that "the demand for 'respect' for human rights and fundamental freedoms arises from the universally

3 Excerpt taken from the Portuguese version.

shared conviction that they have a foundation: the problem of the foundation is inescapable" (2004, p.57). For him, a democracy is only truly legitimate if it guarantees and protects the fundamental rights of *all* its citizens. Giuseppe Tosi notes that Bobbio asserts the importance of human rights as a criterion for "verifying the quality of a democracy" (2020, 243), and how hate speech and discourses based on the slogan "a good criminal is a dead criminal" mask a dangerous and distorted attack on the social contract.

In *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989), Robert A. Dahl discusses how legitimacy in democracies is sustained by the inclusion and participation of citizens in governance, which aligns with the need for international institutions to act to protect human rights globally. Dahl suggests that the legitimacy of a democratic regime is strengthened by its ability to ensure that all citizens have an effective voice in the political process. This has implications for what international institutions such as the UN and the International Criminal Court must do to maintain their own legitimacy.

New challenges—namely, climate migration, the impacts of artificial intelligence, and digital governance concentrated in big tech—make it clear that democracy can only protect human rights if it is radicalized and inclusive. This means that the institutionalization of popular participation must be strengthened beyond the ballot box. Democracy must break with competitive individualism and rediscover its collective foundation, capable of confronting ecological collapse and new forms of technological domination. Without this break and this deepening, both democracy and human rights will remain unfulfilled promises in a fair and inclusive manner.

4. Concluding Remarks

Throughout this text, a critical reflection on the legitimacy and challenges of democracies has been presented, using the work of Norberto Bobbio as a central theoretical reference. For Bobbio, democratic legitimacy is not limited to mere legal compliance, but depends on the active and effective participation of citizens, the representativeness of institutions, and the robust protection of fundamental rights. These pillars underpin

public trust and act as buffers against trends that erode democratic stability, such as the decline in political participation and the rise of authoritarian and populist agendas.

Pluralism and digitalization, along with globalization (and deglobalization), present complex challenges that affect democratic legitimacy. Pluralism only fosters inclusion when accompanied by public policies that guarantee equal opportunities and representation for marginalized groups. Globalization necessitates the democratization of supranational bodies, as regulatory shifts without democratic safeguards undermine the sovereignty of peoples and deepen inequalities. Digitalization, which, a priori, expands access to information, also fragments the public sphere and spreads misinformation, increasing the concentration of power; addressing these risks requires the regulation of platforms, investment in digital literacy, and deliberative mechanisms that enhance the quality of participation.

The relationship between legitimacy and human rights is a central and normative pillar of democratic legitimacy, given that the defense and protection of human rights are a prerequisite for the public perception of justice and legitimate governance. Systematic violations of rights or the inability to guarantee them widen legitimacy deficits and fuel mistrust and imbalances of justice in global governance.

Strengthening social safety nets, deepening multilateral cooperation through the promotion of more democratic multilateral structures, binding instruments for citizen participation, and technological regulation of global public goods are essential lines of analysis in the process of strengthening democratic legitimacy. The combination of legality, social justice, and institutional innovation will allow democracy to renew itself and fulfill its promises in the 21st century—even in the face of the challenges yet to come.

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Challenges of Contemporary Democracy for a Cosmopolitan Constitutional Democracy: The Garantismo[1] as a Model[2]

Javier Miranda[3]

Malaise with Democracy and the Challenges

In these times, it has become commonplace—properly, a *topos*, to the extent that it is also used in discourse as an argument—to affirm the existence of a disenchantment, a discomfort with democracy. This is accompanied by the feeling – and the weakly contested assertion—that politics has moved away from its representative foundations. In public discourse, one hears over and over again the allegation that we are governed by an elite driven by its own interests, disconnected from the needs and aspirations of the people.

This is a descriptive discourse of a reality for which there is relevant evidence. But it is also a performative discourse that, through its formulation, constitutes, *makes real*, what it enunciates. Part of the disenchantment is caused by this corrosive discourse of democracy.

1 The Italian word *garantismo* (the same in Spanish) has not a precise translation into English. This expression evokes a conception of law as a system of guarantees or warranties constitutionally established (Moreso 2021, 606).

2 This text was originally written in Spanish and then translated into English with the help of my English teacher, Gabriella Remedi. I thank Gabriela for her work.

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This is the discourse of current heads of government such as Javier Milei and Donald Trump. Paradoxically, it is also the discourse of the far right and *libertarians*.[4] The paradox lies in the fact that those who most harshly attack political practice, in addition to aspiring to reach or effectively exercise political power in society, are those who promote a political model of inequality, exclusion of migrants, non-Judeo-Christians, and those who do not share their values. They attack democracy and politics for being a game for the privileged today, while defending a model of society based on the exclusion of those who are different or those who think differently.

Of course, not all the discomfort with politics and democracy originates from in these currents that spread on the basis of noise and rupture today. The suspicion and recurring observations that, in reality, public decisions often do not reflect the common good, but rather agreements between privileged sectors, contribute to many people feeling alienated from the system. Added to this are the growing economic inequality and the socially produced concentration of wealth. The gap between rich and poor is widening. The rich accumulate more wealth, while the number of poor people has remained relatively unchanged since 1990.[5] And this occurs in a world that produces enough wealth to provide a dignified life for the entire population of the planet.[6] While thousands and thousands of people die from a lack of drinking water, sufficient food, or basic medicine, a few rich people or those aspiring to be rich finance startups, gamble in the fintech industry,or promote the arms industry, whose product is none other than objects to kill human beings.

Inequality and injustice, added to the serious difficulties a large number of people face in meeting their basic needs (food, health, housing, and education) is fertile ground for the emergence of two types of reactions, two types of reactionaries. One type is the dispensable individual who considers participation in the construction of society a sterile task, which nothing can change. It is the face of disaffection, today reflected in the low participation of the population in electoral processes or in spaces of

4 These libertarians should not be confused with the libertarians of the anarchist tradition. Between one and the other there is an abyss of ideas and proposals for the organization of society.

5 https://www.oxfam.org/es/letters-and-statements.

6 https://un.org/es/global-issues/food.

citizen participation. The other type, vaguely anti-system, proposes a radical break with the egalitarian democratic model. "*Que se vayan todos*" (let them all go), chanted the demonstrators in Buenos Aires in December 2001, when the president-elect resigned and fled the government house by helicopter. Alternative leaderships are thus emerging that impose a new model of security with a heavy hand. This option usually starts with a simple, easy-to-understand diagnosis that lacks depth or evidence, which identifies "the problem"—immigrants, gangs, crime, etc.—and proposes authoritarian solutions, of uncontrolled exercise of power, to put an end to the enemy thus created. This is the basis on which the oxymoron of *illiberal democracy* is built.

There is thus a subjective malaise that manifests itself as a daily indifference to democracy and a rejection of its most complex and compromising assumptions. This gives rise to apathy together with protest, a rabid response (Galli 2013, 9).

Meanwhile, it happens that objectively democratic nation states do not have enough power to face the challenges that arise for human coexistence. There are challenges that cannot be met at the level of the national state. Consider the environmental and climate challenges. No action by an individual state has the capacity to prevent the climate transformations that affect its populations. Think also of organized crime. A response on a domestic scale is not adequate with respect to this either. The large migratory flows that stress the welfare states of rich countries do not allow for an effective and humane response implemented from the local level. The recent COVID-19 pandemic showed that not even health is a domestic issue. There are many more examples of challenges that do not stop at artificial national borders.

On the other hand, in a world where the economy and communications function on a planetary scale, the real possibilities of deciding at the level of a national government are scarce, if not non-existent. The political leadership of the national state has limited and weak decision-making power in the face of the economic power and influence of large, infinitely more powerful transnational private corporations. For example, the economic dimension of Uruguay—a country classified as a full democracy

by *The Economist*'s 2024 Democracy Index[7]—is almost four times smaller than the annual turnover of Alphabet, Google's parent company.[8] What power does the Uruguayan political system have to impose conditions in a negotiation with Google?

In addition, the national actors of democracy are subject to the tension and temptation to access or maintain political power in short cycles between elections. Both government and opposition parties are usually more concerned with opinion polls and upcoming elections than with the transformations necessary for the well-being of their people.

> Modern politics knows only restricted spaces and short times… It is afflicted with localism and presenteeism… Democracy thus comes into conflict with political rationality, that is, with the long-term interests of the democratic countries themselves, and is in danger of collapsing. (Ferrajoli 2025, 23)

In this context, contemporary democracy faces the challenge of rebuilding bridges between rulers and the governed, revitalizing mechanisms of participation and promoting organized and reflective political action. Overcoming discontent, apathy and irrational rebellion requires institutional reforms and the promotion of a new political culture that restores the centrality of trust, deliberation, and equality. It also requires—especially from those who are particularly dedicated to analyzing and thinking about models of social organization—a reopening of the discussion on *the grammar of democracy*.

> There are times when the need for a grammar is more felt. They are those in which abnormal linguistic uses suddenly assert themselves, often simplified with respect to the previous ones: abnormal to such an extent that they appear as errors of grammar, but so widespread and repeated that they end up imposing themselves almost as new rules. (Bovero 2002, 11)

7 https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/.

8 Uruguay's GDP in 2023 was USD 77,885 million (https://www.uruguayxxi.gub.uy/es/monitor-macro/), while Alphabet advertised an annual turnover of more than USD 300,000 million that same year (https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/las-ganancias-de-alphabet-(google)-aumentan-impulsadas-por-la-publicidad,-la-nube-y-la-ia).

This means rediscussing the definition of democracy and questioning the purpose of this form of government. Justifying the democratic option is also important. Finally, the risk of thinking beyond the limits accepted today and proposing a new model of democracy must be taken.

The following lines are structured around these questions as a preliminary outline of a political project. From the outset, I must acknowledge the lack of originality of this proposal. The purpose of this text is to amplify and promote knowledge of the proposal for a cosmopolitan constitutional democracy launched by Luigi Ferrajoli and *Costituente Terra* in 2020.[9] In this way, "to avoid defeatist and paralyzing pessimism, destined to become the resigned acceptance of what exists" (Ferrajoli 2022, 124), I pledge to the gestation of a universal civic commitment that goes beyond interpreting the world and proposes its transformation (Marx, "11th Thesis on Feuerbach", in Engels and Marx 2006, 59).

Democracy and Its Definition

A probably common basis for defining *democracy* is that it is a form of government. This implies describing (stipulating) the mechanisms of political decision-making within a given community. That is what a *form of government* consists of.

I would like to offer some analytical considerations on what I have just stated, as I believe that this will make it possible to outline the elements of a definition of democracy.

To define implies to stipulate. There is no such thing as *democracy* in and of itself. In any case, there are some political experiences and also certain exemplary ideas that we agree to identify with the expression *democracy*. The definition of a theoretical concept is a construction made by the one who defines; it is a stipulation. One variable for accepting a theoretical definition is its explanatory capacity, its ability to account for the elements that make up the structure of the phenomenon that is its reference, the necessary but also sufficient elements. In this way, although

9 https://www.costituenteterra.it

stipulative, a theoretical definition aims to align with the common usage of the expression that identifies reality.

From what has been said, it can be deduced that a theoretical definition, in addition to being essential—without it, all debate is impossible due to a lack of specification of its object—has a descriptive and simultaneously normative function. Highlighting the necessary and sufficient identification elements presupposes a description and, simultaneously, a choice by the person making the definition. In this last aspect, evaluative decisions are involved. The definition of democracy that is adopted is therefore not aseptic; it has implications for the model of social organization that is described, and is proposed according to axiological assumptions.

Secondly, the goal was said to be describing and stipulating the *decision-making mechanisms*. These mechanisms are expressed in norms, in rules of behavior. It is legal norms adopted by the community of reference that prescribe the valid method of decision-making. The result of that activity is, in turn, a set of rules. These rules—which we call Law (in force in that community)—basically establish which behaviors are allowed, prohibited, or mandatory for the members of the community. That is what decisions consist of. Mechanisms and decisions imply and constitute legal norms. There is no democracy without legal norms.

The mechanisms, the rules that regulate the decision-making method, not only establish the steps to be followed to reach the decision. They regulate, of course, the acts necessary to adopt a decision, yes, but they also determine who is authorized to carry out those acts. These norms establish *who* has the power to make political decisions and *how* that power is to be exercised to ensure valid decisions are made (Bobbio 2001, 24–25).

It is peacefully accepted that in modern democracies it is the people (*dêmos*), and only the people, who have the power (*krátos)* to make decisions that are binding on all members of the political community.

Now, decision-making, like all power, also has legally imposed limits. The game of coexistence necessarily supposes the limitation of all power, from that of the physically strongest to that which is economically or socially strong. The game of democratic politics is defined by the establishment

of limits on all powers that are otherwise *savage powers* (Ferrajoli 2011c, 45–46, note 2). Social coexistence between savage powers is impossible.

Boundaries refer to the form of decision-making, who has power, and how to *validly* exercise that power. Not just anyone, nor under any procedure, can effectively establish decisions that are binding on all those to whom they are addressed. We then speak of the formal validity of decisions. These are the formally valid decisions.

In contemporary constitutional democracies, however, the validity of decisions does not depend solely on how they are adopted. In fact, in systems of rigid constitutionalism,[10] the content of legal decisions is also subject to control. Precisely, what characterizes the *constitutional rule of law* (Ferrajoli 2011a, 461–464) is formal control and also substantial control, the *conformity* and *coherence* of legislative decisions with the Constitution.

The foregoing considerations are intended to substantiate the insufficiency of a purely procedural definition of democracy. It is not enough to establish *who* has the power to make decisions (the people or the people through their elected representatives) and *how* those decisions should be made (majority rule). Even authors who postulate a minimum and procedural definition of democracy, such as Bobbio (2005, 460), Bovero (2014, 18–21), Dahl (2012, 43–47), and others, establish certain criteria, conditions and preconditions of democracy that refer to content. These criteria, conditions and preconditions, as necessary elements of the stipulation of the meaning of democracy, are categories of its definition. Therefore, what can or should be the object of decision—the substantial dimension—must also be part of the definition of democracy (Ferrajoli 2001, 343–347).

Thirdly, there was talk of *political* decisions. This means that the matter regulated by these decisions is that which refers to the *polis*, to the city, to common life, to the *community*. The object of regulation is coexistence. Law is the regulation of life in society. Hence a double limitation on the power to make political decisions: only the behaviors and solely those

10 Constitutional rigidity implies that the Constitution is the norm of the highest hierarchy of the legal system defined by it, not subordinate to any other norm. This structural feature is complemented by the establishment of special procedures for its review and the jurisdictional control of conformity and coherence of any other norm of lower hierarchy (Ferrajoli 2011b, 85–88).

that may affect others can be subject to legal regulation. Anything that a subject does which does not affect other individuals is outside the scope of legal regulation and cannot be its object (Ferrajoli 2005, 481–483).

This has a further implication: the political community is defined, constituted by that set of rules that establish the *who*, *how* and *what* of decisions. With this I want to emphasize that political communities do not exist before these rules. It is these norms—and, in particular, in constitutional regimes, precisely the Constitution—that constitute the community, the people. I thus reject the idea of the *nation* as a political entity that existed before the Constitution (Schmitt 2003, 46, 234). I affirm that a people is not the result of a pre-existing community of values, beliefs, culture, race, languages, or similar characteristics that that a constitutional text collects and reflects. On the contrary, it is the constitutional political pact that gives life to a political community (Ferrajoli 2011a, 368–369; 2011b, 51–53). This conclusion has far-reaching consequences when it comes to proposing a planetary citizenship, a *cosmopolis* (universal city).

In short, the stipulation of a definition that contains an explanatory scope of that contemporary phenomenon that we call constitutional democracy must incorporate the *who*, *how* and *what* of the power to make valid political decisions in the community thus defined. The *who* and the *how* define the *formal dimension* (the form of decision-making), while the *what* defines the *substantial dimension* (the necessary content of the decisions) (Ferrajoli 2011a, 873–874).

The formal dimension of democracy implies, on the one hand, that the people, and only the people, have the power to make political decisions in the community. In contemporary constitutional democracies, that power is entrusted to the political representatives of that people. For this reason, democracy demands ensuring the effective political participation of the members of the people in determining who those representatives are. This implies guaranteeing the political rights to elect representatives and to be elected as a representative, as well as the rights to political autonomy. However, as was recently said, the guarantee must be of *effective participation*. This implies that the conditions for participation must also be guaranteed. And this involves other fundamental rights, such as those

of information, expression, and association; in general, all the rights of freedom. Now, participation and the exercise of the rights of freedom, as well as the political rights to elect and be elected, are a chimera without the basic guarantee of social rights, especially food, health, and education.

As can be seen, the formal dimension of democracy also implies its substantial dimension. The form of government is defined according to its purpose, by its social reason. That brings us to the next point.

What Is Democracy For? Why Democracy?

Let us agree that the state, the political organization, is a human artifice whose *raison d'être* is the realization of the fundamental rights of people.

> In fact, thanks to art that great *Leviathan* is created which we call *a republic* or *State* (in Latin *civitas*) which is nothing but an artificial man, although of greater stature and robustness than the natural one for whose protection and defense it was instituted... the *salus populi* (the *salvation of the people*) is its business,... *equity* and laws, an artificial *reason* and *will*; *concord* is *health*; *sedition*, *disease*; *civil war*, *death*. Finally, the covenants by which the parts of this political body are created, combined, and united with each other resemble that *fiat*, or *make man*, pronounced by God in creation. (Hobbes 2017, 30)

Like every human association, like every institution considered as a subject, politics also has a reason for being, a *social reason* that identifies it. The social reason is the purpose that explains and justifies its institution (Ferrajoli 2011a, 437). In the case of the constitutional democratic state, its social reason is the realization of the fundamental rights of the associated members. What else have we created the state, that artifice suggested by Hobbes's metaphor, for if not to make possible the life of each person and life in community?

However, it should be noted that, beyond the metaphor, this institution is not the creation of a flesh-and-blood subject. I argue that the organicist metaphysical temptation must be avoided. The people—even through

their elected representatives—do not constitute a new juridical person, an autonomous and independent subject from each of the individuals who comprise it (contrary to the German juridical tradition of the *Volksgeist*, as enunciated, among others, by Savigny 1878, 31–33). The people, the citizens who decide, are the sum of each individual, of the decisions made singularly by each member of the political community (Bobbio 1987, 408). The particularity of contemporary democracy is that equal value is attributed to each individual decision, with the collective decision resulting from the sum of each individual decision (majority rule). This is the popular decision, or *vox populi*. Now, I emphasize that the people are not a (new) legal person constituted by legal norms, but rather a collective subject defined by its community of interests and rights that are universally and in equal measure attributed to its members (Ferrajoli 2011a, 365–367).

The political pact of coexistence on which the people are instituted and build the democratic form of government brings in itself equality in fundamental rights. Of course, this means equality in the rights of political participation, (which are at the basis of the decision-making mechanism), as well as equality in the other fundamental rights (civil, freedom, and social). Equality in rights is the guarantee of peaceful coexistence among members and enables the development of each and every one of the individuals that make up the political community. In the constituent pact, equality is not a descriptive judgment of reality, but a normative principle. Each human being is, in fact, different from another in his or her personal identity. In order to allow the full development of each person as a unique being, the pact of coexistence prescribes equality for all when it comes to attributing fundamental rights. For this normative attribution, identities such as race, ethnic origin, lineage, gender, political or religious opinions, languages, etc., are irrelevant. It is to protect and give value to these differences that the pact prescribes equality in rights (Ferrajoli 2019, 13–14). At the basis of this assumption is the ethical option for the equal dignity of persons.

This is the justification, now in ethical-political terms, for democracy as a form of social organization: the dignity of every human person, the equal value of every human being.

What Kind of Democracy?

By now, it should be clear that the model of democracy described and defended here is that of constitutional democracy. The theoretical model, as noted from the beginning, is the one proposed by Luigi Ferrajoli, synthesized in the happy titles of two of his works: *La costruzione della democrazia. Teoria del garantismo costituzionale* [The Construction of Democracy. Theory of Constitutional Guarantees] (Ferrajoli 2023) and *La democrazia attraverso i diritti. Il costituzionalismo garantista come modelo teorico e come progetto politico* [Democracy Through Rights. Guarantist Constitutionalism as a Theoretical Model and as a Political Project] (Ferrajoli 2014). I believe that these two titles clearly summarize the proposal.

First, in contrast to any form of authoritarian government, democracy presupposes a collective construction. In a time when the idea of a messianic leader who leads the people over and against the law seems fashionable again—forgetting the not so distant past of Nazism and Fascism—, we propose to reaffirm the government of laws rather than the government of men (Ferrajoli 2011a, 562 and bibliography cited therein). Once again, we reaffirm a basic principle of coexistence: all power subject to law, no power unregulated. Both political and economic power, as well as the power of the majority, even in a democracy, must be under the law.

This principle logically requires a norm superior to all other norms, from which the latter derive their existence and validity. That is what a constitution is: the highest-level norm of a legal system, constitutive of the political community. In this sense, it is the *rule of recognition* of the legal system that predicates the formal belonging of all other rules to the system. However, the constitution is also the one that sets the aims of social organization, the *social reason* of political organization. In order to achieve these objectives, the different institutional powers are distributed and organized. This is reflected in the common structure contemporary constitutional democracies' constitutions. The first part of the constitutional charters is dedicated to establishing the principles and purposes of the state organization. The second part is intended for the establishment of the different organs of government and control,

through the attribution of powers (functions), to achieve the purposes established in the first part.

As the superior norm of the system to which all powers are subject and all other norms are subordinate, then its rigidity must be ensured, through special reform procedures. In addition, since its scope refers both to the form (the *who* and the *how*) and content (the *what*) of subordinate decisions, of the constitutionality of these rules must be reviewed in terms of both form and content. This is what constitutional rigidity consists of.

In this way, the idea of sovereignty—understood as a power not limited by laws and that does not acknowledge a superior, even in a democracy—requires a redefinition. In effect, the supra-ordered and rigid constitutional establishment of the purposes of political association implies, of course, subjection to the forms of decision-making. It also imposes obligations and prohibitions concerning the content of such decisions—obligations that involve actions to satisfy social rights; prohibitions that imply limits on the exercise of powers to the detriment of the rights of liberty and civil and political autonomy. These links and limits reach not only all public authority, but also private subjects, particularly the economic powers that operate in the market. They also reach the rule of the majority. No majority has the legitimate power to disobey those obligations or violate those prohibitions rigidly imposed in the constituent pact. Popular sovereignty cannot therefore be conceived and defended as the absolute power of the majority. From the statement that the people and only the people can decide, one could infer a power without limits. In the face of this idea, one could argue that *popular sovereignty* can only mean that no one but the people have the ultimate decision-making power. In a democratic system, no person—no monarch or other "powerful" individual or group—can legitimately claim decision-making power over the community. On the other hand, *popular sovereignty* means that each and every member of the people—remember the notion of the people as a collective subject whose members are united by the community of interests and by the equal ownership of fundamental rights—has decision-making power. No one, not even a macro-subject metaphysician, can dispose of what is not theirs: those rights universally and in equal measure attributed to

the members of the people, which are the fundamental rights (Ferrajoli 2011b, 13–14).

In this way, the Constitution stands as the political pact of coexistence, a rigid pact, whose purpose to guarantee the fundamental rights of all members of the community. This establishes the limits and links, the prohibitions and obligations, correlative to the rights that are the purposes of the association. Thus, what the contractualist tradition of the Enlightenment (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) conceived as the metaphor of the *social contract*, is expressed in contemporary constitutional democracies in a real and tangible pact: the Constitution, which institutes the political community. Above that covenant there is no sovereign power, no unlimited power not regulated by it. Even the power of constitutional reform is subject to its rules, through the mechanisms provided for and the incorporation of rigid clauses, of an unmodifiable *coto vedado* (forbidden preserve) (Garzón Valdés 1989, 157). It is also possible, of course, that these entrenchment clauses will in fact be modified. However, this would mean entering a new order and breaking with the old one, which would inaugurate a new rule of recognition resulting from the exercise of a constituent power (Ferrajoli 2014, 79).

It is therefore understandable that the democratic constitutional model is a guarantist one, realized through the fundamental rights recalled in the two titles mentioned at the beginning of this section. Constitutional democracy also presupposes a political project based on the three pillars set out here: a rigid constitution, the subjection of all powers to legal rules, and the purpose of realization of the fundamental rights of the members of the political community thus defined.

A Cosmopolitan Constitutional Democracy. *Garantismo*

Having outlined the grammar of constitutional democracy, I want to return at this point to the objective challenges humanity faces and its current organization on the basis of sovereign nation states.

At the beginning of this essay, I highlighted some urgent issues of life and coexistence that lay bare the impotence of national states to address them. The destruction of the environment; transnational organized crime;

the arrival of large numbers of dispossessed migrants who, fleeing the living conditions in their countries of birth, go to the borders of other countries in search of work and food; violations of the rights of liberty and despotism: these are just some of the phenomena that we witness daily and that exceed the capacity of local institution and policies to confront. There is no longer talk of the war that looms as a recurring threat on the horizon. Nor of *wars* that, when not experienced firsthand, are part of our daily lives. What kind of coexistence is possible within the framework of the use or threat of the uncontrolled use of force? And what response is possible for the attacked states if not the reciprocal response of arms, war or submission? The enormous power of transnational economic and financial corporations, whose social reason is to obtain profits or rents, equally denies the political action of the nation state. In the face of the economic and political power of the lords of insatiable growth and speculation in the financial markets, what policies for the protection of the worker and the dignification of work or the distribution or redistribution of wealth can a state implement on a national scale?

As outlined in the previous sections, the answer is the pact of subjection of all powers to the law. All power under the law; no unregulated power. No matter the power—economic, financial, physical force, markets, or agenda—no *savage power* is admissible. That is the experience of the constitutionalist paradigm.

Now, if this paradigm is not capable of subjecting powers to its rules because of the territorial scale to which it is currently anchored, the territorial dimension must be overcome. Since the economy, finance, production and trade factors, communications, and so many other aspects that determine people's lives of around the world are developed at a global level, the response must be equally global. Therefore, the alternative is to expand the constitutional paradigm beyond the states. A supranational constitutionalism of international law is necessary today.

The idea of a global organization of human coexistence is not new. Consider the federation of states regulated by cosmopolitan law proposed by Kant in *Perpetual Peace* (Kant 1999) or the (possible) confederation suggested by Kelsen in *Peace through Law* (Kelsen 2017), to cite two

classics. Above all, however, it is necessary to bear in mind the practical experience of an organization whose purpose was to ensure peace, respect for human rights and international law, as well as the promotion of social progress, in accordance with the purposes set forth in the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations.

Given the current state of international relations—wars, the blockade of political alternatives, inequality, and millions of people subjected to exploitation, hunger, and misery—it can be said that the United Nations is an example of the failure of the governance project beyond national states.

In response to this form of skepticism and resignation, it is worth noting, in the first place, the naturalistic fallacy that it embodies. From the present state of affairs of the world, it cannot be logically inferred that it ought to be this way; from what it is, it cannot be logically deduced what ought to be (it is *Hume's law* that denounces this *non sequitur*).[11] It is true that the Organization has not fulfilled the expectations and hopes with which it was born after the barbarity of the Second World War. However, I consider it a valuable attempt to subject relations between sovereign nation states to the law. In any case, from its current weakness and ineffectiveness—due to the political decision of those who make up the organization—it cannot be inferred that a supranational institutionality for global governance is unsuitable or impossible.

Precisely, the UN exhibits a weakness of origin: the principle of the sovereignty of nation states enshrined in its Article 2(7). This norm is in contradiction with the constitutional vocation of the Charter itself. The entire United Nations system has as its social reason "fundamental human rights [...] the dignity and worth of the human person [...] (and) equal rights of men and women" (second preambular paragraph of the Charter of the United Nations). In addition, it considers it is "essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law" (third preambular paragraph of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). In this normative framework, can it be maintained without contradiction that the so-called violations of human rights that

11 For an exceptional exposition of the naturalistic fallacy and its foundations, see Scarpelli 1971.

occur within the national borders of the member states are matters "essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state", according to the text of the aforementioned Article 2(7)? In the rule of law, the existence of sovereign subjects that are not subject to the rules of the system cannot be proposed. Neither the dignity of persons, nor equality in rights, nor the prevention of wars admits the sovereignty of nation states. As the subjection of all power to rules, the rule of law at the global level requires that "the concept of sovereignty be radically removed" (Kelsen 1989, 469).

Another determining cause of the shortcomings of the United Nations Organization has been the design of an institutional framework lacking checks and balances. Perhaps the veto power granted to the five permanent members of the Security Council is the most eloquent example of this lack of checks and balances, but it is not the only one.

Without prejudice to this, I believe that the most relevant deficit of the UN normative system is that of not establishing the correlative guarantees for the rights that it proclaims in so many international instruments.

Let me explain. The normative attribution of a right to a person logically implies that another person has either the obligation to perform an action that satisfies that right or the prohibition of injuring it. Now, it can happen—and, in fact, it does happen—that positive law attributes a right to a subject but does not subsequently determine who the holder of the obligation or prohibition implied is. Likewise, the legal system may omit to specify the content of the due behavior that satisfies the right. In these two situations of omission (subjective or objective), the attributed right is ineffective. The positive establishment of the correlative obligations and prohibitions (of links and limits) constitutes the *primary guarantee* of the respective attributed rights. In addition, in the face of disobedience of these obligations or violations of prohibitions (of primary guarantees), the legal system typically requires courts to annul invalid acts or to impose penalties for unlawful acts. These are the so-called *secondary guarantees*, which operate in the absence of action or effectiveness of the primary guarantees. It may also happen—and it does happen—that the positive order in question omits the positive regulation of these secondary

guarantees.[12] The absence of positivization of primary or secondary guarantees leads to the ineffectiveness of the norms that establish rights. This also contributes to the lack of confidence in the system.

In the United Nations system—and, in general, in all systems of international law currently in force—positive law does not go much further than the mere proclamation of rights. In terms of the correlative guarantees, there are usually obligations of respect on the part of the States and the adoption of legislative measures, but no more.[13]

In order to overcome the present experience, it is essential that global constitutionalism does not limit itself to enunciating the fundamental rights of individuals—which constitute the purposes of institutionality—but also establishes their guarantees, both primary and secondary.

This implies the need to establish the institutions and functions of the guarantees. Furthermore, in order to ensure the balance of power and avoid overflow, the separation of institutions and functions of government from those of guarantee must be ensured.

Obviously, this global institutional mechanism requires economic resources to be sustainable. For this reason, a global constitutional project must also contemplate a taxation system of equally global scope, which, through criteria of solidarity, progressivity, and redistribution, allows the financing of the common enterprise of humanity.

In the opening paragraphs of this section, I reiterated the need for all powers to be subject to the law, which does not include only the public or state authorities. In the contemporary world, as previously mentioned, large economic and financial corporations, in many cases, have much more power than nation states. And that certainly affects the conduct of politics at the public level. We live in an era of economic governance of politics; it is urgent and necessary to reassume the political governance of the economy

12 For this entire paragraph on the notion of *guarantee*, see Ferrajoli 2011a, §§ 3.5, 3.6, 10.16. This is the basic concept of *garantismo* as a theory and political project.

13 Paradigmatically, see the formulation of Articles 2 and 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Exceptional is the case of the Statute of the International Criminal Court, which typifies certain crimes and thus, like the state penal codes, establishes the prohibition of injury to "protected legal assets" (primary guarantee) and the mechanisms for criminal liability in case of violation (secondary guarantee).

(Ferrajoli 2022, 99), so that the social reason of the community ceases to be unlimited and suicidal growth and consumption for the obtaining of profits or rents by the lords of profit. For this reason, the traditional constitutional paradigm, built limit public power, must also be expanded to limit and link the power of the private sector.

The model we propose is synthesized today in Ferrajoli's book *Per una Costituzione della Terra. L'umanità al bivio* [For a Constitution of the Earth. Humanity at the Crossroads] (Ferrajoli 2022). The initiative to sketch a preliminary draft of a Constitution for the world proves that it is possible, that there are no theoretical or technical impediments to achieving the proposed leap in civilization. In any case, it depends on the political will—and also on courage—that we can move towards a more humane model of coexistence. In these lines, the only thing I have done is to summarize and highlight some of the ideas that I consider to be the main ones in this work. I intend to motivate the reader to turn to the work of this contemporary thinker. I also encourage adhesion to the project that we seek to promote worldwide through the organization *Costituente Terra*: generating a constituent movement from the ground up. I am convinced that there is a path here that restores our hope, reason and rationality in ethical and political commitment. I invite you to take a stand.

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India: The Democracy of a Fraternal Constitutional Contract

Biju B.L[1]

Introduction

Vasudhaiva kudumbakam (one earth, one family), a theme suggested by the Government of India during its G20 presidency, highlighted India's civilisational idea to engage with the global community. However, what code of conduct would India provide its citizens as members of that great global family? This paper makes a case for the Republic's constitutional fraternity, a human-centred common code of conduct in this respect. It will examine the distinctive formulation of fraternity, a foundational principle of the Indian constitution, as a helpful concept for conversations about global democracy. While arguing the case, this paper adheres to the norm that the discussion must be as wide as possible, including the strengths, weaknesses and operational difficulties of that principle in the country's context. I hardly endorse any nation's claim to a monopoly of any principle of democracy because these principles are the human mind's common property, and no nation-state needs to issue unidirectional advisories towards others on democracy. Therefore, the only objective here is to enrich the debates on global democracy by examining a country's experiments with a democratic principle.

India's great national leader and the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, once described the civilisational history of India as a palimpsest,

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showing multiple inscriptions written by many generations in different periods, overlapping with each other but without erasing any (Nehru 2008). This paper shares his vision, endorsing a generous approach to global democracy as well. Thus, it is not the task to prove which country's contribution is the original, the oldest and the strongest. Modestly, it upholds a conviction that India has a constitution to cradle democracy provided its people choose politics that uphold its foundational principles, chief among them being constitutional fraternity.

Besides the classical companions, such as equality and liberty, fraternity's recent definitions encompass respect for dignity, diversity, care, compassion, loyalty, obligation and togetherness (McWilliams 1973; Spicker 2006; Puyol 2019). India's constitution promotes fraternity in the widest sense. Fraternity in India is as important as liberty in American democracy. However, a public chanting of a civilisational verse is no more useful in strengthening fraternity in India than periodically painting the Statue of Liberty of the US to save its freedom.

Democratic principles—liberty, equality, and fraternity—are not glorious artefacts to be hoarded, displayed and paraded. The people must have an equal opportunity to secure them through their experiences. Thus, an open and critical understanding of politics greatly serves the very idea of democracy. The following account of the Indian experience of fraternity is divided into three parts: the historical antecedents of the idea in India, the constitutional provisions, and the practice of fraternity in Indian politics.

The Antecedents and the Vision

Compared to equality and liberty, fraternity was an idea that had more legitimacy in India's traditional social systems. The kinship-based social units of India's past highlighted its attributes, such as belonging to a group, loyalty to it, obligation, and togetherness. However, the people felt a sense of modern, liberal, egalitarian, expansive and inclusive fraternity in the colonial state, which enumerated them as individuals but identified them as part of enlarged forms of communities. While individualism emerged in this period, it was still far less vocal than community-based

political assertion. Fraternity tried to cross community boundaries of castes, religions and regions, but conflicting demands of their communities impacted the interaction between individuals. Therefore, any public solicitation for fraternity could not miss the community aspect, and this was more so when political fraternities began to claim state power. The moments of unity and divisions in the national movement greatly depended on the type of political fraternity preferred by the communities rather than individuals.

This continued during the pre-independence period, and the idea of nation and nationalism got plural given the preference of different political fraternities. Many organisations and groups subscribed to nationalism and chose a type of fraternity serving their group's interests. Equality, liberty, and respect for dignity were generally accepted in inter-community interactions, but the exclusive and inclusive political fraternities could pull the individuals in opposite directions. The major difference between exclusive and inclusive political fraternities regarding the terms and conditions of a fraternal contract depended on the degree to which they agreed to the other group's demands for equality, freedom, and dignity. Religion and caste became stronger bases of fraternity formation, followed by class, tribes, regions, and languages. Among these, religion, mainly Islam and Hinduism, could emerge as the most expansive categories of exclusive political fraternities, giving rise to a divisive idea called "communal nationalism."

A fraternal contract was impossible without addressing inequality, unfreedom, and injustice in the social relationship between the groups. The chief organiser of the anti-colonial movement, the Indian National Congress, was a country-wide advocate of harmony and unity among the people belonging to different religious, caste, class, and ethnic groups. For a long time during and after the freedom movement, the Congress influenced the Indian nation as a pluralist, inclusive, accommodative and representative entity, protecting the dignity of all. However, the Congress format was vulnerable to the pressure from different groups for equal dignity and political power. Furthermore, it had to tread a straight line between the Hindu and Muslim sectarian aspirations and conflicts. Therefore, the Congress's inclusive political fraternity was strained by

collaboration and conflict with several other political fraternities, especially the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha, and their visions of the nation and nationalism.

Respect for diversity and attention to dignity became inseparable from fraternity when India's leadership deliberated a constitutional scheme. The competitive Hindu and Muslim political fraternities' communal violence resulted in the partition of British India. It necessitated a consensus in the Constituent Assembly of India (1947–1950) to distinguish constitutional fraternity from all types of exclusive political fraternities. Its larger objective was to create a nation with a feeling of we-ness among the people (Gandhi 2024). Therefore, the Congress mostly emphasised non-discrimination as the basis of a fraternal relationship.

When the Assembly discussed fraternity, the nation's unity was also its objective. It was clear that many reasons for disunity were due to prevailing forms of inequalities and status differences. Therefore, to bring up fraternity between individuals, it became necessary to resolve the unequal and hierarchical relationship and interactions between various social groups, and most importantly, to ensure justice, equality and liberty in political, social and economic realms. Even if individuals are enlightened about fraternity, there must be a state to assure them equality of status and opportunity, freedom of thought, faith and expression and social, economic and political justice. Their fraternity will be greater when each agrees to these entitlements to all without discrimination, hatred, vengeance, pride, or prejudice.

The Assembly held a conviction that individuals with different group identities can only relate fraternally if the state is bound by a constitution that cares about their dignity. If one group feels their dignity is in question or is discriminated against, the complaint can turn the fraternity, and thus the nation, fragile. The partition of British India into two countries in 1947 demonstrated this. Trust is essential for fostering fraternity. The Assembly carefully designed a constitutional scheme to increase citizens' trust in the state and, more importantly, between communities. The most essential was to assure the weaker sections and minorities that

their right to justice, liberty, and equality would not be susceptible to majority opinion.

Given the historical context, independent India converged on constitutional fraternity as a common good for all. Therefore, every form of extremism that would damage the social foundation of a democratic republic was kept at bay. The wisdom was that the constitution cannot use fraternity as just a veil to hide all social frictions. Due to the prevalence of competitive political fraternities in politics, the Assembly could not allow fraternity to be used by elected governments with a legislative majority as a weasel word to fill up any sectarian meaning. Thus, it proposed a fraternity based on the dignity of individuals, which was radical politically.

Also, the constitution framers knew that civilisational strength alone would not ensure substantive unity. Communal groups had already begun to appropriate religions, and their propaganda made it a divided civilisation. The sectarian views of civilisation upheld by various exclusive political fraternities had already destroyed unity. Most of the time in the pre-independence era, fraternity was also used by groups to inflict violence (Kapila 2021). So, if not disciplined by the constitution, the exclusive political fraternities claiming civilisational differences would promote caste wars and communal slaughter. Furthermore, the assembly members concurred that any compromise on dignity would pose a danger to the lifelines of fraternity. Thus, the message was clear: a constitutional fraternity would be a bulwark against exclusive political fraternities that violate human dignity in any form.

India's constitutional fraternity is grounded on three premises: first, the harmonious inter-community relationship advocated by Gandhi, second, unity in diversity—a more pluralist and liberal imagination—proposed by Nehru, and, most importantly, BR Ambedkar's persuasive arguments about the right to dignity for everyone as the cornerstone of unity. Thus, the combined ideational force of harmony, diversity and dignity prevented any exclusive political fraternity from creeping into the constitutional scheme.

Significantly, there are radical, moderate, and reactionary interpretations about the constitutional scheme for fraternity. The extreme radicals

believed that constitutional fraternity based on dignity is the totality of fraternity. Dignity for everyone is a prerequisite for unity. Thus, the call for unity shall be avoided since it implies a lack of dignity. There are communitarian minorities and secular liberals following this opinion. The moderates argued for a principled balance between dignity and unity ensured by law. In terms of the operational part, the moderates shall also differ regarding the appropriate means to achieve fraternity, either by a neutral state or through inter-community dialogue based on shared principles or reciprocity.

Contrary to both of these interpreters, there are reactionary groups who lament the extinction of an ideal social system, and thus, call for reclaiming the "glorious past" to construct a perfect fraternity. Their focus is exclusively on unity by restoring a kinship-based system of fraternity. For them, the nation is an echo chamber in which a single community with an ascribed membership strives for spatial and socio-cultural domination over others. Any idea that helps the accommodation of multiculturalism, even by the constitution, is seditious. They considered the dignity of groups and individuals subservient to the nation's unity. Among many traits of fraternity, they would choose belongingness, obligation, sacrifice and loyalty as the most important. However, the dignity of all is anathema. Dignity was an exclusive privilege of the community members. Indeed, the reactionary voice was underrepresented in the Constituent Assembly, and when it was raised, other members moderated it.

The idea of India's constitutional fraternity is composite, which is spread over many provisions. The next section will explain how the Indian constitution incorporated fraternity not merely as a word but as an ideational compact reflecting the dignity of individuals and communities, unity in diversity, and harmony. The various provisions dealing with different facets of fraternity will also demonstrate the constitutional idea of the nation as an ethical union of people of India based on democratic principles.

Constitutional Fraternity

In the Preamble to the Indian Constitution, the people of India solemnly resolve to constitute India into a sovereign democratic republic.

The purpose of the Republic is to secure liberty of thought, belief, expression, faith, worship, equality of status, and opportunity, as well as *to promote fraternity by assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation*. It demonstrates two components of constitutional fraternity—the individuals' dignity and the nation's unity (and integrity).[2] Additionally, the Preamble clarifies that justice, liberty, and equality are the principles and means of achieving the individual's dignity. The idea of the individual's dignity is expanded through various fundamental rights of citizens (Part III) and directive principles to be followed by the state (Part IV). The Preamble also forecasts the form and substance of the Indian nation, and its unity is fastened with the dignity of individuals. Further detailing of the constitutional vision about the nation is in the fundamental duties of the citizens (Part IVA), with a simultaneous emphasis on the fraternity aspects.[3]

After the Preamble, the nation never reappears in the text, either in part 1, where it defines India, i.e., *Bharat,* as a union of states, or in part II, detailing the various grounds for citizenship.[4] The constitutional design for a centralised federal structure supports the unity of the Indian state (not exactly the unity of the nation), concedes the dignity of spatial units and their people by including special provisions for autonomy for some states, and some regions having a concentrated tribal population. To sum up, the Indian constitution describes the nation as people living inside a territory and having an equal entitlement to citizenship based on rights to equality, liberty and justice. The expansive and inclusive fraternity is the means for fostering their unity.

The constitution assures the dignity of individuals irrespective of their social attributes, caste, creed, race, language, and religion.

2 The 42nd constitutional amendment in 1976 added the words, "secular, socialist" to the description of the republic, and "integrity" to unity of nation.

3 The 42nd amendment also added Part IVA.

4 A search for the word "nation" in the digital copy of the constitution shows it more than 220 times, but it mostly appears as part of discrimi"nation", expla"nation", procrasti"nation", determi"nation", nomi"nation", resig"nation", termi"nation" etc. When the constitution uses "national" as an adjective it hardly differs from the meaning in the preamble, for instance monuments of national importance or to connote something applicable to the whole territory or concerning the total population and also part of inter"national". The 42nd amendment added a term "anti-national" to denote some activities, but the 43rd amendment by Janata Party government in 1977 deleted it because of its potential misuse.

There is no such thing as a 'national language' or a 'national religion.' The constitution denotes many official languages for states and the union, which are also mentioned alphabetically in Schedule 8. No exclusive political fraternity's imagination of a nation based on a single religion, culture, or language has constitutional support. Though not directly stated in the constitution, the formation of many states based on languages fortified the recognition of diversity and difference, endorsing spatial dignity in the federal scheme. Part IVA also has some fundamental duties regarding citizens' obligations to the nation. Still, these duties are synchronised with the idea of the Preamble about a nation of fraternity based on dignity, diversity, and harmony.

Freedom from dominance is a prerequisite for a democratic fraternity. The constitution's neutrality towards all religious and cultural claims about the nation hardly means a silence on what it prefers and thus instructs the state to uphold. The fundamental rights in Part III ensure that everyone's dignity is protected. The constitutional directives to the state in Part IV require the state to address a wide range of issues related to the dignity of individuals and groups. Also, the sum of fundamental duties necessitates that citizens comply with their preambular pledge.

Freedom as a fundamental right elaborates what the Preamble states about components of individual dignity—freedom of thought, expression, and faith. Justice, another principle described in the Preamble, is social, economic and political. Part III exhaustively lists a variety of social and political freedoms. The right against exploitation and freedom to choose an occupation may fall short of an economic right, but both are envisaged with a focus on the social dignity of individuals.

In addition to including more social and economic rights to expand the constitutional notion of dignity, the constitution elaborates the idea of fraternity by adding care, compassion, loyalty, and obligation as its constituent components in various instructions to the state in Part IV. The complementary and contradictory entries in parts III and IV may surprise readers. Still, the importance of promoting fraternity through harmony was an underlying reason behind the selective placement of dignity concerns in two parts. In a society characterised by tremendous

diversity, inequality, and unfreedom, presenting the constitution as a fraternal contract requires that no one feels ignored.

It is wrong to say that the Indian constitution promised everyone everything. But it took utmost care to ensure that no one felt excluded or persecuted, at least without a principled reason. The Constituent Assembly addressed all the manifest questions of dignity, and various provisions of the constitution reflected the same. Implicitly, the constitutional provisions ask all political fraternities to validate their contentions using fair equality, positive freedom, respect for diversity, and substantive justice. Constitutional fraternity is not a winner-take-all agreement but a give-and-take based on principles, not power.

Due to fraternity concerns, the Constituent Assembly agreed to develop legally non-enforceable directives about socially contentious issues, such as implementing a uniform civil code and regularising cattle slaughter. Both could ignite communal passion and conflicts between different religious groups. The constitution (Article 44) agrees with the idea of a uniform civil code for all without compromising the freedom of individuals to choose their distinctive religious codes. Diversity is the norm, and unity is only achieved by respecting and recognising the differences. Regarding directives to prohibit cattle slaughter, the constitution calls for the state to use scientific principles and economic reasoning rather than any religion's faith. B. R. Ambedkar, the key architect of the constitutional fraternity, helped reconcile the Assembly's conflicting opinions on these matters (Sambaiah 2023). When constitutional justice is served, no one should lose unfairly and feel victorious over the other. More than once, the assembly debates demonstrated a commitment to fraternity by dispensing justice without compromising dignity.

The rights, directives and duties read together emphasise respect for diversity, honour to the diverse sources of India's civilisational heritage and culture, and religious harmony. In various constitutional cases, the judiciary also promoted a compound reading of rights concerning dignity, which made many directives complementary to fulfilling the right to a life (Article 21) with dignity. Also, the constitutional idea of fraternity hardly prevents Indians from aspiring to be human rather than a national being.

Nationality hardly limits the dignity of any individual in India because some basic rights are ensured for all, and the directive principles may be read similarly. Thus, the assurance of dignity for all is a constitutional requirement of the Indian state, including diverse sections of the population and all humans, irrespective of nationality. The constitutional fraternity of India is also very pedagogic to its citizens, which calls for liberation from the shackles of exclusive, exclusionary, parochial, and xenophobic types and expressions of fraternity and nationalism. Though the word fraternity does not repeat outside the Preamble, the sense of constitutional nationalism is inseparable from the more humanist premises of constitutional fraternity. It sets fraternity free from kinship-like structures and hardly compels an Indian to forget about human identity when claiming nationality and national interest. The idea is very roomy, which enables Indians to open and promote two-way interaction between India and the rest of the world.

Although philosophical disagreements exist on the order and priority of equality, liberty, fraternity, and the precise causal relationship between them, the constitutional fraternity only tried to blend them for the better. Thus, promoting fraternity by assuring dignity for all is a clarion call for freedom, equality, and justice. India's constitutional fraternity hardly demands any break from liberty and equality because it affirms dignity. Thus, the constitution only intends to promote a balanced democratic politics based on the rule of law, despite the socially privileged groups claiming a numerical advantage and trying to hold the reins of everyday politics. The political fraternity at their leadership may like to place unity and integrity of the nation above the components of dignity, equality, liberty and justice. Such an authoritarian call is tantamount to discarding the constitutional fraternity and a war against the constitutional nation.

The judiciary legally adjudicates any conflict over the constitutional meaning, but politically, it must be convinced in a democracy. The constitution stipulates that fraternity shall be expansive, inclusive, egalitarian, and respectful of one's dignity irrespective of caste, race, creed, sex, region, religion, and nationality. It is the only means to describe an inclusive fraternity today, when politics becomes an arena of polarising and tense disputes between exclusive political fraternities. The preambular pledge regarding fraternity was careful to address individual and group

identities as fluid rather than solid as much as possible from a liberal view. The foundational principles of the constitution are not a majority opinion, but the building blocks of a fraternal consensus made by "a microcosm of the nation."[5]

Constitutional fraternity's wider and expansive notion is missing from politics, where the prevalent forms of fraternity are narrow, inward-looking, and exclusively group-specific. The wide variety of social movements in India, justifiably most of them are the outbursts of injured dignity of various sorts, also makes fraternity not more than a mirror image of the forces they oppose and the governments. Sure, the ones who share the left side of the political fraternity camp have a heavy burden to prove their commitment to constitutional fraternity. Strangely, the state and the law have unfairly targeted them for violating fraternity and unity. Their ordeal is augmented further because of the privileged sections' strong influence over shaping the state's fraternity narrative, which separates dignity from constitutional fraternity and uses fraternity as a substitute for hegemonic national unity. It is also a fact that among the four foundational principles mentioned in the Preamble, fraternity received scant attention from the judiciary (Shetty and Sanyal 2011). Thus, the constitutional fraternity was presumably vulnerable to challenges from the dominant political fraternity.

In the post-independence period, the salience of constitutional fraternity was tested under two political regimes—a pro-secular regime led by the Indian National Congress (INC) and a communalised Hindu nationalist regime by the Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP). A historical review of the state practices under the two regimes would illuminate the vicissitudes of constitutional fraternity, particularly its subjection by an exclusive political fraternity and the withering away of a constitutional nation.

Political Fraternities against Constitutional Fraternity

The Indian National Congress was a civil society association formed in colonial India. Later, it became a national organisation claiming a mass

5 Granville Austin (2002) in such a way describes the Constituent Assembly of India.

membership and the most dominant national political party. The shift from a movement-based body to a governing party gradually distanced the Congress from social struggles, and ultimately, it became dependent on state power. Its stance on citizens' rights was very generous during the movement phase. However, its lenience towards the state was evident, especially when it defended the first constitutional amendment in 1950, which *inter alia* added many restrictions to the freedom rights, hinting at the constitutional balance between individualism and statism weighing in favour of the latter. The Congress defended the restrictions by citing the unity and integrity of the nation and social justice. It set a precedent for union governments, who found that a euphoria about national interest, unity, and integrity would be sufficient to compromise the constitutional scheme for rights-based dignity.

Due to the ruling party crisscrossing the state and social realms through its plural social base and politics of accommodation, it could act as a party of power and parties of opposition to foster a consensus (Kothari 1970). However, despite the Congress's dominance at the union level, its hold on states became inconsistent. Its accommodative politics disappeared, and the union government's attitude to states governed by opposition parties lacked constitutional propriety. Power calculations over its rivals and the relative influence of the fractions of the ruling class vis-à-vis Congress also determined its policies (Vanaik 1990). Still, by hiding its partisan political advantages, the Congress regime cultivated the nationalist rationale that India's unity requires a centralised federal system.

By the 1970s, when Congress became more leader-centred and populist, India lost the dialogic space between the society and the state. Politics became dominated by frictions and conflicts between various social group identities, making multiple claims about dignity to gain political representation, share power, and fight the powerful social and economic factions that controlled the Congress regime. However, despite patronising diversity as a politically neutral expression of identity, the state under the Congress regime was sceptical about the dignity claims aiming at political assertions.

The national party began to consider every new dignity-based claim challenging its political dominance as anti-state, and each aspiration for claiming a distinctive identity as a fissiparous tendency or a mass conspiracy against the nation. Under this regime, when the union government frequently appeared as the authoritarian advocate of national interests against dignity, indirectly, it transformed the nation into a partisan political contender. It normalised the practice of union government using nationalism, unity and integrity to smash social and spatial claims about dignity. The national party distrusted regional party formations and portrayed their political mobilisation against the union government as anti-national. Congress preached for regional diversity without decentralisation of power. The abandonment of principled neutrality exacerbated the trust deficiency in union-state relations and intergroup interactions.

Ironically, the Congress regime pocketed the national interest by advertising a partisan view that a national party forming a union government represents the national will, notwithstanding that it did not receive a majority of votes in any general election. Soon after independence, the nation envisaged by the constitution as a democratic, relational entity and most importantly as a dialogic space between the people of India, metamorphosed into a devotional object. Any criticism of the union's narrative of the nation became blasphemous. Also, the nation-worshipping exercise overwhelmed the fraternity promotion under the regime. It widened the scope of Hindu nationalism, remotely controlling the symbols, icons, songs, ceremonies, and narratives.

Besides being the governing party of the union, its fear about a Hindu backlash also influenced the Congress regime's approach to dignity, especially about the political empowerment of religious minorities. Even though the religious minorities fell short of representation entitlements compared to the pre-independence period, the pride and prejudice of Hindus against them showed no moderation during the Congress regime. The Congress regime's approach to minorities indicated that they can expect a benevolent political party to distribute favours, and that too in exchange for their votes, rather than a state fulfilling its constitutional duty. A public suspicion couched in Hinduised secularism did not refrain from asking for public affidavits regarding their loyalty to the nation and

their demands for government jobs or education reservation. Strangely, such a secular call backed by a wilful suspicion was not common against Hindu religious organisations' demands and political activities.[6]

In the political economy, the lack of legally binding economic rights and the ruling party's reliance upon dominant classes led to clientelism and populism flourishing under the regime, further blocking the transformation of subjects to citizens. The political power became more centralised, and welfare was a charity provision by the political leaders holding state power. The Union government, which had a dismal track record of empowering dignity, repeatedly called citizens to sing fraternity chants by displaying their diversity in pre-designed formats. Most notably, in the media's panoramic view of the national day commemorations, the expanding display of the state's military and police power overwhelmed the diversity themes.

The right to dissent gradually became a crime. Several states ruled by opposition parties were frequently placed under constitutional emergency by citing law and order issues. The union government's increasing reluctance to use democratic means to deal with mass protests led to the declaration of a national emergency and suspension of all fundamental rights in 1975–77. None of the state institutions, except the judiciary, voluntarily respected citizens' rights. India remained a democracy, but the interactions between the state and citizens tended to be constitutional, mainly due to the fear of the judiciary.

Furthermore, across many axes of political contestations, for instance, state versus citizens, majority versus minority religion, nation versus region, union versus states, upper castes versus lower castes, and finally, national unity and integrity versus dignity of individuals and groups, the Congress regime progressively failed to stand for the weakest. The state's commitment to the poor morphed into populism, and pluralism became exhibitionist. An arithmetical calculation of electoral gains persuaded it

6 The Congress never educated its followers and the public about the many causes of partition of British India, including the majority's reluctance to share status and power with the most numerically powerful minority. In the popular narratives, the Muslim League's betrayal to the cause of unity summarised the sole reason for partition, which latter fortified the suspicion towards Muslims' demands for dignity and representation.

to trade principles for votes. Besides, by the 1990s, the ruling party often vanished from the scene or washed its hands on many critical occasions of social conflicts.

When the weaker and marginalised sections mobilised themselves or rallied behind another political party, the state machinery turned brutal. Against the mass upheavals for dignity, the Congress in several states served as a Trojan horse for the socially and economically privileged groups, allowing them to hide and fight against the deprivileged. The civil society's support to Congress was also dying off in India after the national emergency, and the news reports about egregious civil rights abuses surfaced after the emergency was lifted. In 1977, the Congress lost the general election to a united opposition led by the Janata Party.

After the opposition party's short spell in power, Congress could win back state power, but the party organisation was truncated. The election victories after a setback emboldened the Congress to be more brutal towards the dignity-centred mobilisations and heavily relied on portraying them as anti-state and anti-national. Being a party preferred and dominated by social elites and harnessed by dominant political fraternities, it could not fully endorse dignity as a right. Despite dominating politics, it kept many progressive social legislations for equality of status and opportunity pending, waiting for some relief under an alternative political dispensation in 1987–89. In 1991, a minority government headed by the Congress initiated neoliberal economic reforms,[7] and constitutionalised the civic bodies (the panchayats) in 1994. The first reform constrained populism as a means to address economic dignity. Without a meaningful decentralisation of power from the union to the states, the local governance reforms did not become a game-changer of democracy.

While the Congress and the BJP appear to be arch-rivals in their battles for state power, the most conspicuous similarity is their preference for centralisation of power at the union level. The Congress regime centralised India more than the constitution had intended. However, the attempts to strengthen and expand the institutional and legal framework for human dignity and fill in the gaps in the constitutional framework for its

7 Earlier a Congress government added the word "socialism" to the preamble in 1972.

full-blown growth were minimal. Therefore, in many senses, Congress only postponed the rise of Hindu nationalists to state power. The authoritarian and centralised state structure that it nurtured over 40 years was suitable for implementing any alternative ideological project from the top, by the BJP. Besides, the Congress regime hardly provided a social check to the latter's spread and assertion from below. The Congress regime's ambivalent use of political fraternity for building a "state-nation"[8] provided no hard hill for the BJP in its pursuit of a Hindu nation state.

Though the constitution fastened fraternity with equality, liberty and justice, Congress's political fraternity largely glossed over its substantive content. In fact, under its dispensations, except for a few political scientists, lawyers, and civil society members, the constitution also lost its pedagogic power vis-à-vis society. The regime often called into question the constitutional restraint on state power, and its patronage politics derailed the principled balance of state to resolve the contradictory concerns over dignity. By the 1990s, the social meaning of the constitution as a fraternal contract was disappearing from politics. Most often, the constitution appeared as an assemblage of provisions vulnerable to selective appropriation by the partisan managers of state machinery.

Despite all the problems of the Congress regime, the only solace was that the left and liberal factions of the civil society could engage with a ruling party that had a historical relationship with the constitution. To many civil society groups, the Congress was a refractory political kid that may be listening to constitutional discipline, democratic moral instructions, and oppositional politics. Despite the augmentation of the state's repressive power under this regime, the Congress was not a powerful political organisation to bulldoze civil society's freedom. Moreover, the regime did not patronise, though it did not prevent, an ideological ecosystem allergic to constitutionalism. However, the BJP, the next regime builder, is a party very different from Congress and the constitution.

The BJP belongs to a network of Hindu socio-cultural and religious organisations, popularly called Sangh Parivar. The group's fulcrum is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), striving to establish a Hindu Rashtra

8 Yadav (2020) describes India as a "state-nation" instead of "nation-state".

centred on Hindu culture and traditions. Its political fraternity, inspired by V. D. Savarkar's Hindutva and MS Golwalkar's ideas, stands opposite to Congress's ideals of fraternity based on unity in diversity.

The organisations of Sangh Parivar converge on the idea that India was a Hindu nation, which lost its glory because of the invasion of "outsiders." Hindus must awake to their nationhood to regain the glory of the past. Savarkar recast the word Hindu as a national identity based on "race of the same blood" without excluding Hindus and reducing their prominence, but as an encompassing one inclusive of all people belonging to any religion born within a territorial space bordered by the Indus River on the west and the Himalayas on the north and oceans on the south. Everyone who came from outside of these natural borders and those who profess a religion and culture which was not born into this territory are not Hindus (Jeffrelot 2007). Savarkar's Hindutva is political Hinduism's most comprehensive and powerful ideological expression. Its exclusive political fraternity challenges the constitutional one. In their ideological world, the nation and religion are free to separate but must unite in a Hindu culture.

Hindutva indoctrinates Hindus about a mythical past, where the history is mainly about the cultural and religious wars led by Muslim invaders against a Hindu civilisation. Its idea of the nation is civilisational. It demands that Hindus seek retribution (Sharma 2015). Its territoriality is based on an ideological cartography sketched by Savarkar, and citizenship criteria would be one's religious-cultural lineage rather than contractual and constitutional agreements.

A constitutional nation based on a fraternity ensuring harmony, unity in diversity and dignity for all is completely at odds with what M. S. Golwalkar of RSS meant when he wrote "We and Our Nationhood." Sangh Parivar strives to consolidate the Hindu political fraternity communally, capture state power and assimilate and subordinate the minority religions. Its Hindu supremacist state dismisses the state-nation distinction as an "alien vision" useful to support "foreign" religions (Jeffrelot 2007). Hindutva has a centrifugal force that draws many Hindus into it, for which a requirement is an amount of resentment towards other religious groups.

Implicitly, the mission of the Sangh Parivar is to salvage the nation from the constitutional format and reconstruct the state based on a Hinduness. In sum, Hindutva is the most powerful majoritarian ambition to propose an exclusive political fraternity.

Hindutva's prophecy and propaganda cannot be at ease with the solemn resolution of the people of India in the Preamble of their constitution. Ambedkar, the key architect of the Indian constitution, was far opposed to their vision of the nation, who criticised Savarkar's proposal of Hindu Rashtra for a united India as a fallacy because of its second-class citizenship for Muslims, invoking a status hierarchy and indignity (Ambedkar 2014). Congress's secularist, Jawaharlal Nehru, was their declared political opponent, and Mahatma Gandhi's Hinduism and his advocacy for Hindus about sacrifice, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence were always irksome to their nation. One of the Hindu nationalists assassinated Gandhi in 1948, Savarkar being an exonerated co-accused of the crime.

Hindu nationalists in the pre-independence period formed a political party, the Hindu Mahasabha, and a cultural organisation, RSS. Unlike Nehru, some Congress leaders sympathised with some of their arguments. At the same time, they were cautious in reminding Hindu nationalists of the necessity of accepting modern democratic principles and non-violence. Also, they required the Congress to adopt a principled position on minority religions. By the 1960s, many of Congress's principled sympathisers had passed away or retired from politics.

During the Congress regime, many civil society voices could amplify a benevolent type of Hindu nationalism that held legitimacy. The states ruled by the Congress also conceded to some Hindu nationalist demands.[9] Most importantly, by prioritising the nation's unity and integrity over and above what constitutional vision related to dignity allows, the Congress regime unknowingly ceded its control over the narrative of the nation, first to the Hindu nationalists, and finally, to Hindutva. The Hindutva's gradual expansion by using soft versions of Hindu nationalism and even by using the civil society freedom granted by the constitution (Ahmed 2016) was one of the most playful practices, uninhibited by the Congress regime.

9 The state government laws to ban cow slaughter, regulation of religious conversions and promotion of Hindi indirectly as a national language are some examples.

Since the mid-1960s, the Congress regime vigorously pursued a state-led national integration programme by reducing fraternity to communal harmony. The programmes primarily relied on Gandhi and Nehru's ideas. However, the harmony project sidelined Ambedkar's emphasis on individuals' dignity. Ideologically, the Congress regime's prescriptions could not go beyond the Hindu nationalists' preferences about a nation and its fraternity, which the latter hijacked by advocating for "samarasata" (RSS 2016). The Hindu nationalist narratives were growing and intersecting with some versions of the state narratives about the nation.

A national pledge for citizens, especially for recitation by children in school assemblies and national day celebrations as part of national integration, that came out in the early 1960s, illustrates the general format of the political fraternity of the Congress regime. The pledge gives an idea of the nation as a family. It reads, "India is my country, and all Indians are my brothers and sisters." The rest of the pledge affirms a devotion to the nation and love for its people. Nevertheless, a major lacuna, a persistent problem of Congress regimes' treatment of the nation and its unity, is also in the pledge. Though it affirms that one shall be proud of the diversity of India's heritage, it never reminds the children to respect each other's dignity and rights. The pledge shows that the Congress's political fraternity was more for system stabilising than reforming or restructuring. It was a fraternity to affirm an obligation and loyalty to the nation without caring for the right to dignity.

Also, when amending the constitution, the national party's approach to dignity was the same. For example, despite adding citizens' duties to the constitution through an amendment in 1976 urging citizens to respect diversity and communal harmony, Congress did not convert any directive principle related to dignity into a fundamental right. Its obsession with state power hindered the enhancement of citizens' dignity. It never crossed that self-imposed infancy exemplified by the aforesaid national pledge.

The nation-building project did not help strengthen the constitutional vision about the nation in mass psychology. The people following the state-led nationalism normalised many proto-Hindutva messages and imageries. It was more about the state-led national integration programmes' display

of fraternity in public functions, official calendars, school textbooks, and public information documentaries that became repetitive and chartered rather than organic and artistic. The state leaders' periodical telecast of their monologues to the nation and an information blitzkrieg through international forums could not stop the fragmenting of fraternity into exclusive political fraternities vying for state power. The state-sponsored nationalism carried mainly rightists and centrists on its publicity wings, despite the left-wingers and dignity-centred social movements showing more proximity to the constitutional nation and fraternity.

Among the exclusive political fraternities subduing the inclusive constitutional fraternity, Hindu nationalism became numerically and geographically the strongest. Much before a Hindu political party took over state power, the Congress regime had already politically reformatted the constitutional fraternity by prioritising the nation over the people and national unity and integrity over individual dignity. The Sangh Parivar became a potential beneficiary of this state-sponsored political socialisation, and it only needed to communalise nationalism and its fraternity. The BJP won power in a few states by the 1990s, and its two coalition governments ruled the union from 1998 to 2004. Though it was out of power from 2004 to 2014, the BJP has repeated its victory in three general elections since 2014. In the 1990s, the BJP could not fully enforce the Sangh Parivar's political fraternity through the state because of pressure from its secular allies. However, the 2014 and 2019 elections gave the party a single-party majority to carry out its programme.

The Congress-led coalition's victories in the 2004 and 2009 general elections indicated a re-emergence of a tie-up between the party and the liberal and left civil society groups. But this time, the BJP had increased its public legitimacy as the political custodian of Hindu privileges. Congress's party organisation could not lead or participate in any social movement at the mass level, and the party's internal unity depended on the command of a political family from the top. Therefore, despite dignity-centred mobilisation and new political fraternities around various marginalised identities that flourished during this time, the party failed to build a social coalition and reinvent its regime. The new social organisations also used civil society's pressure to advance their dissent. Still, their political assertion

demanding equality, liberty, diversity, and dignity hardly culminated in rallying support for a constitutional idea of fraternity. They also missed the whole while yelling for the parts.

Nevertheless, the new base of support that the Congress tried to canvass was not attractive for the centrists and right-wingers of the civil society, attuned to the vagaries of Hindu nationalism and neoliberal capitalism. Indian media also turned heavily critical of Congress. The society was fuming with various sorts of mobilisations over dignity, and the Congress coalition government was dallying under several constraints and facing corruption charges. As a result, a general feeling was that the government was weak and lacked strong leadership to save the nation's prestige. The BJP appeared stronger than the Congress to contest for a nation, and galvanised support by promising a strong government and leadership in this vacuum.

An anti-corruption movement, viz., India Against Corruption (IAC), against the Congress government started in 2011. Critically, it expressed a political fraternity against the Congress regime but mixed and matched idioms of popular nationalism, the constitution, and civilisation and culture. Also, the IAC leaders remained very liberal in showcasing a non-ideological, non-committal, and ambivalent fraternity. Their more pronounced concerns were unity, discipline, obligation, duty, and loyalty to the nation. It sought the sanity of politics and the dignity of individuals, but both were expressed within an urban middle-class etiquette.

Sangh Parivar was also actively involved in this movement, and the BJP mainly used IAC as a platform to attack Congress politically. The movement promised a politics of the middle path by maintaining an equal distance from Congress and the BJP. With this aim, some of its leaders formed the Aam Admi Party (AAP) in 2012. Since the party could not expand geographically, the BJP became the political beneficiary of the IAC campaign. Many urban Indians, hostile to the pitfalls of post-independence politics, saw the resurrection of the Hindu nation as something that would bring them some self-esteem in a globalised world. They chose the BJP as the political and moral vanguard for this mission in the 2014 election.

Many IAC campaigners also switched to the BJP or became opinion makers for its victory. Even though the AAP won three consecutive elections in the national capital territory of Delhi and later in Punjab, many hardcore constitutionalists and activists who were conscious of the wider aspects of dignity questions gradually discarded the party. AAP's political fraternity rendered no big country-wide counter force to Hindutva. It finally lost its bastion (Delhi) to the BJP in 2025. The IAC churned two distinctive but overlapping currents for the reconstruction of India: a civic constitutional thinking and a legitimation for Hindu majoritarianism. In the long run, the latter overpowered the former, and the BJP took credit for sanitising, and, more strangely, for constitutionalising and democratising its politics. Since 2014, the BJP has dominated Indian politics without facing a cohesive opposition from the party system against its political authority or a massive bottom-up challenge from civil society to its legitimacy. Crucially, the union government under the BJP and the Sangh Parivar were ideologically and politically very powerful to abet media criticism and turn them into their ideological mouthpiece.

The Congress regime's fraternity was mostly state-led rather than bottom-up. Despite inadequate emphasis on various aspects of dignity and a failure to strike a principled balance between dignity and unity, it did not dare to make the state pronounce and enforce an exclusive political fraternity. Through various political assertions, many groups tried to challenge Congress with alternative ideals of fraternity, such as the Janata Party, after the anti-emergency agitation in the late 1970s. Still, it hardly opposed the fundamental principles of the constitutional contract or posed an exclusive political fraternity. The anti-corruption movement (2011–14) mainly fed the urban middle class's aspirations about a new India, but it largely drew from the nationalist discourses of the two regimes' dominant players. These two uprisings hurt Congress's credibility, but the Sangh Parivar participated in both, learned, survived, and thrived. Besides these country-wide mobilisations, various regional parties, caste parties, class parties, and different social and cultural movements anchor on alternative political fraternities, remaining close and distant to the constitutional vision.

The two dominant regimes, having Congress acting as an ambivalent unifier and the BJP as a divisive unifier, prioritised unity over dignity, but popular uprisings based on dignity required them to respond. BJP also took up dignity questions of tribal, caste and gender identities. However, some pretentiously secular standpoints, for instance, the ban on triple talaq for Muslim women, the implementation of a uniform civil code and changes in the citizenship rules, hardly conceal the BJP regime's partisan communal intentions. Moreover, its explicitly partisan and authoritarian endorsement of grand Hinduism as the sole custodian of Indian culture is a subversion of the fraternal constitutional contract. The Congress regime diluted constitutional fraternity. Still, it vanished in social and spatial dimensions under the BJP regime. Though the Congress regime began to centralise the federal structure, the BJP regime made the union more arbitrary towards the states' demand for dignity.[10] The union government's infringement upon civil rights and the government's monitoring of citizens with an ideological purpose far exceeded that of Congress.

The previous regime's implicit compliance with Hindu nationalism in the state narratives, its preference for unity over dignity, and the socially disengaged secular fraternity messages were not a big hurdle to the new regime. Given the Congress regime's poor track record in finding institutional solutions to dignity claims, the BJP did not require major changes in the constitutional provisions to sideline the demands. Besides, both regimes routinely centralised power, though the constitution envisaged more power to the union government to safeguard the state's survival in exceptional situations. As a result, the BJP governments, claiming a parliamentary majority, needed only a few executive orders to remove the Congress regime's fraternity programmes from the state premises.

When a regime promoting exclusive political fraternity dominates the state apparatus against the constitutional contract, democracy is the only saviour. The BJP regime tested the social strength of democratic

10 The plight of Article 370, granting Jammu & Kashmir a special status in the federal system, is a case to compare the two regimes' approach to dissenting dignity. Both regimes used the same legal options and similar reasons, but the former did not drain the administrative and cultural autonomy of the state. However, the BJP government in 2019 emptied the article and divided the state into two union territories, showing an act of legal aggression or a retribution par excellence. Similarly, regarding language pluralism, while the former regime promoted Hindi, the latter tried to impose it on non-Hindi speakers.

resistance too far in its two consecutive terms in power, and it lost a single-party majority in the third general election in 2024. This hopefully shows that, despite the strong efforts by both the centrist and rightist regimes, nationalism without dignity is no longer an option that the members of India's constitutional family wish to cherish.

Conclusion

India, to the world as of today, has many brilliant visions from its civilisational heritage, but its contemporary relevance is to be tested by the type of fraternity it upholds. We have examined India's constitutional ideal of fraternity and how it changed under two regimes in post-independent India. Constitutional fraternity is nothing new to India. As Ambedkar said, it is drawn from a concept of Indian heritage, the Buddhist notion of Metta, *Maitri* (Rathore 2020). The Indian constitution does not let the governments, backed by any exclusive political fraternity, force their vision about the nation and its unity on the citizens' dignity. The constitutional contract is an unequivocal declaration that liberty, equality, and respect for diversity are the cornerstones of human dignity. Neither a national nor a global family is possible without a fraternal code of conduct to assure the dignity of all its members. Ideally, in a democracy, fraternity is an unfinished project until the last complaint of dignity is resolved. Any effort in this regard may be fruitful, provided we strive for a consensus over the humanitarian principles of equality and liberty.

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Democracy: Theoretical Contributions, Interdisciplinary Reflections, and Global Challenges

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Political Education as a Key Pillar of Democratic Stability

Brief Description

Throughout history, the concept of democracy has been shaped by two fundamental pillars: Participation, which varies according to the democratic models adopted by different societies, and Education, often expressed through formal public policies as well as challenges related to informing the public.

Our chapter will focus on this second pillar—more specifically, the commitment to political education. To what extent is education a fundamental prerequisite for a functioning democracy? How has it evolved in democratic nations over the years? Our goal is to contribute to this discussion by exploring these questions.

Introduction

Over the centuries—and up to the present—political philosophy and related fields have endeavored to define and debate the concept of democracy. Across such efforts, two pillars are routinely identified as

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essential to the operation and very existence of what is conventionally summarized as government of the people, by the people, and for the people: participation and education—or, in some accounts, information.

The first pillar, participation, varies with the model of democracy adopted by a given society. In a representative democracy, participation occurs predominantly through electoral processes, thereby guaranteeing, among other basic features, the holding of elections and the expansion of political rights, broadly understood as the right to vote and to stand for office (Dahl 2001). By contrast, in a direct democracy, portrayed in part of the literature as the model practiced in antiquity by certain Greek city-states, participation takes place without intermediaries (i.e., representatives) and occurs in the public square through collective debate and decision-making.

The second pillar is associated with education, or information, both linked to the fundamental question of how well those who participate are formally, and minimally, prepared to exercise the values required for a society to govern itself. Norberto Bobbio (1986) famously describes political education as one of democracy's "unfulfilled promises": beyond the quantitative challenge faced between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when political rights were extended to large segments of the adult population, societies still lacked the qualitative commitment to formally prepare citizens for the practice of politics and, above all, of democracy itself.

This is the central focus of the present chapter: to assess the extent to which Political Education ought to be regarded as an essential pillar of democracy, both for its functioning and for its stability. To that end, the discussion is organized into four sections in addition to this Introduction. The next section, without claiming to exhaust the debate, offers a theoretical approach to Political Education as a core element of democracy. The two subsequent sections present empirical findings that gauge the degree of concern different countries exhibit regarding this issue, focusing mainly on measurements and indicators that were designed to capture the functioning and presence of democracy. Finally, the Conclusion engages

with the chapter's overarching objective: to determine how strategic Political Education is to both the conceptualization and operation of democracy.

Literature Review

Education and the Theoretical Construction of Democracy

Thinkers in Classical Greece already defended the strategic value of specific knowledge for the exercise of politics. Despite the many differences that can be drawn between classical and contemporary conceptions of democracy, or even of government and demos, it is a fact that, in *The Republic*, Book VII, Plato (2005) presents a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon that became known as the "Allegory of the Cave". The allegory expresses the connection between "true knowledge" and "political rule." Socrates argues that rulers require education to exercise politics. Aristotle (1987) partially corroborates the idea by defining human beings as "political animals" who need formal knowledge to practice that virtue. One cannot, therefore, downplay the education imparted to the young or the weight such knowledge bears for states and for politics.

Moving forward in time, Thomas More (1972), in the sixteenth century, emphasized philosophy as a science linked to political action and practice. Since at least the seventeenth century, when the more formal institutional bases for the representative model of democracy we recognize today began to consolidate, numerous authors have reflected on education as a foundational parameter for governmental functioning and development. John Locke (1994) most incisively defended property and the constitution of a legislature as antidotes to absolutist power. For him, knowledge had to permeate civic conscience if the form of government he proposed was to be consolidated and maintained, even though this debate was not central to his reflections.

Montesquieu (1987), writing in the eighteenth century, was more forthright regarding education as a cornerstone of republican logic. According to Nascimento (2021, 170), he understood that republican governments "required the full power of education, since the very existence [of that regime] depended on the political [or civic] virtue that only a strategy capable of inspiring and sustaining a love for the republic could

produce." This "love," Montesquieu argued, is tied to democracy, because only in such regimes government is entrusted to the citizenry. Thus, if republican governments result from choices, those choices must be well oriented and demand "public knowledge."

According to Martins Jr. and Dantas (2004), the debate on citizen formation gained prominence in political philosophy between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly with the expansion of political rights and the emergence of an incipient notion of citizenship. The U.S. model of indirect presidential elections, for example, was justified by the need to temper passions and avoid the risks of misguided direct choices. The underlying issue was the difficulty of trusting voters' knowledge and the danger that they might be swayed by fiery, demagogic, and unfounded speeches.

Still following Martins Jr. and Dantas (2004), and absent a debate that treated universal suffrage as an absolute value—something that, according to Dahl (2001), would be definitively consolidated only in the twentieth century—political philosophy oscillated among several conclusions: restricting access to the ballot box; weighting voters' influence according to formal schooling; strongly differentiating between the representatives and the represented on educational grounds (a distinction that persists, to some extent, in current democracies); or universalizing access to political choice, which ultimately prevailed on a broad scale in the twentieth-century democratic world (Dahl 2001).

The framers of the U.S. Constitution, writing under the collective pseudonym Publius in The Federalist Papers, believed that more literate men were better prepared for political choice and should carry more weight than those easily deceived by passion. Likewise, Alexis de Tocqueville, struck by democratic principles in nineteenth-century America, viewed that republic as a system that feared passion—a view that justified, for example, the indirect election of the president and led to the idea that the decision should fall to individuals possessing a certain "intellectual and moral superiority" to "save democracy and guide the people" (Martins Jr. and Dantas 2004).

The lack of formal preparation, then, would justify excluding individuals from direct voting and political decision-making. Martins Jr. and Dantas (2004) note that Thomas Jefferson, for instance, argued that the people were incapable of exercising the presidency but could participate in choosing it; likewise, they could not legislate but could select legislators. For Jefferson, "education is the greatest guarantee of liberty and a bulwark against corruption," an essential aspect for countering threats to democracy. Montesquieu concurred, maintaining that while the people had a natural capacity to choose representatives, only those representatives were truly fit to deliberate on public affairs. In other words, even if larger contingents were prepared to select representatives, only few were suited to be selected. Moreover, Montesquieu observed, those choices had to be well guided, requiring common sense, debate, and information exchange (Martins Jr. and Dantas 2004).

The essential question becomes: how to differentiate voters from the elected? If a regime claims to be democratic, what entry barriers determine who may vote and, more specifically, who may be elected? Examining England, Marshall (1996) viewed the nineteenth century as the age of conquest of political rights, characterized by the ability to choose and be chosen. That milestone decisively advanced the full attainment of citizenship, realized only in the twentieth century with the incorporation of a series of social rights. The connection between voting, education for collective life, and civic conscience yields a system of representation capable of consolidating citizenship's core idea—Marshall does not speak explicitly of democracy.

Yet another issue remains: at what point is it legitimate to minimize the sharp differences between voters and the elected? Or, at least, when does it become possible to reduce those distances so much that the notion that many may vote but few are fit to govern can be abandoned? John Stuart Mill (1981) addressed this barrier in the nineteenth century when, discussing representative government, he divided citizens into two categories: passive and active. The former would interest rulers because they seemed indifferent, incapable, apathetic, or discouraged from paying proper attention to politics; being indifferent, they could be more easily led. The existence of active citizens, indispensable to democracy for

their critical and lucid role, justifies extending the suffrage to as many individuals as possible.

Thus, everyday debate among actors with diverse viewpoints becomes essential to civic awareness and the exercise of politics. Diversity enables the expansion of political rights, and Mill offers an additional reflection: how can we reconcile the idea that passive citizens suit the interests of their elected representatives, while active citizens are indispensable to democracy, if a representative government is meant to embody the collective will and democratic ideals of society as a whole? Here ethics plays a fundamental role in the functioning of a representative democratic society; in theory, there should be no representative interest beyond that of the represented, an idea reinforced by the active citizens' conscience.

Much of humanity, especially the Western world, entered the twentieth century immersed in the challenge of extending suffrage toward universality and engaging as many citizens as possible with parties, elections, and the contest of votes. Conceptually, expanding political rights to varied realities is justifiable; in practice, electoral registration is laborious but feasible within a relatively short timeframe given minimal criteria. But what about educating for the exercise of democracy? If politics became a quantitative challenge, to what extent did nations truly concern themselves with qualifying democratic practice? Citizens, voters, and candidates now form masses that are roughly equal in their universalized potential to access political rights, but what is their formal preparation? If education is one of democracy's pillars, whose responsibility is it?

Take Brazil: self-declared literacy and minimum ages ranging from 18 years old (for city councillor) to 35 years old (for president, vice-president, or senator) currently separate a voter from a potential officeholder, insofar as criteria depend largely on the individual. When, then, are citizens formally prepared for representative democracy—whether as voters, candidates, or officeholders?

The twentieth century produced profound reflections on this matter. Robert Dahl (2001) speaks of civic education for democratic development, identifying schools as formal instruments for that purpose, alongside the media, political parties, and associations of individuals around

common causes. For Dahl, guaranteeing "opportunities for enlightened understanding" is as essential as the right to vote for the health of a democracy, and such understanding depends directly on education. Without enlightened citizens, democratic mechanisms become purely formal, subject to manipulation or discredit. Investing in inclusive, high-quality political education therefore means not only forming conscious voters but also sustaining democracy's very pillars in the long run.

Bobbio (1986), by contrast, was concerned about political apathy—citizens' disinterest in public affairs—which he traced partly to shortcomings in political education. Summarizing twenty-first-century developments, Dantas (2017) notes that several authors reinforce education as a key precondition for democratic functioning and development. Fung (2004), observing participatory models, points to the need for educational materials to guide decision-making. Coppedge et al. (2020), together with creators of indicators designed to gauge different varieties of democracy, stress the importance of assessing whether young people receive quality education that equips them for democratic participation. Fishkin (2009), academically mentored by Dahl, proposes that citizens' decisions in deliberative-democracy models should be based on politically informed reflection that mitigates manipulation. Diamond (1999) likewise highlights the relevance of education in sustaining a democratic regime and distancing it from authoritarian practices.

In more applied terms, and drawing on contemporary instruments, several initiatives merit attention. Within the corpus of United Nations (UN) documents, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) consolidates essential commitments linked to human dignity. Among its provisions, Article 26 stipulates that "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." It further emphasizes that education "shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace" (United Nations 1948).

In 1966 the UN also adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which reinforces principles crucial to the formation

of citizens among its State Parties. Noteworthy articles include Article 3, whereby "the States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights," and Article 25, which declares that "every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity [...] to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; [...] to vote and to be elected [...] [and] to have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country" (United Nations 1966).

Continuing with UN examples, the 2002 Human Development Report, titled *Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, placed democracy at center stage. In its introduction, under the subtitle "Triggering a virtuous cycle for human development requires promoting democratic politics," the report explicitly underscores the indispensable role of political education:

> Promoting democratic politics means expanding capabilities such as education, to enable people to play a more effective role in such politics, and fostering the development of civil society groups and other informal institutions to help democratic institutions better represent the people (UN 2002, 5).

It thus becomes evident that democratic enhancement hinges on the development of genuinely inclusive educational policies. According to the United Nations, such policies constitute the core of what it defines as political freedom: the ability that enables individuals to claim economic and social rights, with education acting as the principal instrument through which those policies can be refined and extended.

Complementing this agenda, the United Nations in 2015 launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—a framework that has guided governments, firms and social initiatives worldwide through 17 goals and 169 targets designed to foster a better world by 2030. At least seven of these goals: Quality Education (Goal 4), Gender Equality (5), Clean Water and Sanitation (6), Reduced Inequalities (10), Climate Action (13), Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (16), and Partnerships for the Goals (17) contain targets that embed fundamental aspects of political education for democratic development. Illustrative is Target 4.7, which demands that

"by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote [...] human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity."

Building on these principles, a 2016 report released by UNESCO, the UN agency responsible for education, science and culture since the 1940s, expresses concern with implementing pedagogical tools capable of delivering democratic and civic formation. This concern crystallizes in the framework known as Global Citizenship Education (GCE), conceived as a strategy aimed at promoting a broad and egalitarian civic identity through three interrelated dimensions: cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral.

Given the scale of this challenge, as recognized by the UN and operationalized by UNESCO's formal instruments, it is necessary to look closely at the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a German-Dutch institution whose flagship contribution is the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). For the IEA, civic education encompasses knowledge and understanding of the institutions and processes of civic life, such as voting in elections, together with knowledge, understanding, and opportunities for societal participation and engagement. Consequently, the ICCS seeks to measure the development of knowledge, understanding, skills, and dispositions that prepare young people to comprehend the world as informed and active citizens.

Expanding upon these instruments, several social-responsibility tools—especially in the corporate sphere—deserve particular attention. These include the ESG strategy (Environmental, Social, and Governance), the ISO 26000[3] guidance, and the GRI (Global Reporting Initiative).[4] Aligned with the UN SDGs, the ESG concept rests on the idea that universal criteria should be adopted and advanced by diverse societal actors—from governments to firms. The term ESG emerged in 2004 through a joint initiative of the UN Global Compact and the World Bank, aiming to transform business practices around inclusive, ethical, and

3 https://www.iso.org/iso-26000-social-responsibility.html.

4 https://www.globalreporting.org/standards/.

environmentally responsible values. Although no single instrument captures the full extent to which an organization is committed to ESG principles, a variety of tools, such as questionnaires and reporting guides, seek to measure how different institutions address governance and environmental and social commitments. In Brazil, for instance, the Instituto Ethos[5] offers an extensive diagnostic form titled *Ethos Indicators for Sustainable and Responsible Business* (2017; cycle 2018/2019), organized explicitly around ESG parameters and divided into 47 indicators, each with five developmental stages.

Within the Governance dimension, the form assesses a company's dialogue with the public sector, its transparency, and its anti-corruption policies. Indicator 6.1.1, for example, gauges commitments to social-responsibility initiatives, explicitly including "awareness in the arena of political and social education." Indicator 14.5.4 measures the extent to which companies support the full exercise of citizenship through information and awareness programs. In the Social dimension, the form calls for an appraisal of "timeless concerns relating to present, past and future political and human rights, promoting awareness among internal and external stakeholders and extending beyond corporate reality."

Another essential instrument for understanding corporate social action that intersects with political education is found in the family of ISO quality standards. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) seeks to align global benchmarks for quality, management, and environmental challenges, among others. The ISO "certificates" across a range of themes confer institutional credibility and trust in global markets and fields of operation. In the realm of social responsibility, actors from various ISO member countries—together with UN agencies, environmental bodies and other international organizations—collaborated from 2005 to 2010 to develop what is now known as ISO 26000. Unlike other ISO standards, ISO 26000 does not offer formal certification; instead, it provides guidance for socially responsible conduct by companies and organizations. This orientation naturally invites engagement with areas closely related to

5 https://www.ethos.org.br/.

political education, such as "Human Rights" and "Community Involvement and Development."

Finally, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) stands out among these applied instruments linked to the social role of institutions across sectors. Founded in the 1990s and headquartered in the Netherlands, the GRI was created to guide companies in managing environmental, social, and economic indicators through social-responsibility reports. In the Implementation Manual, G4—Sustainability Reporting Guidelines (GRI 2013), several categories are defined, including G4-HR2 (Human Rights), which measures the "total number of hours of employee training in human-rights policies or procedures relevant to the organization's operations, including the percentage of employees trained." Under G4-SO4 (Society), the guidelines assess the extent of "communications and training on anti-corruption policies and procedures."

While countless examples could extend this discussion, the objective here has been to identify reference points—both historical and contemporary—that justify political education as a central element of democratic theory. A more exhaustive literature review could certainly broaden the analysis by connecting democratic functioning to widespread access to formative and informational content; however, that task lies beyond the scope of the present text. The following sections therefore turn to empirical research on how the educational pillar contributes to the development of democracies at large—and how education appears strategically linked to the first pillar: participation.

Results and Discussion

Educational Trajectories and the Construction of the Democratic Regime

To lend empirical substance and analytical depth to the debate on the importance of education for democratic quality, we adopt a most-different-cases comparative strategy. Countries such as Brazil and Sweden illustrate the correlation between political education and democratic performance. According to the most recent Democracy Index 2024 report, Sweden scored 9.39 (on a ten-point scale), ranking third worldwide and classed as a full

democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit 2025). By contrast, Brazil scored 6.49, placing 57th and falling into the category of flawed democracy.

From an educational standpoint, Sweden enjoys a long tradition of integrated civic education—chiefly through the compulsory subject *Samhällskunskap*, which covers social and political knowledge—and allocates substantial resources to basic education, spending 7.2% of GDP on public education, one of the highest proportions globally (Schulz et al. 2024). Adult literacy is virtually universal, and young Swedes demonstrate high levels of civic knowledge: in the ICCS 2022 (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study), Swedish students achieved the second-best performance among the 22 participating countries. These outcomes reflect a dedicated curriculum, well-trained teachers and a school culture that values critical thinking and participation. The literature indicates that explicit and consistent civic-education curricula tend to produce students with greater political knowledge and democratic commitment, whereas inconsistent implementation undermines instruction in democratic values (Silaban et al. 2024).

Brazil, by contrast, faces historical and structural challenges in civic education. Following democratization, sporadic efforts were made to insert citizenship themes into curricula—for example, the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) of the 1990s and, more recently, the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) in 2017—but these initiatives have been fragmented and lack continuity. Unlike Sweden, Brazil has no compulsory, stand-alone subject in civic education throughout basic schooling; civic content is diffused across History, Geography, Philosophy or Sociology, depending on each school's or teacher's emphasis. Teacher training also shows gaps: despite solid professional requirements, research reveals that topics such as voting and elections rank among the areas in which Brazilian teachers feel least prepared to instruct students (Schulz 2024, 41), a finding corroborated by Nascimento (2021). Unsurprisingly, Brazilian students perform modestly in civic education. In ICCS 2022, Brazil ranked near the bottom, below the international average in civic knowledge (Schulz et al. 2024, 67), indicating significant deficits in civic literacy among Brazilian youth.

This disparity is closely linked to educational trajectories and suggests that, in places where schools and other social institutions successfully embed democratic principles and mutual trust, as in Sweden, democracy becomes culturally consolidated; where political education is weak or discontinuous, as in Brazil, a gap persists between formal institutions and the deep convictions of significant portions of the population. Over time, a virtuous circle emerges: education enhances political culture, which stimulates electoral participation, which in turn reinforces the legitimacy and stability of the democratic system. Political education is therefore strategic to the functioning of contemporary democracies, underpinning informed political participation and a high-quality public debate (Dantas 2017). Ultimately, democratic consolidation requires more than regular elections: it demands a civil society educated in democratic values and engaged with institutional processes.

Assessing Democracy in Cultural Terms

Selecting an indicator of democracy must align with the research object itself. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index adopts the broadest conception of democratic regime, incorporating electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and governmental-effectiveness dimensions (Herre 2022). This perspective dovetails with the chapter's central argument: political education constitutes a democratic pillar, contributing fundamentally to informed political participation and public debate—elements captured by metrics that extend beyond mere electoral procedures. Moreover, because the index encompasses both consolidated and emerging democracies, it enables an examination of how varying institutional arrangements respond to differences in civic formation.

Operationally, the Democracy Index aggregates indicators in five categories: (1) electoral process and pluralism; (2) functioning of government; (3) political participation; (4) political culture; and (5) civil liberties. The political culture category is particularly sensitive to the effects of education, as it evaluates citizens' attitudes and values.

It is important to emphasize that no single indicator can universally evaluate democratic regimes; the appropriate choice depends on the research

question. Given our focus on political education as a fundamental pillar of democratic stability, a metric that integrates cultural and participatory dimensions is most suitable. In addition, the Democracy Index combines expert assessments with survey data annually, producing a measure easily communicated to policymakers and the media—thereby enhancing the external relevance of this chapter's findings and fostering a broader, enduring discussion.

Within the EIU Democracy Index, the "political culture" dimension consists of eight items that measure the depth to which values, attitudes, and consensus indispensable to democratic stability are rooted: (1) Existence of sufficient consensus and social cohesion to sustain democracy; (2) Share of citizens who favour a "strong leader" over parliament and elections; (3) Potential support for a military government; (4) Preference for unelected technocrats governing; (5) Perception that democracies are unable to maintain public order; (6) Belief that democracy harms the economy; (7) Degree of popular agreement with the statement "democracy is better than any other form of government"; (8) Effective tradition of separating state and religion.

In each case, lower support for authoritarian solutions, or higher support for democratic principles, yields a higher score. Thus, the political-culture dimension captures whether citizens have internalized the rules of the democratic game: rejecting militarist, messianic/personalist or technocratic exits, valuing civil liberties, and maintaining confidence that democracy fosters prosperity. A country may possess strong formal institutions, yet if these values are not widespread, these variable signals potential vulnerability. Consequently, political culture is central to our analysis linking political education and democratic quality.

In Brazil's specific case, lacking a robust educational foundation, democratic political culture remains fragile and uneven. The EIU classifies Brazil as a flawed democracy and gives it a particularly low score on political culture: in the most recent edition, Brazil received 5.0 out of 10, having ranged since 2006 from 3.8 (2015-2016) to 6.2 (2014). This result indicates vulnerabilities such as segments of the population flirting with authoritarian or personalist "solutions" during crises.

Beyond Brazil, the Democracy Index 2024 underscores the centrality of the cultural dimension in explaining disparities between consolidated and consolidating democracies. Sweden has maintained a political-culture score above 9.0 since 2006, placing it among the world's three most robust democracies, thanks to decades of universal schooling and minimal tolerance for authoritarian alternatives. Brazil, by contrast, held a score of 5.0 in this dimension between 2022 and 2024, below the global average of 5.25, indicating ambivalence or skepticism toward democratic rules (Economist Intelligence Unit 2025). This gap is especially relevant because, according to the EIU (2025), global political-culture scores have reached their lowest level since the series began in 2006, reflecting polarization, misinformation and crises of trust worldwide.

Accordingly, civic-education policies aimed at strengthening democratic values, highlighted throughout this chapter, are not merely desirable but imperative for reversing the cultural decline identified by the index and preserving regime stability.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to demonstrate the strategic role and theoretical grounding of "political education" as an essential parameter—indeed, a pillar—of the very concept of democracy. Philosophical elements, illustrated by thinkers spanning the past twenty-five centuries, provided the initial foundation for this claim. We then examined global documents and strategies, emanating from the United Nations and from organizations working in education, and even corporate social responsibility, to underscore further the strategic nature of political education.

Finally, drawing on applied metrics, especially the ICCS and The Economist's Democracy Index, we showed that consistent civic curricula internalize democratic values and build resilience against authoritarian exits, whereas gaps in civic literacy weaken the regime. Theoretically, we reposition political education at the core of democratic consolidation; empirically, we caution that it is not enough to count years of schooling: the civic quality of curricula must also be assessed.

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The Polysemy of Crisis: Conceptual Dimensions of Democracy in Crisis

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Introduction

The latest annual report released by the V-Dem Institute has warned that, for the first time in twenty years, there are fewer democratic than autocratic regimes in the world (Nord et al. 2025). This turning point can be interpreted as an expression of what the literature has come to call the "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), which is characterized by a gradual, state-led regime change aimed at weakening the political institutions that uphold democracy (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018). On the one hand, this diagnosis poses new challenges for scholars of democracy across different fields, particularly in political science, concerning the description and explanation of new forms of resistance to democratic erosion (Tomini, Gibril and Bochev 2023). On the other hand, it underscores the need for theoretical and analytical efforts to distinguish precisely what is being threatened in democracies, in what ways, and by which actors.

The proliferation of analyses of this phenomenon has been accompanied by a complex and rich, yet not always clear, conceptualization. Beyond the superficial consensus in the literature that "something is wrong" with the democratic regime, the abundance of diagnoses reveals a profound

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lack of clarity about the very object under threat. This is not merely a semantic issue: as Collier and Levitsky (1997) have shown, the unchecked proliferation of subtypes of democracy can lead to *conceptual stretching*, weakening the analytical precision of the term "democracy" itself. We argue that this polysemy reflects a prior and unresolved question: What are the core dimensions of the democratic regime, and which of them are under threat? Simply put: what exactly is in crisis when we speak of a "crisis of democracy"?

One way to approach this problem is to start from the classic distinction made by William Riker (1982) between democracy as a method and as an ideal. While the first view focuses on incorporating democracy as a method of conflict resolution through elections, the second view takes on a broader meaning by incorporating a set of values. We argue that there are good reasons to believe that the long-standing conceptual disputes over the meaning of the democratic regime have counterparts in the contemporary debate about the potential crisis of this same regime. In other words, we contend that part of the polysemy and conceptual confusion surrounding the crisis of democracy results from a lack of differentiation among its conceptual layers, leading to analytical slippage and normative ambiguity.

To advance this argument, the work is organized into three sections. First, we take a step back in the discussion to map the field. Our initial objective is to distinguish between competing conceptions of democracy. In particular, we focus on the definitions that conceive democracy primarily as a method—a framework for institutionalizing political competition and the peaceful alternation of power. While broader, more normative understandings of democracy exist, our analytical emphasis rests on procedural definitions, which are not only more prevalent in comparative studies but also provide a clearer lens through which to assess the specific dimensions currently under threat. The second section takes a step forward by mapping, in a non-exhaustive manner, some of the major works that have debated the crisis of democracy. More importantly than simply identifying instances of backsliding, we aim to elucidate the specific conceptions of democracy adopted by these authors and the constitutive elements employed in their diagnoses. In this section, we will discuss our central

argument: a certain conceptual proliferation antecedes the crisis itself and resides in the very definition (or absence thereof) of what constitutes a democracy. This chapter contributes to the discussion by highlighting and clarifying these conceptual differences, thereby facilitating a more precise understanding of the democratic crisis.

We conclude the chapter by arguing that the new strategies of democratic erosion identified in the literature on the crisis pose challenges to the essentially proceduralist traditions of democracy, whose analytical core consists of equating a democratic regime with the institutionalization of uncertainty through competitive elections (Przeworski 1988). After all, if the essence of democracy lies in the uncertainty of the outcome, then the institutions that enable and promote political competition also matter. The analysis cannot ignore the gradual corrosion of these institutions, at the risk of limiting itself to addressing the effects of the crisis (the election) without a proper diagnosis of some of its underlying causes (the erosion of institutions).

Finally, we stress that efforts to enhance conceptual clarity in the debate on democratic crises are not trivial. Instead, they are an indispensable condition for developing accurate diagnoses and for anchoring effective strategies of resistance to democratic erosion.

Conceptual Dimensions of Democracy: The Classic Debate in Political Science

The polysemy surrounding the idea of a "crisis of democracy," as previously mentioned, stems from a prior and fundamental question: the lack of consensus on the very concept of democracy. Diagnosing the crisis, first and foremost, depends on conceptualizing what is being diagnosed. In other words, identifying whether or not a political regime is undergoing a crisis requires revisiting the distinct conceptions of democracy, delimiting their constitutive dimensions, and analyzing the elements that have recently been subject to contestation or erosion.

This debate has historical roots but can be organized around a tension between two traditions of democratic theory. We learn with Riker (1982, 8) that "[d]emocracy is both an ideal and a method." On the one hand, there

are expanded views (often referred to as "maximalist") that conceive of democracy as an ideal—a mechanism for realizing certain extrinsic values such as social justice, equality, or substantial freedom (Przeworski 2024, 6). According to this perspective, the democratic method is not an end in itself, but rather a means of achieving various social, economic, and cultural objectives. Jack Walker (1971), for example, criticized the method-based definitions of democracy, which he considered to be an "elitist theory" of democracy. He therefore advocated a return to the core of a normative theory oriented towards "the production of citizens who were capable enough and responsible enough to play this role"—participating in the public affairs of the community (Walker 1971, 75).

On the other hand, conceptions known as "minimalist" view democracy as the institutionalization of the method for choosing rulers, although they may differ regarding the degree of institutional requirements and the role of liberal guarantees within the democratic concept. The minimalist tradition finds its expression in Joseph Schumpeter's (1942) critique of what he termed the "classical doctrine" of democracy, inherited from eighteenth-century democratic philosophy, which viewed democracy as the instrument for realizing the "common good" and the "general will" of the people. Schumpeter presented a definition of democracy centered purely on the method for selecting rulers, a mechanism for producing the political government: "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter 1942, 269). In this reframing, democracy is stripped of any normative content and comes to represent the mechanism that institutionalizes competition among elites for political leadership.

The implications of the emergence of Schumpeter's theory are profound. First, it strengthens the view that there is no single common good for a political community to pursue. Second, and perhaps most relevantly, Schumpeter's definition shifts the central political role from the people to the elites. In this tradition, it is the political elites, as competitors for political power—and not the people directly—who are the driving force of the democratic regime; the "will of the people" is conceived as the result of this competition, rather than its starting point. Therefore, the move

away from more substantive definitions of democracy was accompanied by a new conception that distinguishes the democratic method from its effects on the body politic. The central focus is always on evaluating how political power is managed among the actors competing for it.

Adam Przeworski (1988; 1991) is a leading contemporary exponent of the minimalist tradition, contributing especially to the deepening of the analytical rigor of Schumpeterian theory. His definition of democracy is equally procedural, defined as a system in which political conflicts are processed and where parties lose elections (Przeworski 1991). If democracy relates to the alternation of power, in which incumbents can be defeated at the polls and peacefully yield power, then one can extract at least three constitutive elements from this minimalist definition of democracy: *(i)* the need for an organized political opposition, *(ii)* the existence of competitive elections, and *(iii)* respect for the electoral outcome by relevant political actors, particularly the losers. In short, the minimalist tradition institutionalizes uncertainty about who will govern (Przeworski 1988, 63), hence binding all actors participating in the political game to the electoral outcome.

An influential alternative to the purely proceduralist conception of democracy is presented by Robert Dahl (1971). In fact, this is not a direct break with Schumpeterian minimalism, but rather a refinement of the foundations that enable the interpretation of democracy as a method, thus expanding its conceptual foundations. A key aspect for understanding Dahl's contributions is to grasp the distinction he makes between democracies and polyarchies. Unlike Przeworski (1988), for Dahl, democracy is not conceived as a dichotomy. That is, the author's objective is not to make a binary classification of whether a regime is democratic or authoritarian, but rather to recognize the existence of a continuum on which different political regimes can coexist, lying at varying distances from an ideal democratic regime.

By empirically recognizing the existence of countries whose regimes approximate the democratic ideal to varying degrees, Dahl proposes conceiving of democracy as a normative ideal—a horizon that real-world regimes (or real democracies) aim to reach. For Dahl, what characterizes

this normative democracy is the full responsiveness of elected actors to citizens: "a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens" (Dahl 1971, 2). Since it is an ideal type, existing regimes can never be fully democratic, but are rather imperfect arrangements situated on a continuum of democratization. For this reason, Dahl adopts the term polyarchy to designate the real-world political systems that combine, to varying degrees, contestation and participation, and that approach—albeit incompletely—the democratic ideal (Dahl 1971, 8).

A second key counterpoint in Dahl's theory is its shift away from the excessive focus that Schumpeter and Przeworski place on the electoral event, toward a concept that incorporates institutional guarantees to enable political competition and simultaneously promote greater political participation in the selection of rulers—a well-known pluralist feature of Dahlsian theory. Although political institutions may take on distinct constitutional arrangements (Dahl 2001, 145), polyarchy presupposes the observance of institutions that ensure *(i)* free and competitive elections, *(ii)* freedom of association, *(iii)* freedom of expression, *(iv)* the right to vote, *(v)* eligibility for public office, *(vi)* the right to compete for support, *(vii)* alternative sources of information, and *(viii)* that government policies are dependent on votes (Dahl 1971, 3).

Despite remaining within the framework of proceduralism, Dahl's theory is more complex than the minimalist tradition. One of his seminal contributions lies in establishing a link between the strategic calculations of political actors and the institutional structures of different regimes. This logic is essential not only for understanding regime transitions and the process of democratization, but also for analysing the conditions that lead political elites to respect the rules of the democratic game, even in an environment of uncertainty about the electoral outcome. The central question driving his analysis is: Why do actors decide to submit to democratic rules and risk political defeat, rather than resorting to repression or exclusion of the opposition?

The response to this question can be found precisely in the strategic calculations of political elites. In this mode of analysis, democracy

can be conceptualized as a self-enforcing equilibrium wherein actors are constrained to act peacefully and within the rules of the game, thereby maintaining a balance of power among diverse political groups. The willingness to compete peacefully—including the acceptance of one's own defeat—stems from the expectation that the costs of abandoning the democratic regime outweigh the potential benefits of authoritarian alternatives. This outcome, however, is always unstable and contingent; the equilibrium of a polyarchic regime depends on conditions that lead political actors to accept that the costs of democracy are lower than those of opting for other, non-peaceful means of processing conflict (Dahl 1971, 15–16).

Beyond simply contrasting different analytical conceptions of democratic regimes, it is essential to acknowledge that even within the minimalist tradition, which refrains from placing high normative expectations on democratic regimes, there are significant variations with direct implications for how the supposed contemporary crisis of democracy is understood. As we will see, much of the debate within political science on the crisis of democracy reflects the internal conceptual tensions of the field itself. Authors influenced by the pluralist tradition tend to emphasize the stability of institutions that promote competition and participation as central to the regime's endurance. In contrast, academics closer to the Schumpeterian tradition tend to be more skeptical of the diagnosis of a crisis, restricting the democratic definition to respect for electoral uncertainty and the possibility of alternation in power.

The Conceptual Dimension of the Crisis: The Contours of the Debate

Although the topic of democratic crisis dominates much of the recent political science literature, it would be erroneous to conclude that the field is unified concerning the purposes, concepts, or conclusions that guide analytical inquiry. A proliferation of both descriptive and explanatory efforts has emerged. On the one hand, the literature has sought to identify strategies of institutional erosion (Bermeo 2016), challenges to the integrity of electoral processes (Higashijima et al. 2025), and the effects of political polarization among voters and elites (Carothers and

O'Donohue 2019). On the other hand, it has focused on the forms of resistance mobilized by opposition forces and unelected actors, such as courts, the media, or bureaucracies (see Ginsburg and Huq 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). As we will show, this diversity of approaches reflects not only different diagnoses of the crisis, but also distinct conceptions of *which dimensions of the democratic regime* are being contested and thus warrant analytical centrality.

This contemporary scholarship, while varied in focus, maintains important continuities with classical traditions in political science, especially those associated with the theory of democratic transition and consolidation. In this vein, Bermeo (2016, 5) introduces the concept of *democratic backsliding* as a process of regressive transition, defined as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy." The principal analytical innovation lies not in the phenomenon of democratic regression itself, but in its subtle and gradual manifestations in the 21st century. Whereas the 20th century was characterized by explicit ruptures, such as military coups, presidential self-coups, and blatant electoral fraud, in recent decades, this behavior has shifted toward more incremental processes, including executive aggrandizement and the strategic use of electoral rules to limit competition among political actors (Riedl et al. 2024).

Beyond identifying these new forms of autocratization, Bermeo shifts the focus of analysis to the role played by different political institutions in sustaining the democratic regime. Her proposition is clear: "Focusing on democratic erosion will require more scholars to see that democracy is 'a collage' of institutions crafted and recrafted by different actors at different times" (Bermeo 2016, 14). In other words, the crisis of democracy can only be fully understood if one considers the multiple institutional components that constitute it, and the distinct ways in which these components can be weakened or transformed.

The recognition that "institutions matter" is nearly foundational in contemporary political science. But how do they influence the trajectory of democratic regimes? According to Waldner and Lust (2018), this influence can be understood at three levels: *vertical accountability*, *horizontal*

accountability, and *governmental effectiveness*. Different institutional arrangements can enhance (or restrict) the responsiveness of governments to citizens, the capacity of independent agencies to limit the power of incumbents, and the government's efficiency in providing public goods and avoiding institutional gridlocks—the latter of which, in turn, is often instrumentalized as a justification for authoritarian measures. As the authors note:

> We can think of democratic political institutions as having three broad types of effect. First, different democratic institutions may affect the level of vertical accountability and representativeness, such that governments are more or less responsive to citizens; citizens who view their government as a legitimate source of authority have diminished incentive to support antidemocratic movements. Second, different democratic institutions may affect the level of horizontal accountability, such that distinct government agencies have more or less capacity to impede members of the government from acting in increasingly autocratic ways and subverting democracy from within. Third, different democratic institutions may affect the level of governmental efficaciousness and performance, avoiding political stalemate and crisis that can provide the excuse or the motivation and justification for antidemocratic actions (Waldner and Lust 2018, 99).

The institutional emphasis proposed by this literature was decisive in consolidating an expanded research agenda on democratic erosion, bringing together authors who investigate how constitutions, electoral rules, civil rights, courts, and oversight bodies have been instrumentalized or attacked by elected governments. A hallmark of this field of study has been the abandonment of a binary view of democracy, replaced by a gradualist approach aligned with the Dahlian tradition. Democracy is thus conceived as a set of attributes that can vary in intensity, allowing hybrid or ambiguous regimes to be analyzed in more granular and empirically verifiable terms.

Institutional approaches, while central, are not without their limitations—many of which are recognized by the field itself. The most apparent criticism stems from competing analytical frameworks that privilege variables often underestimated by institutionalist perspectives. Waldner and Lust (2018), for example, emphasize that an exclusive focus on institutional rules and structures can obscure the role of political actors' preferences, cultural dynamics, and social coalitions as drivers of regime change. The classic critique of institutional endogeneity resurfaces: if institutions are both the cause and product of political choices, it is insufficient to treat them as exogenous or invariant variables. The phenomenon of backsliding, therefore, demands approaches that articulate both institutional and non-institutional elements, such as actors' preferences and the configuration of social coalitions.

Furthermore, the problem of the insufficiency of democratic institutions as safeguards, highlighted by Luo and Przeworski (2019), is especially relevant for those seeking to understand containment strategies against leaders with authoritarian propensities. The formal existence of accountability institutions—such as courts or oversight agencies—is not a sufficient condition to deter democratic erosion, particularly when such institutions are captured, neutralized, or adapted to serve the purposes of incumbents. The literature on the gradual weakening of democracies rightly insists that institutions without normative support or social density operate as empty shells.

A further problem lies in the reification of institutions in the contemporary debate. Often, these structures are treated as autonomous objects of analysis, without making explicit how such institutions link to the *constitutive dimensions of democracy*. This methodological disconnection obscures the underlying conceptions of democracy that guide each diagnosis of the crisis. In the absence of such clarity, analyses tend to oscillate between minimalist definitions, inspired by the Schumpeterian tradition, and more normative and comprehensive conceptions, without this difference being made explicit. The result is a theoretical fragmentation that hinders the building of analytical consensus or robust empirical comparisons.

This impasse is acutely evident in the debate over *how to measure democracy and its potential for backsliding*. Authors such as Little and Meng (2024), operating within a strict proceduralist conception, question the premise that there is a global decline of democracy. According to the authors, objective analyses of incumbents' electoral performance do not support this diagnosis. The probability of ruling parties losing elections has remained relatively constant since the 2000s, at around 30% (Little and Meng 2024, 5)—suggesting a greater resilience in the democratic system than the emblematic cases of erosion might imply. As they state: "Focusing on a few prominent cases of backsliding creates misleading views about the resilience of democratic institutions" (Little and Meng 2024, 2).

The merit of Little and Meng's work lies in its search for clear and comparable metrics to analyse democratic health. Nevertheless, their analytical focus remains restricted to electoral outcomes, which raises a critical tension: the electoral success of the opposition is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for democracy. As the authors themselves observe, many antidemocratic actions—such as press censorship, the manipulation of electoral rules, and the weakening of independent institutions—are aimed precisely at hindering the alternation of power, even without formally suppressing competition:

> In addition to the theoretical importance of turnover, many of the undemocratic actions taken by leaders—banning opposition parties, controlling the media, and placing loyalists in control of election-management bodies—aim to influence the probability of winning elections (Little and Meng, 2024, 4).

The problem, therefore, is not merely empirical, but conceptual. An exclusive focus on the alternation of power and the loser's acceptance of electoral defeat as criteria for democratic assessment compromises the analysis's ability to capture deeper dynamics of institutional degradation. For Roberts et al. (2025) and Singer (2018), recent political events have led scholars to incorporate a "winner's dilemma" alongside the well-known "loser's dilemma" in assessing democratic resilience, given the risk of an incumbent transforming a transient advantage into a permanent,

institutionalized one. On the other hand, the opposite risk is also real: by excessively broadening the set of institutions considered essential to democracy, one runs the risk of inflating the concept, rendering it normatively overburdened and empirically inoperable.

It is at this juncture that the Dahlian tradition offers a more balanced alternative. For Robert Dahl, democracy—or more precisely, polyarchy—is reducible neither to electoral procedures nor to the mere presence of formal institutions. It is defined by the government's responsiveness to the preferences formulated and expressed by its citizens, a concept that combines elements of participation and contestation. Institutions are important, but from an instrumental standpoint, their function is to ensure that these two principles are realized. As we have already noted, this conception allows democracy to be viewed as a continuum, whereby different regimes can be assessed based on their adherence to these two dimensions.

As Dahl also argues, the existence of polyarchy depends on an institutional structure that increases the costs of repression and reduces the costs of toleration for those in power. This logic, revisited by Waldner and Lust (2018) as a possible basis for the theoretical unification of the field, highlights that the role of institutions should be assessed not only in normative terms but also in terms of strategic incentives. That is to say, democratic stability depends on the extent to which the rules of the game make it more rational for actors in power to tolerate competition and accept electoral uncertainty.

Reviving this conceptual model—cantered on contestation, participation, and incentives—could represent a significant path forward in contributing to the debate on the crisis of democracy. It enables the integration of institutional and behavioural approaches without compromising the normative foundations of the regime. Furthermore, it offers more precise criteria for distinguishing between legitimate political practices, however harsh they may be in a competitive political environment, and actions that effectively erode the foundations of the democratic system. A return to the "constitutive core" of democracy, in Dahl's terms, seems crucial not only for refining the metrics and diagnoses

of the crisis but also for avoiding both excessively alarmist and overly permissive readings.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the conceptual debate on democracy within the literature dedicated to the contemporary "crisis of democracy." We have aimed to take stock—albeit partially—of this field, with a special emphasis on how its authors engage (or fail to engage) with the classical debates on the different definitions of democracy. Ultimately, we have sought to answer with greater clarity *what is in crisis when we speak of the "crisis of democracy."*

We began this chapter by revisiting the classic debates on the definitions of democracy, to show that the competing conceptions—still in circulation today—are not mere theoretical abstractions, but have direct implications for contemporary diagnoses of the democratic crisis. By contrasting the minimalist paradigm, which reduces democracy to the existence of competitive elections with the prospect of alternation of power (Przeworski 1988; Schumpeter 1942), with broader procedural approaches such as Dahl's (1971), which incorporates contestation, participation, and institutional guarantees, we have demonstrated that the conceptual starting point defines which symptoms are perceived as threats to the regime. Thus, narrower readings tend to overlook gradual processes of institutional erosion, while more demanding conceptions run the risk of inflating the concept and generating alarmist diagnoses. It is in this dilemma that the polysemy of the field resides—a dilemma that this work has sought to address.

We argue that Dahl's theory of polyarchy offers a particularly balanced model that combines normative and positive elements, incorporating contestation and participation without neglecting the strategic calculations of political elites as a defining factor in democratic equilibrium. A careful analytical focus on democratic institutions—and, crucially, on their effects on the constitutive dimensions of the democratic regime—is fundamental to assessing the crisis.

Within the literature on democratic crises, we identify not only a terminological polysemy—where competing concepts such as "democratic backsliding" and "democratic erosion" signal a lack of theoretical unification in the field—but also a cleavage between more and less pessimistic diagnoses of democracy's global status. The debate on measuring backsliding, as articulated by Little and Meng (2024), revisits a prior conceptual question regarding what truly constitutes the democratic core that must be protected.

Our analysis has revealed that this conceptual polysemy is not merely academic but has significant practical consequences. When analysts operate with implicit or divergent definitions of democracy, their assessments of the crisis's severity tend to be incommensurable. Authors who privilege strict electoral criteria, such as the effective alternation of power, tend to reach more optimistic conclusions about global democratic resilience. On the other hand, scholars who incorporate broader institutional dimensions—such as judicial independence, freedom of the press, or the integrity of oversight bodies—tend to identify more concerning signs of democratic degradation, even in contexts where electoral competition remains formally preserved.

This analytical tension largely reflects the inadequacy of traditional conceptual tools to capture contemporary forms of autocratization. The strategies of democratic erosion identified by Bermeo (2016) and other scholars precisely challenge the assumptions of minimalist conceptions, which tend to treat elections as isolated events, disconnected from the broader institutional environment that makes them possible. When electoral competition is formally maintained, but the conditions for its fairness are progressively eroded, the inadequacy of definitions that reduce democracy to the mere electoral moment becomes evident.

In this regard, the Dahlian tradition offers particularly valuable analytical tools for understanding these dynamics. By conceiving of democracy as a balance between contestation and participation, sustained by strategic calculations that make toleration more rational than repression, Dahl's model allows one to capture both the procedural aspects and the structural incentives that sustain democratic competition. Crucially, this approach offers more precise criteria for distinguishing between legitimate

political practices, however harsh, and actions that effectively erode the foundations of the democratic system.

Articulating clear conceptions of democracy in the study of its crisis is a precondition for making progress on the measurement of the phenomenon, as well as for proposing effective strategies to counter its attacks. Such clarity can be particularly fruitful for avoiding both unfounded alarmism and excessive complacency, both of which thrive in environments fostered by conceptual stretching.

The central contribution of this work lies in demonstrating that the debates on the crisis of democracy largely reproduce unresolved conceptual tensions within democratic theory itself. This finding suggests that further research on democratic erosion requires not only the refinement of empirical metrics or the identification of new cases of backsliding, but also a more systematic return to the theoretical foundations of the field. Conceptual clarification is not a subsidiary academic exercise, but a necessary condition for more precise diagnoses and more effective strategies of resistance.

Studying the stability of democratic regimes in the contemporary context is an analytical, empirical, and normative challenge. The literature dedicated to this topic has made significant contributions, both in delineating the strategies pursued by potentially authoritarian leaders and in identifying institutional mechanisms of resistance to democratic erosion. Returning to the conceptual foundations of democratic theory seems a necessary step for deepening a debate that is moving beyond describing backsliding strategies to explaining their motivations and assessing the success of opposition strategies. Although the unification of a theoretical paradigm is unlikely—and perhaps even undesirable—parsimonious analytical models based on dimensions such as Dahl's "costs of toleration and repression" can be particularly fruitful for the development of the field, contributing to more precise diagnoses and the anchoring of effective strategies of resistance to democratic erosion.

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The Crisis of Democracy and Its Variants: A Literature Review of the Third Phase of Studies on Democratization

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, the world has experienced what Huntington (1991) called the "third wave of democratization," characterized by the decline of authoritarian regimes, the resurgence of democracies, and the adoption of liberal constitutions across the globe. In parallel, the debate surrounding the democratic regime—its flaws and advantages—has remained constant. In recent years, particularly with the arrival of the twenty-first century, there has been an expansion in analysis of the crisis of democracy, alongside the dissemination of concerns regarding the rise of new populist and authoritarian leaders through social media.

Scholarly literature on democracy seems to point to a significant global transformation, suggesting that there is an ongoing crisis. The consensus is that the contemporary world presents novel challenges to both social and political structures. Nevertheless, there is considerable divergence regarding the conceptual definitions, causes, and consequences of such transformations.

Both popular and academic discourses reveal a wide range of diagnoses and conceptualizations of the contemporary crisis. This is evident in the several terms employed for the phenomenon, such as "political crisis," "constitutional crisis," "crisis of democracy," and "crisis

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of representation." Analysing the terminology is not merely a linguistic exercise, but an essential part to understanding the semantic scope of these terms within different theoretical frameworks. This effort seeks to organize the discussion by recognizing that each term may highlight distinct facets of the crisis, thereby providing a clearer identification of its nature, causes, and potential consequences.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the broader framework within which the scholarly literature situates the crisis of democracy, as well as to examine and contrast the diverse terms and definitions adopted by contemporary authors. The analytical focus is on understanding the conceptualizations and explanatory frameworks proposed, their areas of convergence and divergence, and the underlying definitions of democracy and institutions which serve as base for these interpretations.

This discussion is informed by Antonino Castaldo's (2018) typological framework on theories of the crisis of democracy (or CoD), which considers both objective and subjective dimensions at domestic and international levels. We share Castaldo's concern about the lack of terminological consistency across CoD literature. Although Castaldo (2018) thoroughly addresses the methodological approaches of different authors, this analysis does not delve into those aspects. Instead, we focus on presenting and analysing the main theoretical and conceptual perspectives, aiming to identify and organize the terminology associated with the concept of crisis and its significance in the broader academic discourse.

Focusing on contemporary theories of the CoD, the literature under review is situated within the third phase of democratization studies, as proposed by Merkel (2010). According to the author, this field of research can be categorized into three distinct phases. The period from 1970 to 1990 is the "phase of optimism and action theories" (2010, 18–20), which emphasized actor-driven explanations for the global expansion of democracy. The second period is the "phase of realism and structuralism" (Merkel 2010, 20), which adopted a historical-structural approach that highlighted systemic constraints on agency. The third and current phase is the "phase of pessimism and path dependency theories," which centres on the internal autocratization processes within democratic regimes:

> In the academic sphere, emphasis has swung from research on processes of democratization to those of autocracy. Articles such as 'The end of the transition paradigm?' (Carothers 2002), 'Democracy challenged' (Ottaway 2003), 'The rise of competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 2002), 'Authoritarian reversals' (Nathan 2003), 'Defective democracies' (Merkel 2004), 'Electoral authoritarianism' (Schedler 2006) and 'Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes' (Svolik 2008) are indicative not only of the change in focus of such research, but also of the sea of change from optimism to pessimism which has been spreading continuously since 2000 (Merkel 2010, 18)

This chapter explores selected recent contributions to the field that reflect the third phase of the crisis of democracy (CoD). The literature is analysed from a global perspective, with no interest in the specificities of approaches focused on individual countries. The theories are considered as part of the broader scholarly production within the field. Furthermore, the analytical effort is concentrated on significant works published from 2018 onward, both because they represent the most recent output on the topic and because they incorporate approaches that conceptualize the crisis as a global phenomenon, not limited to areas with historically fragile democracies. Additionally, the election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016 and the early years of his administration represent a pivotal moment in CoD analyses and provide important perspectives to the debate regarding the purported crisis in otherwise consolidated democracies, within the broader context of a global crisis.

This is not an exhaustive mapping of contemporary CoD theories, but an attempt to systematize a selection of relevant works. The extensive body of literature presents diverse analytical perspectives. As Ghirardi (2021) notes, these perspectives include sociological, political, legal, economic, and psychological approaches, as well as the author's own proposal based on the metaphysical premise of a crisis.

This chapter highlights several of these different theoretical perspectives. One is the neo-institutionalist perspective, which emphasizes institutions and actors' choices, employed by Steven Levitsky, Daniel

Ziblatt, and Adam Przeworski. All three scholars are rooted in political science and focus on the American situation. In contrast, sociological perspectives emphasize political culture, in which actors' perceptions and trust constitute fundamental analytical elements. This approach is exemplified by Manuel Castells, who broadens the debate by incorporating technology, communication, and globalization, with empirical references to the United States and Europe. David Runciman, also grounded in political science, considers the role of institutions; however, his analysis focuses on actors' perceptions and trust, with empirical references to the United States, Europe, and Asia. Leonardo Avritzer contributes to the international debate by incorporating the Brazilian situation through a political culture approach, combining historical analysis with actors' perceptions. Similarly, Oscar Vilhena Vieira examines the Brazilian context from a constitutionalist perspective, emphasizing constraints imposed by the constitutional text.

Accordingly, the chapter is structured around three axes of analysis derived from the literature. The first examines the expressions and definitions that emerge as synonyms or characterizations of crisis, such as rupture, retrogression, backsliding, transition, breakdown, and subversion. This analysis focuses on authors such as Adam Przeworski, David Runciman, Scott Mainwaring and Fernando Bizzarro, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, Leonardo Avritzer, Manuel Castells, and Oscar Vilhena Vieira. The second section addresses the distinction between political crisis and constitutional crisis, focusing on the works of Adam Przeworski, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, and Oscar Vilhena Vieira. Based on this framework, the third section examines the concepts of crisis of democracy and crisis of representation, with particular attention to Adam Przeworski, David Runciman, and Manuel Castells.

The analysis concludes that the literature reveals more convergence than divergence concerning the current crisis. The literature largely views the transformation of the democratic regime as a gradual political process, seen by some as a crisis of democracy itself and by others as a crisis of political representation.

Rupture, Crisis, or Retrogression

There is a consensus among scholars of democracy regarding the existence of democratic transitions and authoritarian ascensions worldwide. The literature addresses this phenomenon by presenting examples such as Hungary under the government of Prime Minister Orbán, Turkey under President Erdoğan, Poland with Andrzej Duda, the United States during Donald Trump's administration (2017–2021), and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's mandate. These cases are often mentioned as representative of authoritarian populist, legalistic autocrats, or autocratic populist tendencies and their variants (Almeida and Guarnieri 2020; Bugarič 2019; Huq and Ginsburg 2018; Müller 2017; Scheppele 2018; Varol 2015), which have emerged within formally democratic regimes. The prevailing analyses suggest that contemporary attacks on democracy differ fundamentally in nature from those seen in previous decades. This section outlines the key terms and definitions employed in the literature on the crisis of democracy (CoD) to characterize the political dynamics of contemporary democratic regimes.

Drawing on the democratization wave theory, Bizzarro and Mainwaring (2019) offer an analysis of transitions in contemporary democracies (between 1974 and 2012), grounded in the typology proposed by Lührmann, Lindberg, and Tannenberg (2018). Their analytical framework is structured around stages through which democracies have progressed or backslidden, according to patterns of advance and decline. Terminologies within this framework range between the extremes of "transition" and "breakdown," where "[…] we code as a transition a shift from either kind of autocracy to either kind of democracy. The inverse change, from either kind of democracy to either kind of autocracy, we code as a breakdown." (Bizzarro and Mainwaring 2019, 4).

Within this analytical model, transition and democratic breakdown may represent either prolonged processes or specific historical events. Accordingly, democracies are classified into categories such as breakdown, erosion, stagnation, advancement, or remaining consistently highly democratic without major advances in terms of democratic indices. The most pertinent classifications for this discussion are breakdown

and erosion. Breakdown, understood through a narrow conception of democracy (Bizzarro and Mainwaring 2019, 4), refers to regimes in which democratic governance has broken down entirely—whether due to military coups, self-coups, or incremental processes. Erosion, interpreted through a broader conceptual lens (Bizzarro and Mainwaring 2019, 5), involves the deterioration of individual liberties and specific rights, while maintaining competitive, free, and fair multiparty elections (Bizzarro and Mainwaring 2019, 4–6).

This study draws on data from the V-Dem Democracy Index, and the conceptual definitions of democracy applied are consistent with that dataset. The narrow conception aligns with electoral democracy, characterized by free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of association. The broader conception corresponds to liberal democracy, incorporating adherence to elections, individual rights, the rule of law, and the effective functioning of judicial and legislative institutions as counterweights to executive authority (Bizzarro and Mainwaring 2019).

Democratic breakdown denotes democratic rupture—that is, the complete collapse of the foundational elements of electoral democracy (competitive, free, and fair multiparty elections) leading to authoritarian governance, devoid of electoral norms. According to Bizzarro and Mainwaring (2019), such breakdown can occur through three distinct pathways, with the incremental route being the most identified in contemporary scholarly literature. This raises the question of whether classifications such as incremental collapse and democratic breakdown correspond to the terminology used in contemporary CoD discussions. These classifications appear to emphasize temporally extended processes, in which the precise moment when democracy ceased to function cannot easily be determined. Rather, the focus lies on the cumulative developments that gradually dismantle democratic regimes—a continuous process of democratic reversal.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) similarly state that contemporary democratic breakdowns occur through the subversion of democratic processes from within, typically orchestrated by elected leaders (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 15). They refer to this process as electoral backsliding

or legally subverted democracy, describing a gradual erosion whereby political actors capture key referees—such as judicial and law enforcement institutions (81) and rewrite the rules of the game (90).

Runciman (2018, 52) also affirms that the main threat to democracy today stems from elected leaders who undermine democratic institutions while claiming to defend them. His analysis frames the subversion of democracy as a gradual, continued process, not a series of discrete, dramatic events that are typical of traditional coups.

Przeworski (2020, 172) also supports this perspective, defining democratic deconsolidation, or backsliding, as a gradual erosion of democratic institutions and norms. Drawing upon Varol's (2015) work, Przeworski introduces the concept of subversion by stealth, defined as "the use of legal mechanisms that exist in regimes with favorable democratic credentials for antidemocratic ends" (Przeworski 2020, 178). In this framework, subversion by stealth refers to the process by which political actors employ legal instruments to advance antidemocratic objectives deliberately and covertly—essentially operating behind a democratic façade. Democratic backsliding, then, becomes a process in which governments adopt a series of actions, none of which are overtly unconstitutional or antidemocratic in isolation, but which cumulatively undermine opposition forces' ability to remove them from office or to meaningfully influence policymaking (Przeworski 2020, 183).

These dynamics are consistent with the notions of incremental-path and democratic erosion as articulated by Bizzarro and Mainwaring (2019). The concept of democratic subversion is framed as a continuous, cumulative process that may ultimately result in total regime collapse. Moreover, these processes underscore the idea that the crisis of democracy is generated internally, emerging from within democratic regimes themselves, using their own institutional tools (Almeida and Guarnieri 2020; Bugarič 2019; Huq and Ginsburg 2018; Müller 2017; Scheppele 2018; Varol 2015).

Similarly, Castells (2018) supports the idea of a prolonged democratic crisis. He characterizes it as a "gradual collapse" (Castells 2018, 8) and explores its underlying causes. However, his work does not clearly differentiate between the terms "crisis," "rupture," and "collapse," which

appear to be used interchangeably, all referring to a temporally extended transformation with no clear tipping point.

This analysis is further contrasted with the works of Avritzer (2018; 2019) and Vieira (2018). Although both focus their arguments on the Brazilian context, there are conceptual parallels with global analyses presented by these scholars, along with elements that diverge partially. Once again, the term "democratic backsliding" is employed to characterize a sustained decline in democratic quality. Nevertheless, Avritzer (2018, 276) draws a conceptual distinction between democratic backsliding and democratic rupture:

> I would like to clarify here that there is a distinction between democratic backsliding and anti-democratic moments. I understand democratic backsliding as a period marked by a decline in public support for democracy across broad segments of public opinion and by the contestation of democratic outcomes. Anti-democratic moments, by contrast, involve more radical ruptures with electoral institutions. (Author's free translation).

The author employs this distinction to formulate the thesis of a democratic pendulum in Brazil. While it is not within the scope of this article to examine this specific theory in detail, the distinction itself reflects a counter current interpretation of the democratic crisis. The author separates individual perception elements—an approach we identify as sociological—from institutional elements, which pertain to changes implemented by political actors within the rules of democracy. In this sense, democratic backsliding is related to trust, whereas antidemocratic moments are actual ruptures within the regime. In other words, the electorate's perceptions and the contestation of democratic outcomes by political actors differ from the rupture itself, which materializes through institutional transformation.

However, the notion of rupture addressed by Avritzer (2019, 12–13) carries the idea of a "continuous process of institutional degradation," aligning his argument more closely with the analytical framework proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

Similarly, Vieira (2018) distinguishes between the concepts of rupture and crisis within a constitutional framework. Constitutional ruptures are easily identifiable, whereas constitutional crises tend to be more subtle. The former refers to the moment when "the previous constitutional order is overturned or collapses, and a new one is established" (Vieira 2018, 38), while the latter corresponds to democratic backsliding, when conflicts between political actors are no longer mediated through institutional mechanisms.

According to Vieira, constitutional crises may take several forms: (i) when public authorities express that institutional mechanisms are insufficient to resolve political conflicts, thereby resorting to exceptional measures; (ii) when institutional paralysis sets in; (iii) when the three branches of government advocate divergent constitutional interpretations; (iv) when constitutional rules are used to restrict democratic capacities.

As in Avritzer (2019), Vieira's analysis draws a distinction between a specific point of institutional rupture—in which previous rules are replaced by new ones and a prolonged period of transformation involving subtle changes in the application or interpretation of rules that ultimately subvert them.

Accordingly, Vieira (2018, 16) refers to the unfolding crisis as a period of "hard times," during which institutions are weaponized as instruments of political retaliation. This concept appears to align with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) notion of the legally subverted democracy, as well as with Przeworski's (2020) concept of subversion by stealth.

Although the literature employs diverse terminology—sometimes treating these expressions as synonyms and at other times drawing conceptual distinctions—it converges on several key points: (1) there is a transformation currently underway within democratic regimes; (2) this transformation differs from previous reverse waves (Huntington 1991) in its nature and mechanisms; (3) this new wave of democratic erosion is a gradual and continuous process, rather than a discrete, covert coup; and (4) the transformation is taking place within the democratic regimes themselves, with the very rules and institutions of democracy being used as instruments of subversion.

After recognizing that there is consensus in the contemporary literature regarding the existence of an ongoing transformation of democracies, we proceed to investigate how this shift has been characterized by scholars. What elements are highlighted to define the nature of the crisis? Do the definitions employed align with the terminology adopted? And is there consensus within the literature regarding the political or constitutional character of the crisis?

Political Crisis *versus* Constitutional Crisis

In a historiographical reassessment, Przeworski (2020) investigates the differences among countries that have experienced democratic transformations. The existence or absence of a political crisis is a relevant element in his analysis. A political crisis is understood as a situation in which: (1) there are disputes over who should govern; (2) there is a constitutional declaration of violation committed by the government, or constitutional incapacitation of government members to continue in office; (3) there is conflict among the branches of government and a resulting state of ungovernability; or (4) the government is forced to resign or suppress the opposition due to popular pressure or military threats (Przeworski 2020, 29–30).

This conceptual approach encompasses circumstances that, at first glance, may be seen as institutional (such as conflicts between branches of government, ungovernability, or the forced resignation or repression of opposition due to external pressure), constitutional (such as official declarations of constitutional violations or the disqualification of government officials based on constitutional grounds), or perceptual, relating to the views of individuals (as in disputes over who should legitimately govern). These circumstances reveal the nature of the crisis or of the multiple crises at play.

The line separating a political crisis from a constitutional crisis is often tenuous and difficult to define. For instance, asserting that a given country is undergoing a political crisis due to an accusation of constitutional violation against the current government implies that the breach of a constitutional norm by those in power may lead to a loss of

legitimacy, affecting public perception and thus potentially qualifying as either a political or a constitutional crisis, since legitimacy is itself a key constitutional component of democratic authority. Nevertheless, if such a violation is ultimately addressed through institutional mechanisms, one could argue that the constitutional order remains operational. Considering this level of complexity, it is necessary to distinguish between political and constitutional crises based on the elements outlined in the literature.

To understand the nature of democratic crisis, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) adopt a neo-institutionalist approach, identifying the crisis as stemming from an assault on informal norms. Their framework integrates both institutions and the actions of political actors as essential components. The proper functioning of democracy, they argue, depends not only on formal rules but also on the shared understandings of appropriate behavior that underpin them (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 202). These shared understandings refer to informal norms, particularly the principles of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

The first norm, mutual toleration, refers to the recognition by political actors of the legitimacy of their opponents' participation in the democratic process (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 103–104). The second, institutional forbearance, pertains to respect for the spirit of the law, that is, the self-restraint of political actors in the use of constitutional powers. For example, in situations where no explicit constitutional provision prohibits a given action, actors are expected to respect established precedents and avoid exploiting constitutional ambiguities for partisan gain, thereby honouring the tradition of democratic restraint (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 107).

In short, "democracy" is seen as a system whose functioning depends on constitutions reinforced by unwritten democratic norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 20). Within this framework, "crisis" is conceptualized as the legal subversion of democracy, meaning the deliberate undermining of informal constitutional norms by political actors. Through a comparative and historical methodology, the authors reconstruct political disputes to identify actions that violate both formal and informal constitutional rules.

Given their emphasis on informal norms, the current democratic crisis extends beyond the scope of a constitutional crisis. The Constitution

alone does not seem sufficient to safeguard democracy, nor does the current context indicate overt violations of constitutional provisions. On the contrary, the constitutional rules are formally respected, but in ways that subvert their democratic function.

> Even well-designed constitutions cannot, by themselves, guarantee democracy. For one, constitutions are always incomplete. Like any set of rules, they have countless gaps and ambiguities. No operating manual, no matter how detailed, can anticipate all possible contingencies or prescribe how to behave under all possible circumstances. Constitutional rules are also always subject to competing interpretations [...] If constitutional powers are open to multiple readings, they can be used in ways that their creators didn't anticipate. Finally, the written words of a constitution may be followed to the letter in ways that undermine the spirit of the law. (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 101).

Respecting this logic, the crisis observed is institutional in nature, as it involves the breaking of informal rules. Moreover, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) reflect on how the erosion of adherence to informal rules arises amid favourable conditions—such as economic crises, popular dissatisfaction, and the decline of political parties—as well as due to the failure of institutions that serve as democratic safeguards.

The definition of institutions encompasses both rules and organizations. The authors highlight the existence of democratic guardian institutions, whose duty is precisely to preserve democracy by constraining the actions of political actors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 46). Emphasis is placed on the role of political parties and electoral system rules, as well as the judiciary system, law enforcement agencies, intelligence services, and regulatory and tax agencies, all of which act as arbiters of democracy.

> Democracies do have written rules (constitutions) and referees (the courts). But these work best, and survive longest, in countries where written constitutions are reinforced by their own unwritten rules of the game. These rules or norms serve as the soft guardrails of democracy, preventing day-to-day

> political competition from devolving into a no-holds-barred conflict (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 103).

It can be inferred that the proper functioning and endurance of democracy depend on the existence of written rules such as the Constitution—which intrinsically requires compliance with informal rules—the performance of guardian institutions such as political parties and electoral rules, and the arbiters.

Our interpretation aligns Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) reading with Przeworski's (2020) analytical approach: we find similarities in the emphasis placed on the choices of political actors, reflecting the neo-institutionalist perspective both share. These analyses link the crisis to institutional characteristics, revealing its political nature. We note that legal and constitutional elements are present in the works and play a relevant role in democratic endurance. Nevertheless, it appears that such elements are incidental to both the endurance of democracy and to its decline.

Reinforcing the distinction between political and constitutional crises, Vieira (2018) offers a systematic classification to analyse Brazil's situation from a constitutional perspective. The author argues that the persistence and proper functioning of constitutional democracy depend on a commitment among sectors of society, political leaders, and institutional actors to abide by the rules and premises of democratic dynamics (Vieira 2018, 130–131).

In this sense, the definition of Constitution is expanded beyond a mere set of supreme norms to encompass a set of provisions that enable democratic functioning and serve to "enable political competition and institutionalize conflicts, establishing several devices aimed at ensuring that clashes can occur—even if vigorously—within the constitutional framework" (Vieira 2018, 34).

This reveals that the existence of conflict among political actors and between citizens and the State is intrinsic to constitutional democracy; therefore, crisis cannot be confused with the mere existence of conflict within a democratic context. The endurance of democracy presupposes the emergence of conflicts, which must be conducted in accordance with the principles set forth in the Constitution and guided by democratic values.

The proper functioning of democracy depends on several elements, among which the conduct of actors vis-à-vis the formal and informal rules of democracy stands out. Once again, the concept of unwritten rules of tolerance and self-restraint arises as a premise of democracy, equivalently to the rules of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance seen in Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

Thus, the nature of the crisis—whether political or constitutional—is sought to be understood. Vieira (2018) explains that a constitutional crisis refers to the moment when "political and institutional actors abdicate from guiding their conduct in accordance with the rules and procedures established by the Constitution, placing the very survival of the regime at risk" (Vieira 2018, 21). Meanwhile, political crisis is defined as the moment when actors engage in the democratic game with

> [...] a strong impact on institutional behavior, favoring more conflictive and heterodox conduct that, while not threatening the regime's demise, points to a new pattern of political system functioning (Vieira 2018, 23, author's free translation).

From a historical reconstruction approach, Vieira (2018) presents a similar reasoning to the one found in Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018): that the Constitution continues to mediate conflicts as actors follow formal rules. According to Vieira (2018, 16), "the validity of legal and political actions continued to be disputed based on constitutional grammar," revealing the absence of what would constitute a proper constitutional crisis.

Contemporary examples of populism and autocratic legalism support the position that political and institutional actors are not making decisions outside the Constitution. Consequently, Vieira (2018) regards the contemporary framework as a case of political crisis that impacts the functioning of constitutional institutions. We understand that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) corroborate this argument, placing the core of the contemporary crisis in institutional elements related to actor choices. For instance, breaches of informal and unwritten rules dynamic, such as institutional forbearance, seem to indicate actors' attempts to mask authoritarian positions without violating legal grammar or written

rules. Thus, the legal sphere does not seem to be in crisis, since actors acknowledge its relevance and play within the strict rules of the game. The crisis's nature lies elsewhere, in subtle dynamics and conducts.

Przeworski (2020, 177) also appears to sustain this view by asserting that "democratic deconsolidation need not entail violations of constitutionality," which brings us to two points: (1) constitutional rules alone cannot uphold the democratic regime, and (2) political actors may display authoritarian behaviour even without violating constitutional rules. From this, it seems that the nature of the crisis is interpreted in the literature as political, differentiating it from constitutional crises.

A review of these works suggests that the authors distinguish between constitutional and political crises, and their analyses consistently reinforce this distinction. Furthermore, it indicates that these authors interpret the nature of the contemporary crisis as political. However, this does not imply that legal or constitutional elements are irrelevant to democracy; rather, they do not appear to be the main issue. Finally, this conclusion leads us to the third point of investigation in the literature: do the elements presented and the definitions of democracy used by the authors indicate a crisis in democracy itself or in one of the characteristics of contemporary democracies? Is there consensus among scholars that the crisis of democracy lies at the core of the political crisis?

Democracy Crisis *versus* Political Representation Crisis

The identification of the crisis as political leads to the second step of the analysis: to question whether the classifications found in the literature refer to a crisis of democracy itself or of one of its central elements. We seek to determine the extent to which the literature examined in this study interprets the crisis as a crisis of political representativeness. In turn, the expression "democracy crisis" requires identification of the concept of democracy employed by the authors. It is also necessary to determine whether the elements indicated by the literature as causes of the crisis relate to the adopted concept of democracy. Among the theoretical approaches on the subject, some authors rely on minimal definitions and others on

substantial ones, and there are those who emphasize institutional, social, or economic elements as causes of the crisis.

Among those proposing a minimalist approach to democracy, we highlight Przeworski (2020). Democracy is understood as a political arrangement composed of the following characteristics: governments are chosen via elections and there is the possibility of removing incumbent governments from office (Przeworski 2020, 5). Furthermore, "consolidated democracies" are those in which there have been at least two peaceful transfers of power through elections without forceful contestation (Przeworski 2020, 25). In parallel, the crisis is defined as a situation in which existing institutions are affected by several causes and characterized by a disaster (Przeworski 2020, 10).

Przeworski (2020) posits that crises stem from institutional disasters, which are consequences of several causes within democracy. The identification of a crisis involves recognizing an institutional disaster; however, not all disasters constitute a crisis, as it is necessary to observe whether the signs of such a disaster reveal threats to institutions.

The signs indicated by Przeworski (2020) are: a sudden loss of support for established parties, a decrease in popular trust in democratic institutions and politicians, explicit conflicts over democratic institutions, governments' inability to maintain public order without repression, and the advance of xenophobic, racist, and nationalist parties and attitudes. The research also extends to the causes of these signs, highlighting economic conditions, the historical context of democracy in the country, the intensity of political polarization, and institutional design.

Both the signs and the causes encompass institutional, cultural, and social characteristics, as well as those related to individual perceptions. Explicitly, the decrease in popular trust highlights the importance of individual perception, which relates to the idea of legitimacy. The advance of xenophobic, racist, and nationalist attitudes relates to the cultural element. Finally, the decline in party system support and conflicts over institutions represent the institutional element.

The work reveals institutional, economic, social, and cultural causes, but the concepts of democracy and democracy crisis indicate the

relevance of the institutional criterion, focusing on rules, specifically those of the electoral system. The author does not fully clarify the notion of "institutions" adopted. Some excerpts (Przeworski 2020, 7) suggest a broad concept encompassing rules and bodies. However, the distinction drawn between institution and political party allows the interpretation that the concept employed may be more restricted.

Moreover, the text's approach is both rational neo-institutionalist and historical (Hall and Taylor 2003). Przeworski attends to the relationships within the political game, considering the importance of actors' roles (Przeworski 2020, 79) and analysing them through the lens of risks, costs, and benefits (Przeworski 2020, 143). Simultaneously, the structure and method used reveal a belief in a historical perspective to identify patterns and similarities.

The relation between democracy and institutions is framed in terms of conflict absorption and regulation. In these terms, political institutions ensure democratic stability by structuring, absorbing, or regulating conflicts according to established rules (Przeworski 2020, 178). This perspective aligns with the theoretical framework of rational institutionalism, as it considers that actors make choices based on predictable outcomes within a given institutional setting.

Przeworski (2020) presents an institutional interpretation of democracy and its crisis, with emphasis on the electoral system. Accordingly, if a democratic crisis is defined by institutional breakdown or threats to key institutions, it is an institutional crisis. Although individuals' perceptions are acknowledged as relevant—particularly in relation to elections and the functioning of representative institutions—they are not central to the author's conceptual definitions. The core of the analysis remains grounded in a neo-institutionalist perspective.

In this sense, by considering diverse signs and causes beyond the institutional criterion, are we broadening the concept of democracy? By pointing to economic crises, are we re-centring the paradox between democracy and capitalism? Do causes such as the degree of social polarization lead us to a crisis of representativeness or of democracy itself?

In Przeworski's (2020) writings, we find no answers to these questions, nor even the questions themselves.

In Castells' (2018) approach, however, we can find elements that help differentiate representativeness from democracy. For the author, democracy is a broader concept when compared to Przeworski (2020). He mentions not merely democracy, but liberal democracy, whose characterization requires formal elements related to elections, separation of powers, and material elements related to individual freedom.

Based on this definition, the author introduces terms such as "political legitimacy crisis" and "liberal democracy crisis" throughout the work. The central element of the crisis is the rupture of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. (Dis)trust in institutions emerges as the main driver of the crisis; in the author's terms, distrust delegitimizes political representation and generates the gradual collapse of a political model of representation (Castells 2018, 7–8).

The political legitimacy crisis refers to the widespread perception among citizens that political actors no longer represent them, reflecting a breakdown in the subjective link between public preferences and the actions of elected officials (Castells 2018, 12). This highlights the centrality of individuals' perception to the definition of the crisis.

For Castells (2018, 17–26), the crisis results from a set of diverse causes: it is the conjunction of cyclical processes involving globalization, the economic crisis of global financial capitalism, the problem of corruption, and an identity crisis. In brief, the logic presented is that these cyclical processes generate different types of crises; in the absence of institutional protection against these crises, individuals begin to question institutional representativeness.

We identify the causes of the crisis as economic, cultural, and social characteristics, as well as related to individuals' perception. In parallel, the concept of democracy employed is broad. The author emphasizes that the current crisis "is not a rejection of democracy, but of liberal democracy as it exists in each country, in the name of real democracy" (Castells 2018, 8, author's free translation).

From this perspective, the author seems to follow a sociological approach to explain the crisis. We interpret that, for Castells (2018), it is not a crisis of democracy per se, but rather a crisis of political representation. With individuals' perception of institutional legitimacy as the central element, the democratic model under scrutiny is representative democracy, not democracy itself.

Along similar lines, we align this approach to Runciman's (2018) analysis, which argues that the survival of democracy depends on the actors' trust in the competition and the rules of the game (Runciman 2018, 9). Again, the element of individuals' perception emerges as relevant to the functioning of democracy.

However, here democracy is defined minimally. It is understood as a political regime where rulers are replaced, the loser accepts defeat, and the winner takes office; "democracy made to last"—which we understand as consolidated democracy—occurs when this peaceful turnover happens twice consecutively (Runciman 2018, 20).

The author identifies relevant factors that differentiate the current historical moment from past crises: political violence, catastrophes, and technological revolution. Accordingly, contemporary threats are: (1) political violence from within institutions, with elected officials undermining democratic institutions while claiming to defend them (Runciman 2018, 52); (2) the creation of artificial democratic life disconnected from human activity (Runciman 2018, 95); and (3) the failure of political institutions to find solutions to problems (Runciman 2018, 151, 155).

As with Castells (2018), the sociological approach is relevant to the present analysis, alongside a comparative historical reconstruction. Runciman's (2018) analysis also revolves around the element of individuals' perception, since both the creation of artificial life disconnected from human activity and the failure of institutions lead to the questioning of the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The model of democracy under analysis, a representative and distant model, is what is being questioned, not "real" democracy.

> Modern democracy is full of flaws. Many people feel ignored. Their opinions seem to count for little. And it is rare for their

> representatives to give any impression of interest in listening to them. Contemporary populism feeds on this sense of disconnection. Although social media cannot function as a substitute for modern democracy, they can offer tempting ways to patch some of its gaps. One of the deepest sources of frustration with representative democracy is how slow and ineffective it can appear, especially when compared to the immediate gratifications available in virtual life. [...] Democracy, with its system of checks and balances, its bureaucracy, and its rules, often seems too weak for the twenty-first century. (Runciman 2018, 151, author's free translation).

Although Runciman (2018) adopts a minimalist concept of democracy—employed in identical terms by Przeworski (2020)—his analysis of the crisis appears to align more closely to the approach adopted by Castells (2018). The institutionalist perspective appears less prominently than the role of individual perception and trust. Both Castells (2018) and Runciman (2018) emphasize that the crisis encompasses civic dissatisfaction grounded in democratic ideals, focusing on demands for more democracy rather than less. Therefore, if citizens call for greater democracy, labelling it a "crisis of democracy" seems misplaced, the crisis's nature likely lies elsewhere.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the crisis through the lens of representativeness appears somewhat detached from the minimalist definition of democracy espoused by Runciman (2018). His analysis suggests that this minimalist view supports the argument that the contemporary crisis stems not from democracy itself but from the liberal model. While democratic processes, understood as peaceful power alternation, continue, trust in institutions and procedures has declined. Thus, the core issue lies not in defining the regime as democratic but in the attributes surrounding this definition—specifically, the representative and/or liberal model.

Conversely, Runciman (2018) also provides an analysis of the role assigned to institutions, specifically their capacity to absorb attacks and coups d'état (Runciman 2018, 66). It is noteworthy that Przeworski (2020) follows a similar line of reasoning. Here, Runciman's proposal advances to the notion that the effective functioning of democracy depends significantly

on the proper operation of political institutions as regulators of conflicts and assaults. An analysis of the state of American democracy reveals that:

> [...] The advantage seems to be on the side of democracy's survival. One might even say that, because Trump was elected, democracy in the United States is functioning as it should. There is an ongoing conflict between Trump's destructive threat and a system designed to withstand great destructive potential, especially when it comes from a demagogue. The demagogue begins to discover the world of difference between words and facts. He is constrained by institutions that resist his demands for personal loyalty (Runciman 2018, 25, author's free translation).

Although Runciman (2018) highlights widespread distrust in institutions, he also affirms their effective functioning based on contextual performance analysis. Both Runciman (2018) and Przeworski (2020) suggest that democracy's demise requires political institutions to fail in managing conflicts—whether in structuring, absorbing, or regulating them. Nevertheless, the interplay between the minimalist democracy concept, institutional roles, and the focus on individual perceptions in Runciman's work indicates that the crisis he describes is one of representation rather than of democracy itself, aligning with Castells' (2018) analysis.

Thus, the literature on the crisis of democracy reveals no clear consensus on whether the crisis pertains to democracy itself or to representativeness. Our analysis of key theoretical references highlights a convergence between Castells (2018) and Runciman (2018), both indicating a crisis of representativeness, while Przeworski (2020) positions the contemporary transformations as a genuine crisis of democracy.

Conclusion

A brief review of the key literature on crisis of democracy (CoD) theories allows us to outline provisional conclusions to systematize the academic landscape on the subject. The extensive literature on democracy and crisis restricts comprehensive analysis, while the evolving nature of the phenomenon limits definitive conclusions. Nonetheless, the aim to

(1) present the general framework of the third phase of CoD literature, (2) examine, and (3) contrast the various terms and definitions employed by the authors enables us to organize the different approaches.

Firstly, there is consensus within contemporary CoD scholarship that democratic transformation is a continuous, gradual process. Although Przeworski (2020) speaks of democratic backsliding and subversion, Runciman (2018) refers to a gradual coup, Castells (2018) labels it a gradual collapse, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) use the term "electoral democratic backsliding," and Vieira (2018) discusses constitutional retrogression; the contextual and historical analyses offered by these authors reinforce the argument that the regime's transformation dynamics differ from past crises and bear democratic contours, respecting formal rules, yet using authoritarian content.

Secondly, the investigation into the political or constitutional nature of the crisis reveals that adopting one perspective or the other implies attributing the cause of the crisis to different factors. Przeworski (2020), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), and Vieira (2018) agree that the contemporary crisis has a political core; the constitutional factor plays a role within democracy, but the analyses suggest that the nature of regime transformations originates in political legitimacy or illegitimacy.

Thus, we do not claim that the literature treats political crisis and constitutional crisis as mutually exclusive or entirely separate phenomena—one can lead to the other—but the centrality of the debate in the context analysed, based on the elements and definitions presented, appears to locate the root of the crisis in politics.

The third point concerns the distinction between democracy and representativeness, on which the CoD literature lacks consensus, showing considerable definitional variation. While Castells (2018) and Runciman (2018) employ the term crisis of democracy, their definitions suggest a crisis of representativeness, i.e., of a specific model of democracy—with emphasis on individuals' perceptions. In contrast, Przeworski (2020) offers a neo-institutionalist approach, where the debate's core lies in the choices of individuals and institutions; the concepts adopted converge in a way that democracy itself appears to be at the crisis's core.

We understand that representation is a component of democracy; however, each author's conceptual framework highlights the key for defining democracy and its sustenance. The causes presented in the CoD literature provide analytical tools to comprehend and classify the crisis's nature. Our aim was to assess whether the signs and causes in the CoD framework align with the definitions of democracy and its crisis. While some causes and signs undoubtedly impact the institutional framework, the key argument is to remain mindful of the authors' initial concepts, as a minimalist, electoral understanding may restrict analysis, whereas a substantive approach—including cultural and perceptual factors—broadens it.

This selective review of CoD literature reveals that, despite the variety of terms used, the authors' concepts and analytical elements show greater consensus than disagreement regarding the contemporary crisis. Evidence suggests that the literature increasingly views the transformation of the democratic regime as a gradual, political process, interpreted by some as a crisis of democracy itself and by others as a crisis of political representation.

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Democracy under Threat: Some Suggestions on How to Cope

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Democracies are going through a critical moment. Although the democratic model is still widely valued, it is not necessarily working very well. Citizen disaffection, the rise of authoritarian leadership, economic crises and social unrest, digital disinformation, and ideological polarization have led to serious apprehensions about its functioning and to much criticism. Based on an analysis of the main threats facing democracies, this text makes some suggestions on how to deal with them.

Whether we like it or not, in the first decades of the 21st century, the democratic advances of the late 20th century hit reverse gear. Reports from organizations such as Latinobarometer (2024), Freedom House (2025a; 2025b), and V-Dem (2024) show a sustained decline in democratic indicators. For example, according to Latinobarometer 2023, only 48% of Latin Americans considered democracy the preferable form of government, a 15-point drop from 63% in 2010 (Latinobarometer 2023, 18). Disaffection with democracy is growing across the board. Democratic consolidation has been replaced by processes of "autocratization," that is, the weakening of the rule of law, attacks on civil liberties, and even the discrediting of electoral processes. Seen from Latin America, this is a particularly serious trend. The wave of dictatorships that swept across the region during the 1970s and 1980s left enormous wounds that have

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yet to heal. It is thus particularly painful to note the loss of support for democracies that took so long to reestablish.

As 2024 comes to an end, democracy faces one of the most critical moments in recent decades. Elections, institutions, and fundamental rights are being challenged, eroded, or, in some cases, openly violated. This crisis does not come about via military coups or external invasions, but rather through a slow and gradual erosion from within. It is now elected leaders themselves who undermine democratic institutions, creating hybrid regimes that some characterize as "illiberal democracies" (Zakaria 2007).

Traditional early warning mechanisms, designed for abrupt disruptions or external threats, are no longer sufficient. It is thus imperative to identify and counter internal vulnerabilities and the sophisticated strategies by which some elected leaders, protected by the legitimacy of their popular mandate, systematically dismantle institutional checks and balances. This process, which exploits democratic legitimacy itself, is far from easy to identify, condemn, or reverse.

Democracy, in its essence, transcends the simple holding of periodic elections. It is a way of organizing power to expand citizenship in all three dimensions—political, civil, and social—and to prevent or limit the domination of some individuals or groups over others. This comprehensive conception is the one under siege today. When a democratic system consistently fails to resolve society's fundamental problems, especially deep economic inequalities, it risks losing legitimacy and popular support. The inability to generate tangible well-being for its citizens makes it vulnerable to internal erosion by leaders who promise radical solutions, even if this means undermining democratic norms. The health of democracy is, therefore, deeply tied to its ability to deliver social justice and guarantee the material and civic well-being of its population.

The central thesis presented here can be summarized as follows:

Contemporary democracy faces multiple, closely interrelated threats. These include extreme polarization, institutional distrust, the rise of authoritarian populism, the proliferation of disinformation, persistent socioeconomic inequality, and the systematic weakening of checks and balances. These threats can only

be effectively addressed with comprehensive solutions that combine domestic policies with broader reforms that transcend national borders.

Latin America: Institutional Fragility, Disenchantment, and Polarization

Latin America, a region that experienced a remarkable wave of democratization at the end of the 20th century, today faces deep institutional fragility, exacerbated polarization, and the rise of "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler 2006).

The truth is that the region's transition to democracy, while ending decades of dictatorships and coups d'état, brought about low-intensity democracies. Latin American democracies grapple with persistent challenges such as a representation crisis and chronic institutional weakness. The absence of a strong political culture hinders the development of sustainable democratic systems. Without an engaged and educated citizenry, effective democratic consolidation is virtually impossible.

Political parties, which should be pillars of representative democracy, are undergoing a crisis of representation. Their lack of ideological consistency and of vertical structures lead to their failure to represent new social subjects, and their elites often show a tendency toward bureaucratic authoritarianism (Salazar 2005). This disconnect between parties and citizens leads to apathy and scepticism.

A critical factor undermining democracy in Latin America is persistent economic and social inequality. The region is the most unequal in the world (Heine, Fortín, and Ominami 2025). This inequality is not just an economic problem. It is a fundamental challenge to democratic institutions. Economic and social disparity leads to distrust in institutions and to ruptures of the social fabric. The failure of traditional democratic institutions and prevailing economic models to address these inequalities creates fertile ground for the rise of populist leaders who promise solutions that are as radical as they are spurious.

Disaffection with democracy is directly related to the persistence of inequalities and the reduction of rights brought about by the neoliberal ideology that flourished in the 1980s. The result has been a formal,

procedural democracy that lacks substantive content, citizen participation, or accountability, generating profound apathy and scepticism. This is reflected in low voter participation in elections.

Political polarization is an additional challenge to democratic governance, with a particularly acute impact in Latin America. Ideological tensions, social fragmentation, and distrust of democratic institutions create a complex environment for the exercise of political leadership.

In this context, a new type of regime has emerged that is less than fully democratic without being fully authoritarian. Since 2007, several democratic ruptures have taken hold in Latin America. Some have led to hybrid regimes, like that of El Salvador, and others have led to the establishment of outright autocracies, as in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Although ultimately unsuccessful, the attempted coup d'état in Brazil reflects these new trends. The assault on the Three Powers Plaza on January 8, 2023, just as President Lula began his new term, enjoyed the complicity of sectors of the Armed Forces. Fortunately, it was unsuccessful. Its main proponents, including former President Bolsonaro, have been convicted. The ease with which this attack was carried out is striking.

Democratic erosion in Latin America, as noted, occurs when institutions are dismantled "from within" by popularly elected authorities, an effort primarily led by the executive branch. El Salvador's experience under President Nayib Bukele is an example of this type of strategy.

In the face of state incapacity, unrepresentative political parties, and government inaction on social demands, Latin American civil society has undertaken its own initiatives, independently of traditional political and social actors, to reclaim public spaces and defend its rights. These spontaneous social mobilizations draw on historical memory and experience. They include direct action, such as street occupations, road blockades, and mass demonstrations. The social uprisings that took place in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile in 2018–2019 reflect these dynamics operating outside of institutional frameworks. These are social uprisings that lack political leadership and raise heterogeneous demands that are not addressed by the system.

Chile's social uprising of October 2019 is a case in point. It was a mobilization that took the establishment, including both the government and the opposition, by surprise. Institutions managed to react, and on November 15, 2019, most political sectors reached an agreement that paved the way for an unprecedented constitutional process. Within this framework, two referenda were held on diametrically opposed texts. Both were rejected, in a singular expression of the disconnect between elected representatives and ordinary citizens.

United States: Internal Threats

The United States, long considered a bastion of liberal democracy, now faces a series of threats that test the strength of its institutions.

Endemic problems such as the influence of money in politics, attempts to impose white supremacy, and the deindustrialization associated with the decline of former industrial centres have weakened adherence to democracy. The influence of money in politics is systemic and distorting: elections increasingly become "rich people's monologues," where public demands are dismissed. The 2022 midterm elections, for example, cost over $16.7 billion, surpassing the 2018 record of $14 billion—a figure greater than the gross national product of more than 70 countries in 2021(PRC 2023). More than 90% of congressional candidates who won did so by spending large sums, and the amount of "dark money" from unknown sources involved is cause for serious concern (PRC 2023). The political system is increasingly perceived as a "rich people's game," with a handful of families and billionaires contributing disproportionate sums to campaigns. The enormous influence of money in politics undermines the fundamental principle of equality, fuelling popular discontent.

Confidence in American democracy has declined dramatically. According to a Gallup study, the share of Americans satisfied with democracy has fallen from 60% in 1984 to 28% in 2022 (Jones 2024). Other polls reveal that 67% of respondents believe that US democracy is in danger of collapsing, and 57% no longer view the United States as a model of democracy (PRC 2023). This is a direct reflection of the system's failure to address economic and social injustices.

Political polarization has been exacerbated by a bipartisan struggle that has seen the rise of radical factions in both parties. The parties see each other not just as political adversaries, but as irreconcilable enemies. The United States can be described as a kind of "binational state," with Republicans and Democrats leading two sharply opposed national communities that function as confederations under a single federal government (PRC 2023). This polarization is increasingly expressed along racial and identity lines, exacerbating social divisions. Political struggle prioritizes partisan and factional interests over national ones, resulting in mutual accusations and serious institutional dysfunction. This has led to a steady decline in the number of laws enacted by Congress, the result of relative legislative paralysis.

The threats to electoral integrity and the weakening of democratic norms are evident. A significant number of citizens doubt the results of the 2020 election, and a segment of the electorate refused to accept President Trump's defeat at the hands of Joe Biden (Royo 2025). Politicians who spread lies and delegitimize elections have won office, allowing one party to control the electoral machinery in many states. Informal democratic norms, such as self-restraint in the exercise of power and the rejection of violence, have begun to disintegrate. A growing number of American politicians are willing to set aside democratic norms to gain or retain power (PRC 2023).

Democratic institutions have also been directly attacked. Leading universities, like Harvard and Columbia, have suffered unprecedented attacks by the Trump administration, with multimillion-dollar cuts, the arbitrary opening of investigations, and ideological pressures seeking to diminish progressive perspectives. The Department of Education was dismantled, and diversity programs were declared unconstitutional (Royo 2025). Freedom of the press is under attack, with attempts by those in power to silence critics and promote sympathetic media, often through ownership changes, regulatory pressure, and harassment of journalists (Freedom House n.d.). The rise in political violence, tragically manifested in the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, reveals the severity of the crisis.

The democratic crisis in the United States is not merely a political or cultural phenomenon. It has deep economic and social roots. The concentration of wealth and the influence of money in politics undermine the principle of political equality, fuelling popular discontent and facilitating the spread of anti-establishment narratives. Social inequalities exacerbate polarization and weaken democratic resilience, as the system's failure to address economic injustices leads to a loss of faith in its ability to benefit the vast majority.

In the first months of President Trump's administration, the proliferation of executive orders has challenged the balance of power through his iron grip on Congress and the Supreme Court. The checks and balances of American democracy are not working. As President Obama (2025) has put it, "the United States is dangerously close to autocracy."

Europe: Populism and Geopolitical Tensions

Europe, the cradle of modern democracy, also faces challenges that threaten the stability and principles of its democratic systems. They include the rise of populism and political extremism, exacerbated by geopolitical tensions and the exploitation of the migration crisis.

In recent years, right-wing populism has reared its ugly head in many European democracies, achieving government power in countries such as Hungary, the Netherlands, and Italy. In Germany, the far-right (AfD) is now the second-largest political force. The Sweden Democrats in Sweden, Chega in Portugal, and VOX in Spain reflect the same trend. The threat of a far-right victory is also very much present in France, as the "cordon sanitaire" formed by republican forces is increasingly weakened.

The exclusionary narrative of the radical right is a clear threat to the respect for and tolerance of minorities, a fundamental aspect of liberal democracy. In the economic sphere, populism is closely linked to globalization and the fears it raises in certain groups, particularly regarding job losses. Economic anxieties are thus added to demands for cultural homogeneity and for "regaining control" fuelled by the influx of immigrants and refugees (Borràs 2024; Ivaldi 2024).

Paradoxically, the very construction of the European Union has created the conditions for it to become the recurring "scapegoat" in the multiple crises plaguing the continent. National governments often use this abstract and depersonalized idea of "Brussels" to evade responsibility for unpopular measures approved at the national level. This makes it more difficult to implement supranational policies, creating a setting in which populist narratives blaming external entities resonate strongly.

The rise to power of right-wing authoritarian leaders and the growing political influence of far-right and supremacist movements pose a grave threat not only to democracy at the national level, but also to global governance (Herz and Summa 2025).

Geopolitical tensions, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reveal and exacerbate internal divergences within the EU. Foreign powers use disinformation and cyberattacks to interfere with EU public opinion (European Parliament 2025). Disinformation, regardless of its origin, has been considered by most political forces in the European Union to be a direct threat to democracy. Narratives disseminating unfounded claims of fraud, irregularities, or the unreliability of institutions are spread to sow confusion and hinder democratic debate. The European Parliament has taken steps to strengthen its defense against disinformation, through new laws and other means of increasing resilience and safeguarding democracy, including the "European Democracy Shield" initiative (European Parliament 2026). In the debate on disinformation in the United States, the far right has succeeded in presenting its necessary regulation as an attack on freedom of expression. This same argument has been adopted by various European far-right political groups (Borràs 2024; Ivaldi 2024).

In all this, the migration crisis has been a key factor. The sustained influx of migrants and refugees has fueled nationalist sentiment and support for populists throughout Europe. Current migration policies are perceived as a failure. The migration crisis has been politically exploited, to the point of turning refugees into a "bargaining chip" in agreements such as the Joint EU–Turkey Action Plan, which seeks to stem the flow of migrants to Europe.

In short, the erosion of democracy in Europe is the result of a complex interaction between economic distress stemming from globalization, cultural nationalism fuelled by migration, and external interference through disinformation. This creates fertile ground for populist and extremist movements that, once in power, challenge liberal democratic norms and institutions from within, replicating the pattern of autocratization observed globally.

Common Factors of Democratic Erosion

Threats to democracy in Latin America, the United States, and Europe reveal a set of common factors that undermine the foundations of democratic systems.

One of them is *extreme polarization*. In all regions, societies are increasingly divided, not only by ideological differences, but also by a deep "emotional rejection of the other" (Goberna Reports 2025). This polarization impedes constructive dialogue and the search for consensus, leading to an "us-versus-them" logic that paralyzes governance and weakens leaders' ability to implement sustainable public policies.

Directly related to polarization is the *crisis of institutional legitimacy and distrust*. Citizens show growing disillusionment with political parties, governments, and democratic institutions. This distrust manifests itself in apathy, scepticism, and, in some cases, support for leaders who promise to dismantle the established order. The perception that the system is unresponsive to people's needs, or that it is captured by vested interests, breeds discontent.

The *impact of socioeconomic inequality* is another driver of democratic erosion. As is evident in Latin America, economic and social inequality leads to distrust in institutions and the fragmentation of the social fabric (UNAM 2024). In the United States, the capture of politics by money severely distorts the political system. In Europe, globalization and its unequal effects on employment and well-being fuel all kinds of fears that are skilfully exploited by populists.

Disinformation *and external interference* have become global tools for manipulating public opinion and exacerbating internal divisions. In Europe, foreign powers use disinformation and cyberattacks to interfere with public opinion (European Parliament 2026). In the United States, the proliferation of false and conspiratorial narratives contributes to polarization and the delegitimization of electoral processes (Royo 2023).

Perhaps the most insidious and dangerous factor is the *erosion of democracy "from within"* or *the rise of "elective authoritarianism*." By this is meant the process whereby leaders who come to power through the ballot box slowly and gradually dismantle democratic institutions—by now a widespread trend (Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez 2023).[2] It can be seen in Latin America in cases like El Salvador and Venezuela, and in the United States with the erosion of the balance of power, which weakens checks and balances and allows the executive branch to consolidate disproportionate control. This is what some have defined as an "autocratic regression."[3]

Finally, the *weakening of checks and balances and of the rule of law*, along with *the crisis of political representation*, are direct consequences of the above factors. The systematic erosion of legislatures, judiciaries, and independent media is a constant in democratic decline. The inability of traditional political parties to represent citizens' interests, coupled with the perception of corruption and lack of response to social demands, generates apathy and pushes citizens toward alternative, often more confrontational, forms of expressing discontent (Salazar 2005).

These factors interact and reinforce each other, creating an ecosystem of vulnerability that, if not addressed in a timely manner, threatens the very survival of democracy in the 21st century.

Ideas to Renew Democracy

Addressing the complex and multifaceted erosion of democracy in the 21st century requires a comprehensive and proactive approach. Such an approach must transcend reactive responses and focus on renewing

2 YouTube, 2023; Norc, n.d.) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3zqrTew3DA

3 (Norc, sf).

the very foundations of democracy. The following lines of action, inspired by a critical but proactive vision, seek not only to defend what has been achieved but also to build more resilient and inclusive democracies capable of responding to today's challenges.

Strengthening Institutions and the Rule of Law

It is crucial to protect and strengthen democratic institutions, especially those that act as checks and balances on the executive branch. This includes *reinforcing the independence of the judiciary and the legislature*. The necessary resources and institutional autonomy for these branches to exercise their oversight function effectively must be ensured, thus allowing them to resist any attempt at "institutional capture" by the executive branch. Experience shows that the institutional strength of the judiciary is the main bulwark against democratic erosion.

Transparency and *accountability* must be promoted. It is essential that public management and political financing be fully transparent. This implies the implementation of access to information laws, the creation of independent anti-corruption agencies, and the protection of whistleblowers who expose fraud and corruption (Freedom House 2019). Transparency is the best tool in the fight against corruption, which seriously affects democratic institutions.

Term limits must be protected to prevent the entrenchment of authorities in power. The erosion of term limits is a manifestation of serious democratic dysfunction. It is vital to defend and, where necessary, restore these limits to ensure the rotation of power and prevent the establishment of messianic leaderships that distort the democratic system.

Combating Polarization and Promoting Civic Dialogue

Affective polarization, which implies an emotional rejection of the "other," is one of the most corrosive threats. To mitigate its effects, it is necessary *to promote civic education and critical thinking*, investing in education that fosters respect for democratic values, tolerance, and the ability to identify and denounce disinformation and fake news.

Spaces for dialogue and citizen participation must be created. It is essential to create platforms where citizens with different points of view can engage in civilized conversation, find common ground, and rebuild social trust (UNIR 2025). This requires going beyond traditional mechanisms and seeking innovative forms of deliberation. Institutional mechanisms such as the Popular Law Initiative can play a key role in reinvigorating democracy.

Furthermore, it is necessary *to support and encourage the creation of pluralistic and independent media outlets*. The media have a crucial responsibility in promoting inclusive and responsible public conversation. Mechanisms for protecting pluralism and competition must be reviewed to prevent media concentration in the hands of a few actors and ensure media independence from political interference. A pluralistic media system is essential to ensure the proper functioning of the democratic system.

Countries also need *state policies* that transcend the government of the day on basic issues such as growth targets and major physical infrastructure programs. Political parties must identify and propose goals and tasks that can be the subject of cross-party agreements.

Reducing Inequality and Expanding Citizenship

Democracy cannot thrive in a context of deep inequalities such as those found in Latin America. It is imperative to address the socioeconomic causes of distrust. A key issue is *strengthening the state's fiscal capacity*. Taxation is a vital instrument for balancing economic and political power, increasing the state's capacity to generate citizenship. Taxes are central to sustaining democracy, especially in a region as unequal as Latin America. Tax reforms aimed at bringing about a basic principle of equity, namely, that those who have more pay more, must be enacted. This is the condition for *transforming rights into everyday realities*. Democracy must be capable of solving the major problems that hinder development. This implies ensuring that social rights related to labour, housing, health, and education are translated into tangible realities for citizens. To this end, it is essential to have efficient and adequately funded states.

Finally, it is necessary to *prioritize inclusive public policies* that address the shortcomings of Latin American democracies in areas such as social exclusion and public security. The proliferation of illegal economies dominated by organized crime is currently the main scourge plaguing most Latin American countries. Combating it does not require a "heavy hand," but rather a "fair hand" that represses when appropriate while always respecting people's rights. A fair hand complements prevention and rehabilitation policies. In this regard, a radical reform of prison systems is urgently needed. Prisons in the region today do not promote rehabilitation and are often used as operating centres by criminal gangs.

Promoting Citizen Participation and Party Renewal

The crisis of representation demands a renewal of the channels of political participation. At this level, it is necessary to *articulate new forms of political participation* that counteract the crisis of representation by allowing civil society and new social movements to be valid interlocutors and to actively participate in decision-making. Similarly, *the internal democracy of political parties must be strengthened*. Parties must be more transparent in their financing and allow their members to elect their leaders through primary systems, avoiding internal oligarchies. Furthermore, *"new political practices" must be recognized and channeled*. Instead of criminalizing direct actions by civil society, governments must understand the reasons for their emergence and seek mechanisms to integrate these demands into the political system, thus avoiding an increase in confrontations and violent mobilizations.

International Cooperation and Defence of Democratic Values

Defending democracy is a global task that requires coordinated action. *Support for democracy must be coordinated internationally*. Democracies must work together to promote their shared values and constrain the behaviour of autocratic powers. Grassroots movements fighting for democracy must be given vocal and public support. Violent repression must be met with public condemnation.

Disinformation and foreign interference must be fought. Rapid response teams for cybersecurity and disinformation incidents must be deployed. Regulations that require online platforms to be transparent about political advertising must be put in place.

Finally, it is essential to ensure compliance with international obligations. States must ensure that their national legislation on freedom of expression and other fundamental rights is in line with international legal obligations.

These measures are essential to reverse the democratic decline. Defending democracy is not an option, but an imperative to guarantee fairer, freer, and more equitable societies.

Conclusion

The analysis of threats to democracy in Latin America, the United States, and Europe reveals a complex and challenging reality. Democracy today faces multiple and closely interrelated threats. The 21st century has witnessed a new trend, one that replaces violent democratic ruptures with a slow and gradual erosion, often orchestrated by elected leaders who dismantle institutions from within. This "autocratization from within" is a global phenomenon fuelled by extreme polarization, institutional distrust, persistent socioeconomic inequality, and the exploitation of disinformation.

In Latin America, post-transition institutional fragility is exacerbated by deep inequality that breeds apathy and mistrust. This opens the door to "elective authoritarianisms" that promise order and solutions to problems unresolved by electoral democracies. Emotional polarization and the inability of traditional political parties to represent an evolving citizenry push civil society toward new, often criminalized, forms of political action, deepening the crisis of representation.

In the United States, the crisis of legitimacy manifests itself in deep public distrust. The excessive influence of money has turned elections into the preserve of the wealthy, and partisan polarization has transformed political adversaries into irreconcilable enemies. This internal dynamic

has led to institutional dysfunction, attacks on electoral integrity, and the weakening and violation of informal democratic norms. This has culminated in serious episodes of political violence that reflect the deep national divisions.

Europe, in turn, has experienced a rise of right-wing populism and extremism that capitalizes on the economic distress stemming from globalization and cultural tensions exacerbated by migration. Disinformation and external interference amplify these divisions, while the very structure of the European Union, by allowing "Brussels" to become a scapegoat for national problems, contributes to the erosion of its supranational legitimacy.

These factors do not operate in isolation. They are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The failure of democracies to address deep socioeconomic inequalities and unmet citizen demands is a common thread running through all regions, undermining the legitimacy of the system and creating fertile ground for the rise of leaders promising authoritarian solutions. When democracy fails to deliver on its promise of expanding citizenship in its political, civil, and social dimensions and of resolving the major problems that hinder development and freedom, it becomes especially vulnerable.

Renewing democracy requires profound reflection. In this regard, Daniel Innerarity (2025) is right to say that "we have done something wrong to allow the far right to rise." As Pablo Stefanoni (2023) asserts, in many countries "rebellion has turned right-wing." The reasons are diverse. Among the most significant we should mention the following: i) the ideological asepsis produced by extreme pragmatism; ii) the indifference to uncontrolled migration; iii) the relativization of the importance of democracy in sectors of the progressive world; and iv) the hyperregulation that in many cases has ended up stifling all kinds of initiatives emerging from society.

Democracy is not static, but a dynamic process that must constantly adapt and renew itself. This requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach. Strengthening institutions; promoting transparency and accountability; combating polarization through dialogue and civic

education; reducing inequality through robust fiscal and social policies; renewing political parties and promoting citizen participation; and promoting robust international cooperation to defend democratic values and combat disinformation are some of the urgent measures that are required in this regard.

The future of democracy depends on renewed political will and an unwavering ethical commitment. It is time to reaffirm that democracy, with all its imperfections, remains the best system for keeping societies free and ensuring a dignified life for all. Democratic resilience is not a utopia, but a constant task that demands the active participation and commitment of all social and political actors.

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Democracy in Crisis: Conflicts and Affective Practices in Focus

Paulo Bodziak[1]

Shocks and even conflicts arising from differences have always been a natural condition of liberal democracies throughout the so-called Western hemisphere. One of the most significant conflicts in this context—arguably the most important—was the period of religious intolerance in the 18th century, which pitted Catholics and Protestants against each other in a struggle for dominance over Europe's future. This conflict helped shape our current understanding of how modern democracies should accommodate, support, and ensure the very existence of minorities within the complex societies that have emerged over the past centuries.

Nonetheless, it seems that this almost tacit agreement—originally forged to bind us together—is now under threat. Far-right movements and parties, apparently rooted in and enabled by the very democratic institutions they aim to compromise, are challenging this foundation. The more they attack and infiltrate these institutions, the stronger and more entrenched they appear to become.

From this perspective, we seem destined for the collapse of democratic regimes. Perhaps more troubling is that many people around the world appear willing—or at least inclined—to consider this path as a plausible solution to enduring economic crises, such as the increasingly persistent combination of inflation and stagnant wages (Ramakrishna 2021). Thus, it is not unreasonable to ask whether we are facing an unprecedented kind of conflict—one that cannot be fully addressed by simply invoking

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traditional principles like freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of belief, and freedom of assembly. Of course, this is not a straightforward question, and it certainly cannot be fully answered within the scope of this essay. Rather than attempting to address the problem in its entirety, our aim is to focus on what we believe to be the core of this emerging conflict: a new kind of fragility currently experienced in the relationship between the public and private dimensions of our lives in the early 21st century.

The advent of social media was instrumental in effecting such a change, profoundly not only altering how we send and receive information but also weakening how we think and feel it. We now face increasingly scarce intervals of time to process the endless volume of events, people, and places with which we must establish relationships of understanding, affect, and orientation. The diffuse experience of "lag" has become a daily reality permeating our entire lives. This phenomenon differs from the acceleration inherent in urban life since the first Industrial Revolution—which introduced faster, standardized forms of action and production—because we are now enmeshed in the endless production of "novelties" generated and circulated via social media platforms. We are compelled to assimilate new meanings every day. Even longstanding problems initially present themselves intuitively, without conceptual clarification, demanding rational explication so that we can comprehend emergent discourses and practices that erupt almost daily. This mismatch between the speeds of comprehension and information disrupts our fundamentally human capacity to seek meaning and undermines our lived experience of place in the world.

History has always been our way of conferring meaning on world events. In an essay on the concept of history, the Jewish-German thinker Hannah Arendt draws attention to the polysemy that the notion has acquired across its multiple regimes of temporality and historicity over time. We refer to history as a "category of human existence," predating even Herodotus, and rooted in poetic (tragedy), political (*polis*), or philosophical (process) solutions to the paradox of human permanence and ephemerality. Her illustration of the historicity inherent to human existence invokes Ulysses's tears: "[…] when Ulysses, at the court of the king of the Phaeacians, listened to the story of his own deeds and

sufferings, to the story of his life, now a thing outside himself, an 'object' for all to see and to hear." (Arendt 1961, 45). This cathartic recollection is understood as an experience of reconciliation through the narrative of past acts. Consequently, the emergence of a new generation presupposes its "deeds and sufferings," produced by the new in conflict with the old processes of the world, until it emerges as an enduring principle. This transition from "deeds and sufferings" to lasting principle is best clarified when narrative experience is compared with the political experience of the *polis*. These are distinct regimes of historicity but share the same mechanism: transforming the ephemeral into the immortal through the organization of memory. Regarding the Greek *polis*, Arendt reminds us:

> Not historically, of course, but speaking metaphorically and theoretically, it is as though the men who returned from the Trojan War had wished to make permanent the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and sufferings, to prevent its perishing with their dispersal and return to their isolated homesteads (Arendt 1958, 198).

Thus, the community must perpetuate the "deeds and sufferings" by organizing those who experienced them, preventing their isolation and ensuring that memory remains in context. For Arendt:

> Memory, the mind's power of having present what is irrevocably past and thus absent from the senses, has always been the most plausible paradigmatic example of the mind's power to make invisibles present (Arendt 1971, 226).

However, such power is debilitated when it loses its "pre-established framework of reference" (Arendt 1961, 6)—its context and the connections that organize, select, name, transmit, and preserve the conscious continuity of time. In the *polis*, longevity is established by law, which shelters and preserves the past, yet remains distinct from the deeds and sufferings themselves. Yet a community also manifests itself and is bounded by shared memory, not by law (*nomos*). As with history as a "category of human existence," a community shares the same narratives that bring its members to tears of recollection. This is the arrangement that defines our place in the world.

The sense of place in the world is given by the renowned—and at times controversial—distinction made by Hannah Arendt between the public and private spheres. To elucidate this opposition, it is necessary first to expound upon the dual meaning of the public domain. In its first sense, the public corresponds to appearance—what can be seen and heard by all—in contrast to what remains hidden, thereby securing a form of reality intrinsic to both the world and ourselves. The second sense that Arendt attributes to the public domain in *The Human Condition* (1958) is its identification with the notion of "world"—that which is common among us, in contrast to what we privately possess. This encompasses the artifacts created by human activity as well as the deeds and speech acts performed among those who inhabit this shared space.

> To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time (Arendt 1958, 52).

It is in opposition—both unifying and dividing—that the ancient conception of the private domain as "place in the world" is established. The term "private," in contrast to the public, is defined primarily by its exclusivity—that is, the deprivation of essential things of human life that can only be fully actualized in the company of others. In broader terms, the private domain, understood as property, exists "in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist. Whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people." (Arendt 1958, 58). It is the domain that safeguards us from the dual condition of public life—community and appearance. On one hand, the private domain protects our activities, emotions, and necessities from affecting or being affected by others. Certain things, if brought into the public sphere too early or inappropriately, are lost or corrupted—such as love or an unfinished work of art (Arendt 1958); others simply cannot be exposed to the public, such as pain. According to Arendt (1958, 50–51): "the most intense feeling we know of […] is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all." On the

other hand, the private domain also conceals the beginnings of public action (Arendt 1961, 276–277). It is through private concealment that continuity is interrupted, making new starts or beginnings possible.

Thus, the private domain assumes utmost importance for the political body. Arendt refers to the involvement of both human spheres as the deep connection between the private and the public, because the significance of each sphere can only be revealed in the tension they establish between one another. The "place in the world" is therefore a politically created space that shelters the pre-political dimension of human life. Given this connection, property cannot be regarded as merely an axiomatic condition for admission into the public realm. For Arendt:

> It is much more than that. Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human. (Arendt 1958, 64)

Perhaps no concept captures the connection between the public and the private better than that of law. The private domain remains hidden inwardly, but its outward political–public manifestation is called property. Its most visible mark in the ancient world was the boundary line between neighboring houses, whose walls could not touch one another. The space ensured between houses—a sort of no-man's land—was designated by the Greek word *nomos*, derived from *nemein*, which means to distribute, possess, and inhabit what is distributed. The originating law of the city-state was not the object of political action but rather the condition without which the city could not be organized. Cleisthenes and Solon established the framework for change that allowed the conflicts of the city to be expressed through institutions, at a moment when cities resorted to qualified individuals to act as arbitrators and legislators of the city (Vernant 1990, 286). These lawmakers established the citizen of the *polis* by reorganizing not only space but also time and even the numbering system, so as to integrate all citizens of the *polis* equally, regardless of family, profession, or residence. The purpose of those reforms was to establish a framework in which: "all Athenians, whatever their families,

professions, or residences, might be equivalent to one another, as citizens of the same state" (Vernant 1990, 305).

It is noteworthy that these legislators not only reorganized political institutions—as we conceive regime change in modern times—but also rearranged society itself. Like Hannah Arendt, Jean-Pierre Vernant also observes that the Greeks understood the public and the private as connected domains. Thus, the reforms of Cleisthenes and Solon anchored political conditions by also circumscribing the private domain of the Athenian. As Vernant notes:

> For the ancients, every human society seems composed of multiple parts differentiated by their functions; but at the same time, in order for that society to form a *polis*, it is necessary that it assert itself on a certain plane as one and homogeneous. Designating *politeia* at once as the social group taken as a whole (society) and the City-State in the strict sense, it is difficult to make of it an entirely coherent theory, since, depending on the perspective adopted, that *politeia* appears either as multiple and heterogeneous (differentiation of social functions) or as one and homogeneous (egalitarian and common aspect of political prerogatives defining, as such, the citizen). (Vernant 1990, 303)

Because they were considered pre-political, laws did not represent the endpoint of citizens' action. Legislators, when not foreigners themselves, were required to leave the city—at least temporarily. In this way, both the law and the legislator illustrate the articulation between the public and the private spheres, as well as the pre-political character of the activity that establishes this articulation. With these elements in place, one can now clearly formulate a political conception of privacy. Unlike the moral notion, the political conception does not view property as possessing ontological precedence (i.e., a natural right to appropriation) over the political realm, nor as something that should be preserved independently of it. Instead of this framework, Arendt draws on the ancient notion of a deep interconnection between the public and the private, shifting the relationship from one of anteriority (in which the private precedes the political) to one of concomitance between the two spheres.

Moreover, as Jean-Pierre Vernant also helps to demonstrate, the state is not merely a guardian of privacy, as if it bore the dual task of interpreting its many individual expressions and providing appropriate mechanisms of protection and punishment. Rather, privacy is conceived as the space that guarantees the articulation between the public and the private domains.

Once this political conception of privacy—as the guarantor of the articulation between the public and the private realms—has been elucidated, it becomes possible to understand more clearly the risks posed by the platformization of political life. "Terms of service" and "privacy policies" grant platforms the prerogative to use collected data for commercial purposes, typically related to targeted advertising. Our data then begins to shape the content we access, producing a double consequence: on one hand, it determines what is offered to us in spaces such as timelines; on the other, it conditions the ways in which we act, given that our perception of reality is mediated through algorithmic filters. The massive collection of data and the algorithmization of interactions largely determine with whom we interact, which topics we engage with, and the ways in which we consume information.

This represents, evidently, a form of compromised privacy—but one that does not align with the traditional model of state violation (against which liberal rights of resistance might be mobilized), nor with violations committed by another private actor (against which one would appeal to the state for protection). Platformization entails a novel form of corporate control over the very articulation between the public and the private domains—a distinction that has been foundational to political life in the West since Antiquity. While, for John Locke, political compacts presupposed the existence of property owners as a condition for establishing civil society and the state itself, the current process of collecting and manipulating personal data represents a new form of privatization. This privatization is not limited to individual ownership but expresses an economic form of control by large corporations over a dimension that is essential not only to public life but also to the subjective organization of the private sphere—this intimate space in which we shelter and protect our feelings, thoughts, and vital needs.

This privatization of political compacts—or privatization of the *nomos*, as the foundational norm of social coexistence—manifests itself broadly: in the dynamics of the labor market, in democratic elections (even within consolidated regimes), in the production and circulation of art, in education, in healthcare systems, and even in the structuring of affective relationships. In the face of such a scenario, Hannah Arendt's political thought offers essential tools for understanding the risks involved. Arendt's very formulation of the distinction between the public and the private arose as a response to the traumas of the totalitarian experience in the twentieth century. This is not, of course, to draw a direct comparison between totalitarian regimes and digital platforms, but rather to recognize that the public/private dyad, which proves so useful here, was developed through a profound inquiry into the historical forms of the dissolution of political space. It is within this context that the concept of principle of action emerges—devised by Arendt to understand how freedom begins and is sustained within the common world, but also revealing the impact that public forces may exert upon the private dimensions of human life.

The final formulation of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism—reached between 1952 and 1955—explicitly articulates the concepts of "totalitarian movement" and "total domination" based on the topological structure of the human condition, which attained its full elaboration in 1958. It is particularly significant that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973), the annihilation of public, private, and psychological life is described as a deliberate roadmap for dismantling the political topography of the tradition. In the essay "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," (1950) reflecting on the ultimate goal of totalitarian governments, Arendt writes:

> Total domination is achieved when the human person, who somehow is always a specific mixture of spontaneity and being conditioned, has been transformed into a completely conditioned being whose reactions can be calculated even when he is led to certain death. (Arendt 1950, 60)

The author continues by describing the three phases of total domination, to which we have already referred: the juridical, the moral,

and the individual. Each of these corresponds to different conditions of the person's public, private, and psychological life, all of which must be systematically destroyed in order to reduce the individual to a bundle of "identical reactions."

As a result, totalitarian rupture does not simply introduce a new principle or essence of government to the traditional gallery of political forms; rather, it subverts the traditional relationship between permanence and movement. Whereas the political space was historically conceived as a permanent structure within which the spontaneous movement of human affairs could unfold, the totalitarian experience aims to structure a perpetual march of the human species as a whole—devoid of any trace of spontaneity. In this regard, terror replaces positive and stable laws with laws of movement derived from nature and history, which serve to identify "objective enemies" against whom domination is directed. According to the author:

> Terror as the execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind, eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the "parts" for the sake of the "whole" (Arendt 1973, 465).

In place of the channels and limits established by law, the movement encircles and compresses the plurality of individuals like an iron band (Arendt 1973, 465), suppressing the possibility of spontaneous movement and new beginnings, as it enforces and accelerates a coercive and logical trajectory. To secure individual adherence to this continuous assault on the objective enemy, the totalitarian system relies on ideologies. Through them, the totality of the movement is explained by a single premise—logical in form but coercive in its effects on thought—rendering all contingencies of reality intelligible through the appearance of a pseudo-scientific discourse. In this way, all individuals are made to conform equally to the roles of victim and executioner, suppressing the principle of action so that everyone marches in lockstep with the totalitarian trajectory toward absolute domination.

Unlike tyrannies, which preserve the private activities and psychological conditions of their subjects, totalitarianism extends its control to aspects of human life previously thought to be indestructible—thereby revealing them as historically constituted conditions. Further distinguishing totalitarian rupture from tyranny, the author writes:

> The whole sphere of private life with the capacities for experience, fabrication and thought are left intact. We know that the iron band of total terror leaves no space for such private life and that the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys man's capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action (Arendt 1973, 474).

Thus, totalitarianism not only eliminates the objectivity of the principle of action by suppressing the public realm, but also renders inspiration itself impossible. It constitutes an extreme scenario, akin to a form of censorship accompanied by the deprivation of one's very capacities to see and to hear. In this sense, the principle of action requires not only worldly conditions but also private and psychological ones that must survive even in the absence of the public realm, making possible its eventual reemergence.

As Montesquieu asserts, in cases of conquest, "the citizen may perish and the man survive." This distinction—"between man as citizen (a member of a public order) and man insofar as he is an individual" (Arendt 1994, 332)—is fundamental for understanding the principle of action. Though it is explored by the French thinker, it remains unresolved and continues to pose a challenge to modern political thought. In this regard, the totalitarian system eliminates the distinction between individual and citizen—and with it, the perplexities and tensions this distinction entails—by establishing a single universal law that permeates all aspects of human life.

Yet outside the extreme totalitarian condition of our time, these dichotomies, perplexities, and nuances are still preserved. With them remains the overlapping and conflict of actions that are not necessarily inspired within the same dimension of human life. Situations such as a driver who violates traffic laws in order to rush a victim to the hospital,

or the classical example of Antigone, may be considered insoluble, as they appeal to "higher laws" that transcend politics without necessarily denying or destroying it—as tyrannies and totalitarian regimes do.

If we aim to elucidate the principle of action, it is necessary to examine the private sphere of human life, as well as its psychological aspects. Indeed, within the personal sphere there also exist principles that guide and signal directions for our actions. As Arendt concludes, following the insights of Montesquieu, it is a fact that the laws of each form of government establish a separation between the public and private spheres:

> [But] it is this non-public sphere from which the sources of action and motion, as distinguished from the stabilizing, structural forces of law and power, spring. Hedged iIi by law and power, and occasionally overwhelming them, lie the origins of motion and action (Arendt 1973, 335).

From this, we can understand the impossibility of abandoning private experiences in order to act in the public realm. However, such inspirational relations do not occur as individualized, psychological experiences merely reflected in the public sphere; rather, the principle of action is inspired from without. According to Arendt (2008, 335), there exists a "peculiar unity of each culture" from which both individuals and citizens emerge. This unity ensures that the different spheres of human life may find common ground capable of overcoming the tensions between personal and political principles.

The novelty introduced by the platformization of information corresponds to the erosion of this "unity," which previously enabled the mitigation of conflict. In the absence of such unity—whether presupposed or institutionally upheld—individuals tend to fragment into selective affinity groups, or "bubbles," which serve as an effective means to avoid the inherently conflictual nature of political action. Conflict, after all, is nothing more than the expression of the appearance of the new, which is why it is impossible to engage in action without encountering some form of it.

Thus, in a reality structured by platformized information, clashes and disputes with individuals who share no conciliatory horizon often become

the norm, fostering highly polarized and belligerent environments. While conflict is intrinsic to all political action—and indeed, the birth of the new necessitates a degree of rupture—reconciliation should also remain a possibility. Echoing the Latin expression *Initium ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nemo fuit*, Arendt roots the human condition in the capacity to initiate something new—to perform miracles; not of a supernatural order, but those effected through human action when it interrupts ongoing sequences or automatic processes, thereby constituting "the wholly unexpected" (Arendt 1961, 168). In this sense, it is against the automatism of all cosmic, historical, and natural processes that human freedom asserts and actualizes itself.

This leads us to the inevitable conclusion that political action is inherently oppositional: it interrupts preexisting processes. It is, therefore, conflictual—not merely in the sense of confrontation or destruction, but as a substitution of old processes with new ones. To presume a transition without any form of conflict or rupture would be a political misjudgment and a threat to freedom itself. Conversely, the artificial production of conflict, in the absence of genuinely new beginnings, risks devolving into the glorification of violence under the guise of change.

In her essay *On Violence* (1970), Hannah Arendt analyses the situation on university campuses in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to the Vietnam War, American society was undergoing structural changes in segregation policies that had, until then, excluded a significant portion of the population on the basis of race. As Arendt portrays it, however, the dismantling or weakening of segregationist policies and the growing presence of the Black community in American universities were accompanied by a phenomenon she referred to as the *glorification of violence*, even when such violence was symbolic or verbal. This phenomenon was rooted in a widespread conviction among student groups and Black activists that American universities were undergoing transformations that signalled institutional progress toward more pluralistic realities. Violence, in this context, was justified as a necessary response to break through barriers and forms of resistance—violent in themselves—that hindered this march toward a better university. The glorification of violence thus consisted of the belief that violence

served the cause of progress and, as such, should not only be permitted but also tolerated in its discursive and symbolic expressions.

This historical experience offers important lessons for today's world of platform-mediated information. The persistent reinforcement of specific opinion biases—often sustained by misinformation or outright falsehoods—generates the phenomenon of the perceived imminence of desired outcomes. In Brazil, this dynamic was visible in the aftermath of the 2022 elections, when repeated calls for a "military intervention" were framed as if the fulfillment of such a demand were perpetually imminent. In any case, the glorification of violence is invariably accompanied by a sense of urgency that calls for the removal of perceived obstacles. Paradoxically, the platformization of public discourse generalizes this sense of imminence and, with it, disseminates the glorification of violence as produced and amplified by digital platforms.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the logic of social media does not foster the actual undertaking of new beginnings, precisely because it remains trapped in the dynamics of reproduction. Genuine political action, even when it utilizes digital platforms for dissemination, requires tangible worldly events—acts and experiences of human suffering and achievement—capable of truly affecting people and generating meaningful transformation.

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Democracy and Capitalism

David Rothkopf[1]

American capitalism killed American democracy.

This is neither an overstatement nor is it a parochial story that only has implications for the United States. It is a revealing case study in the drift toward illiberal democracy worldwide.

Democracy is not a destination. It is a process. More than that, it may be more akin to a living organism than it is to a mechanistic set of rules and procedures. If it is not nurtured, cared for, constantly kept alive, it will wither and die. Further, in the wrong environment, if it is exposed to toxins that undermine its intent or the social conditions required for democracy to survive, it will die.

This has been known for a very long time.

"A Republic… If You Can Keep It"

In the United States, there is an often told story of the last day of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 at which the country's founding document was drafted and approved. One of the delegates to the convention, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, represented Pennsylvania, the state in which the convention was held. He was at the time, already well known as a leader of the revolution via which the American colonies broke away from the British crown, a scientist, and a writer.

At the conclusion of the convention, Franklin was approached by a prominent local woman named Elizabeth Willing Powel. She asked, "Well, doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?"

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Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it."

Franklin's acknowledgement of the fragility of the new system of government that was being undertaken at that moment, was telling. But just as telling and underscoring the same point was Article V of the U.S. Constitution, which outlined the process by which the document could be amended. The Constitution's authors did not think such a document could survive unchanged, and a number of prominent Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, had argued that the Constitution should expire after a set period, perhaps 20 years, so that a new one could be adopted more appropriate to the times. The solution that was arrived at, however, ensured that the U.S. Constitution would be a living document. And indeed, three years after it was ratified, in 1788, ten amendments were also ratified, known today as the Bill of Rights.

Today, there are 27 total amendments to the document. They have reflected much—but not all—of the social upheaval that is only natural in a period like the almost two and half centuries since the document was first approved. They included the amendment ending slavery and one that granted the right to vote to women who, like Mrs. Powel, were not viewed as worthy of full citizenship until 1920 (in the 19th amendment to the Constitution).

Structural Flaws Make Intended Evolution Difficult

Unfortunately, due to other flaws in the conception of the Constitution, further amendment now seems unlikely. Because ratification of amendments requires approval of three-quarters of the U.S. states, of which there are now 50, and because such deep divisions exist between many of those states. (The process is actually more complicated than that. A proposed new amendment requires two-thirds of both houses of the U.S. Congress to approve it or two-thirds of U.S. state legislatures requesting that a national constitutional convention be held. Only then can the proposed amendment be presented to all the states for ratification.)

Further, rules once created to grant equal voices in the Congress to both agricultural (and therefore less populous) states and industrial states with higher concentrations of people, balance proportional

representation based on population in the lower house of the Congress with equal representation of two senators per state in the upper house, the U.S. Senate. What this means is today, we are very near the point at which one-third of the American people, choose two-thirds of the U.S. Senate. A state with a population of just over half a million like Wyoming therefore has the same number of votes in the Senate as does California, with almost 40 million residents and an economy so large it would rank fourth in the world among all nations.

This gives hugely disproportionate power to rural states that also tend to be more conservative and much less power per person to urban states, which tend to be more progressive in their views. And because of the requirements of the Constitution regarding amendments, it is almost impossible to see how this imbalance can be addressed short of accepting new states into the union.

Why is this relevant? Because it means that American democracy can no longer grow and adapt as was intended. We are entering a phase in which a minority of Americans can impose their will on the majority, which is an idea that is fundamentally incompatible with the principles that led to the development of democracy. (Even if those principles were seldom fully realized in practice.)

When Money Is Power, It Is the End of "One Person, One Vote"

Worse still for American democracy, however, have been developments that have increasingly granted crucial power within our system to the wealthiest members of our society and to large powerful corporations. Like the inequality manifest between less populous and more populous states, the disproportionate allocation of economic power within the U.S. has undermined core concepts that lie at the center of functioning democratic societies, notably the idea of "one person, one vote."

But, whereas the structural impediments to fair and evolving democracy created by the rules concerning proportional representation were damaging, the evolution in the U.S. of the power assigned to those with the most economic resources has actually killed it.

As they have throughout our history—and the history of most other countries in the world—those Americans with the most economic power have sought to have and exercise the most political power. It is a phenomenon our founders warned of… even as they established a country in which effectively only white male landowners would have real power. They traded the British aristocracy for the seed stock of its American successors. As we transitioned from being an agrarian nation to an industrial one, the super-empowered in our society changed their business interests and addresses. But whether they were called "robber barons" as they were in the United States in the 1890s or "tech bros" as they are today, the few have always had disproportionate power in American society. Some have pushed back on that power, but typically they did so on behalf of another group of aspirants to their role, not average citizens but oligarchs-in-waiting.

That is not to say average citizens had no role in these transfers of power. They did. The rich would use all the tools at their disposal to persuade voters that political candidates would be acting in their interests, addressing the *quotidien* challenges of their lives. But, the primary sponsors of those candidates did not seek primarily to improve the well-being of the masses so much as sought to ensure their man—and his supporters in Congress and statehouses and legislatures—would be in power to protect and advance their interests. They had to take the will of the people into account to be sure. But they always found ways to manipulate it, and where turbulence from below would bubble up, they would find a way to smooth it over.

The challenge to democracy of economic inequality was summed up by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis a century ago when he wrote that "We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both."

But the existential threat high concentrations of wealth in a society pose to democracy was one that Americans had been aware of since the founding of the country.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1785, "I am conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable. But the consequences of this enormous

inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property, only taking care to let their subdivisions go hand in hand with the natural affections of the human mind [...] Another means of silently lessening the inequality of property is to exempt all from taxation below a certain point, and to tax the higher portions of property in geometrical progression as they rise."

As author George Thomas wrote of another U.S. founding father in *The Atlantic* (2025), "Similarly, Gouverneur Morris, the Founder who drafted the actual text of the Constitution, worried at the Constitutional Convention that 'the schemes of the rich' would take advantage of the passions of the people, resulting in 'a violent aristocracy, or a more violent despotism.' Morris insisted that the 'rich will strive to establish their dominion'."

Or as noted American historian Joseph Elliswrote for *Mother Jones*, a U.S. publication with a progressive political orientation (2018), "'In every society known to man,' [America's second President John Adams] wrote in *Defence*, 'an aristocracy has risen up in the course of time, consisting of a few rich and honourable families who have united with each other against both the people and the first magistrate.' There were few universal principles in Adams' political universe, but this was one of them: All societies eventually produced social and economic elites that, left unchecked, achieved political domination at the expense of everyone else. 'You are afraid of the one, I, the few,' he wrote to Jefferson." But the Warnings Were Ignored.

Several factors contributed to the dangerous concentration of power that exists among America's wealthy and our most powerful corporations today. The first are those elements of human nature and history referred to in the quotations above. The next is the gradual evolution of a system that was not known to America's founders.

In 1776, the same year the U.S. was founded, economist Adam Smith published his masterwork, *The Wealth of Nations*. Many consider it the founding manifesto of capitalism. Certainly, taken along with the industrial revolution, which also happened to start at the same time (James Watt patented a version of the steam engine in 1776, as well), a

new economic system that emphasized economic freedoms and rewarded individual enterprise took root.

In the U.S., given its status as a new nation that was created simultaneously to these big developments in world history, capitalism grew unfettered by historical constraints and customs that were found elsewhere in the world. For the same reasons, the industrial revolution was allowed to develop more rapidly and less constrained in the United States. Several important consequences resulted. One was that in the 19th century, U.S. laws began to conflate the rights granted to individuals with a new concept, rights being granted to imaginary individuals, corporations. Landmark Supreme Court decisions supported the idea that corporations had rights. And when the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed, granting equal rights under the law to everyone, while the intent of the law was to redress the wrongs of slavery, the amendment was seen as an opportunity by corporate lawyers to expand their privileges. They did so to the extent that in the century and a half since the amendment was passed, it has been invoked in more cases on behalf of companies than of people.

Corporate growth and the size of the U.S. economy and the lack of the existence of effective laws prohibiting monopolies led to the growth of great corporations in the U.S., including, in the second half of the 19th century, the first true multinational corporation, the Standard Oil Company. With companies of such size, great fortunes were also created and the founder of Standard Oil, John D. Rockefeller, became America's first billionaire.

As Rockefeller and his economic peers gained influence and control over the economy, there was a backlash. At its peak, in 1911, when the company was broken up by the government because it had grown too large, Standard Oil controlled 90 percent of all U.S. oil refining capacity and around 85 percent of domestic oil sales. A political movement to regulate these big companies—part of the push and pull between the power of the people and the power of big money—grew up. In the early 20th century, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt led a movement to break

up such companies that targeted and successfully restructured some of the biggest.

It worked but only temporarily. Today, at least six of the world's largest oil companies can trace their roots directly back to Standard Oil (ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, Marathon, ConocoPhillips, Phillips 66). Similarly, others that the state tried to regulate found ways to grow, and new megacompanies grew to take their place, with new megafortunes accruing to their founders, owners, and managers. The result is that while America hit a peak of income inequality in the decade before Roosevelt's reforms, those benefits have gradually been offset and today, inequality in the U.S. is the worst it has ever been.

The top 1 percent of Americans own over a third of the country's wealth, but the bottom 50 percent owns less than 2 percent. The top 1 percent of American earners make 20 percent of U.S. total income, with the bottom 50 percent earning less than 13 percent. Today, the average American CEO makes 344 times the amount of the average worker.

The system attempted to find a balance between the economic interests of those who had profited within its free-wheeling system of capitalism and the overall interests of society at large (income taxes were also started at the beginning of the 20th century) but ultimately, at least thus far, it has failed to maintain that balance.

A Half Century of Tough Consequences for Democracy

For the better part of the last half century, triggered in part by income taxes reaching their highest rates ever during the mid-1950s and in part by efforts of those in power to reduce perceived threats to their interests from social upheaval, there has been an unprecedented move to consolidate the power of America's richest citizens and the corporations they controlled.

Great influence became ever greater. The rich (predominantly found on the right in American politics, more often associated with the Republican rather than Democratic Parties) used their influence to change the laws of American media to enable the creation of a partisan media ecosystem

that promoted their views, their candidates, and ultimately even their "alternative facts" and narratives of American life. Washington was the enemy. Deregulation was their friend. Republicans argued that they were looking out for the working man. They asserted that they were fighting for fiscal responsibility, that they knew how to grow America for everyone. They understood how to create jobs and prosperity.

None of this was true, but that didn't matter. For the purposes of those behind the creation of these disinformation networks, only building political support for the candidates of lower taxes and less regulation and who would support judges and laws that concentrated power in the hands of the few and undid the efforts at levelling our society that came with initiatives like America's Voting Rights Act or other efforts to empower disenfranchised groups like minorities or women.

Since such groups largely did not share the interests of the super empowered in our society, the influence that they might have that came from their numbers (and they were a growing majority of Americans) would have to be counteracted.

This in turn produced gerrymandering (redrawing maps of congressional districts to produce greater likelihood of one party or another winning) or court decisions like the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling known commonly as *Citizens United* (Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission 588 U.S. 310 (2010)) that gave the rich ever more power by saying that the amount they could contribute to political campaigns could not be regulated because such regulation would be an infringement on their right of "free speech." Tax cuts and more recent Supreme Court decisions like last year's (2024) removing deference that had been given to the judgment of federal regulators that gave or will give corporate leaders ever more wealth (which they could then translate into power and then translate that into more wealth and so on *ad infinitum*). Indeed, the practice of packing our courts with political appointees with a blatant political agenda and doing the same in the U.S. Congress has effectively removed all checks and balances to offset the power of the U.S. chief executive. A clear and significant example is last year's U.S. Supreme Court decision to grant the U.S. president effective immunity for everything he does in office, thus

shattering one of the founding principles of America's or any democracy, that no individual is above the law.

Populists Who Work for the Super-Empowered Elite

Because economic inequality has grown dramatically for the past forty years in America, it has frustrated many average Americans. It therefore became increasingly important for those in power to find a way to harness those frustrations into support for candidates who would protect and expand the prerogatives of the emerging oligarchy. That was effectively done via the demagoguery of (primarily) right-wing news outlets like Fox News and Breitbart and by populist (largely Republican) candidates and led to the perverse situation that in the most recent presidential election the majority of Americans expressed their anger at a system that was leaving them ever farther behind by…electing the people, like current U.S. president Donald Trump and those close to him, who were engineering their marginalization and exploiting them.

That is not to say that the very wealthy would not have found ways to do something close to the same had a Democrat won. They certainly did in the recent past when, during the Clinton Administration, they embraced neo-liberalism and promoted Wall Street and corporate views from ending Glass-Steagall to promoting unfettered free trade that helped fuel the growth of inequality. (I was in that administration and regret every day my willing and active cheerleading for such policies.) Barack Obama received more support from Wall Street than any candidate in history until that time…and the first thing he did was hire back the same folks from the Clinton era to perpetuate neo-liberal policies. Both administrations were much preferable to the current one in the U.S. in my personal view. But, they also, in crucial ways, exacerbated the (largely economic) forces that undermined real democracy in our society.

Many Americans, including myself, warned that re-electing Trump would pose a threat to American democracy. And certainly, it has sought to do so when you consider the ways the rule of law in the United States has been diluted, the power of the president has been increased, and

freedom of expression (in universities, libraries, cultural institutions, museums, and even in scientific research) has been curtailed.

So, it is tempting to say that the challenge Americans face is defending democracy. But that would be misleading.

Because no country in which the top 1 percent of society holds more wealth than the bottom 90 percent is, in fact, a democracy. Because without rulings like the Supreme Court's on the Citizens United case, but more so with it, money translates to power. Always has. Always will. (And those with money seek more of it and those with power seek more of it and seek to retain it.) As another prominent member of America's founding generation, Alexander Hamilton (1788), wrote with regard to this problem clearly, "As riches increase and accumulate in a few hands [...] the tendency of things will be to depart from the republican standard."

Compounding the problem is the aforementioned problem that the wealthiest and most powerful in any society tend to use the tools at their disposal to influence society (media, schools, churches, etc.) to persuade citizens that society is working well if it produces the wealth and stability that serves the interests of the super-empowered. I'm not just talking about political sloganeering. I'm talking about something deeper. I'm talking about shaping a culture so that people's deepest beliefs and even their sense of identity are linked to serving the objectives of those in charge. This was done by feudal lords and the church working in unison to say, serve the state today and gain your reward in heaven, and it was done by bosses throughout history persuading people that the very value in their lives came from the work they did (for someone else). Today, being an American means being for unfettered capitalism (anything that seeks equity is socialist and thus by definition evil and anti-American).

The Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci described this process as cultural hegemony—the ability of those in charge to inculcate into the rest of society beliefs that served the interests of those in positions of power. He felt that the only way to produce change in society was to create a counter-hegemonic cultural force that would undo some of the exploitative core beliefs. Naturally, because Gramsci was a communist, he is, in the capitalist world, quickly discredited... as are all writers who

have promoted philosophical approaches that have promoted community interests over those of the individual or a more active role for government as a force to bring social benefits to all citizens.

But here's the thing: on this point Gramsci was right. (He was wrong on many others.) Just as on some points Marx was right and on some points liberal economic thinkers like John Maynard Keynes were correct and on some points modern societies influenced by socialism from Europe to Asia have much to teach us if we could only hear them above the din of the beliefs indoctrinated in us since our childhoods.

The current U.S. president can do much damage, and we must be on guard against that. But while some of the damage he may do might be grave, other elements of it might be undone. But they will not be undone in a way that truly restores democracy in America unless we reject the idea that prior to Trump we were actually a functioning democracy. I know that is a challenging idea for many people and will lead to my arguments being dismissed out of hand by some, but nonetheless, I deeply believe it is true and that the real mission of pro-democracy Americans must therefore be to produce a cultural change in the way Americans see their lives, their society, and their system of government that is more grounded in truth and less influenced by the self-interests of the few who seek to exploit the many, the counter-hegemonic force that Gramsci called for.

Perhaps excesses by the current U.S. government may make it easier for us to help begin to produce that kind of change here in the United States. I tend to believe that they will if we actively draw attention to them and their consequences, to the corruption that is likely to be not just endemic but a central goal of the next administration. Perhaps the changes that could be ushered in—for better or for worse—by the huge sea-change in our societal and economic structures due to the advent of the age of artificial intelligence (which in my view is as big a transformational moment as the industrial revolution that influenced thinkers like Adam Smith, Marx, and many of the founders of this country) will create an opportunity and an impetus for such changes.

Whatever the case, Americans today cannot afford to underestimate the immensity or the urgency of the task at hand. But of course, the threat is

not just to America. The same forces that have gutted American democracy and reduced many of the ideas and ideals that underlay the founding of our democratic government to ashes are at work in other societies around the world. For the most part, the problems grow most acute in the same place inequality has. Because in such places, those with the most power start to fear the unrest of those they are exploiting, and this in turn leads them to apply more force and strip away more democratic prerogatives.

The only cure is recognizing that for democracy to survive, it must do so in a successful symbiosis with an economic system that also seeks to protect and preserve certain democratic principles—if not equal outcomes, then true equal opportunity, if not central planning, then a constant vigilance to ensure that economic enterprises within a society serve the people of the country that grants them the right to exist within its borders. Economic freedoms must exist to support, advance, and extend other fundamental personal freedoms. To the extent they may lead to threats to those freedoms—beginning with giving too much power to too few people—that must be corrected or ultimately democracy will be the casualty.

Regardless of the country in which we live, protecting our communities from further degradation by forces leading to or institutionalizing the unhealthy concentration of power is vitally important. And recognizing that and the fragility of democracy, we must realize the degree to which our diligence and care are required daily to preserve and protect the freedoms and rights we hold most dear.

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Part II
Democracy in Regional Perspective

The Elephant in the Room: The Problematic Relationship between Foreign Policy Decision-Making and Domestic Audiences in Latin America

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Introduction: What does Latin American Foreign Policy Look like Today?

Latin American foreign policy suffers from a profound irrelevance in an increasingly turbulent, uncertain, and conflict-ridden global context. It also appears to be ineffective when attempting to confront antidemocratic narratives in the region. This weakness highlights significant risks to our region, yet it also implies an opportunity for strategic coordination and collaboration. To further explore this diagnosis, we note that four key elements characterize the current state of Latin American foreign policy.

First, despite critical voices, the leaders of most countries in the region maintain a firm adherence to the liberal international order and democracy as their preferred political regime (Rodriguez and Thornton 2022). This adherence is well reflected in their foreign policy identity (Vucetic 2017). Nonetheless, there is some evidence that citizens in this

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region are increasingly pessimistic toward fundamental democratic values (Latinobarometro 2024).

Second, presidents have historically been the most crucial actors in Latin American foreign policy and continue to be so (Ribeiro and Pinheiro 2016; Alcántara et al. 2018). This has made it possible to protect certain complex foreign policy decisions that fall outside the scope of congressional disputes. However, concentrating foreign policy decisions in the presidential leadership can be risky because it leaves room for discretionary and disruptive choices. It also conflates their roles as heads of State representing the country and heads of Government facing internal political opposition. This double nature of presidents could reinforce the polarization of foreign affairs and long-standing internal cleavages. Beyond these considerations, presidents' perceptions regarding how their countries are evaluated, criticized, or highlighted at the domestic, regional, and global levels are fundamental to the status-seeking strategies they deploy and display. In this sense, when it comes to foreign policy, presidents can either lead or follow public opinion.

Third, multilateral cooperation and the rule of law constitute the primary protective strategy for the countries in the region. While some medium-sized countries in Latin America stand out in their international performance, such as Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Chile (Destradi and Wehner 2024; Efstathopoulos 2021; Giacomello and Verbeek 2024; Merke, Reynoso, and Schenoni 2020), the majority of the region remains composed of small countries with a diminished capacity to influence regional and global discussions (Baldacchino and Wivel 2020; Browning 2006, Sarapuu and Randma-Livy 2020; Panke and Thorhallsson 2024; Wehner 2020). In this context, for both small and medium-sized countries, membership in multilateral organizations is crucial to their survival, as it protects them from the uncertainties of global politics (Sotomayor 2006). For example, small and medium-sized countries should be more inclined to defend multilateral institutions, as these institutions promote the active protection of international law and civilized rules of the game, especially when hegemonic countries severely challenge those rules. Contrary to conventional assessments that characterize pro-multilateralism as purely imitative and signalling

only to external audiences, we argue that presidents also actively seek to influence domestic audiences (Rodrigues, Urdinez, and Oliveira 2019). In other words, they use concrete narratives in favour of multilateral cooperation even when international organizations constitute a target for criticism by the radical right amid nationalist and isolationist narratives (Rodriguez and Thornton 2022).

Finally, linked to the previous point, there is a growing debate on the importance of domestic audiences as a defining element for governments' external strategies (Schimmelfennig 2002). Countries' international politics have become a terrain of domestic dispute, affecting the foreign policy decisions that governments pursue and their associated strategies and alliances. In other words, leaders may react to citizens' preferences when defining their strategic international positioning, or they choose their strategy in an attempt to affect domestic public opinion. This interaction is significant when evaluating democratic attitudes and domestic public opinion. In terms of this chapter, one important question is to what degree citizens and political elites in parliament view geopolitics through a lens defined by the internal politics of left versus right or democratic satisfaction.

These elements open a very interesting field of collaboration with the growing literature on the role of decision-makers in explaining how foreign policy identity is shaped (Browning 2006). Scholars typically study attitudes, emotions, and beliefs, which are at the centre of their analytical puzzles. These contributions have shown a preference for rational choice and psychological approaches (Goldgeier 2018). Still, recently, there has also been a proliferation of research focusing on how these individuals (or groups of individuals) act as foreign policy entrepreneurs in the decision-making process (Mintrom and Luetjens 2019). In such circumstances, these actors are key to promoting elements of change or continuity in foreign policy. This is why the views and identities of political elites, such as parliamentarians, are important to assess the underlying factors determining countries' foreign policies (Carter and Scott 2009).

Considering the above, this article aims to further build on these contributions and enhance understanding of the relationship between

foreign policy decision-making and domestic audiences. In particular, we believe it is essential to address the relationship between democratic attitudes in domestic audiences, both mass public opinion and the political elite, and the type of foreign policy Latin American countries pursue.

Therefore, we argue that foreign policy is a key tool in counteracting the advances of anti-democratic narratives in our region, as public opinion's democratic attitudes are not the primary driver of foreign policy. The lack of polarization in public opinion, at least in 2023, represents an opportunity for the political leaders of the so-called "Latin American progressivism" to coordinate actions to reconcile discussions on strengthening democracy, security, and individual freedoms. Consequently, progressives can strengthen their regional coordination to challenge the narrative of radical extremism, presenting individual freedoms and security as part of their core discussions about improving democracy. With this strategy, the temptation of autocratic leaders who promote undemocratic views can be isolated.

Foreign Policy Performance in Latin America: What Are Political Elites Trying to "Sell" through their Foreign Policy?

Existing scholarship on small-middle states has focused on the analysis of status-seeking strategies, where we observe two large groups of countries: those that show themselves to the world as disciplined members of the liberal international order (Long and Palma 2022; Maia and Taylor 2015; Stuenkel and Taylor 2015) and those who are interested in joining models of an alternative order or even rejecting liberalism altogether (Stolle and Barros 2021), as is the case with some BRICS countries, who have directly expressed their intention to challenge the dollar's monopoly as an international currency (Gedikli et al. 2025). Both groups, however, share a common objective, where the need for recognition and distinction at the regional and global levels accompanies the quest for status.

Brazil is a very interesting example in this regard because it is an actor who has been on both sides. Under the administrations of Lula da Silva (2003–2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), Brazil developed an interest in consolidating its position as the most important regional

leader in Latin America, serving as a voice articulating positions at the international level (Milani and Pinheiro 2017). Therefore, Brazil clearly defined its international expectations, seeking strategies of understanding between its regional and global peers, even when this caused tensions with its domestic elite (Milani et al. 2017).

Now, the story was completely different under the administration of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). Bolsonaro not only conducted Brazil's foreign policy with a radical, religious, and anti-liberal populist discourse but also refused to continue occupying the role of regional articulator, despising the historical leadership and authority the country had previously held (Malamud 2018). In concrete terms, Bolsonaro rejected multilateralism, multiculturalism, and regionalism, which had been integral to Brazil's foreign policy for years. Consequently, under Bolsonaro's presidency, the country was perceived as an unpredictable and untrustworthy member of the liberal international order (Stolle and Barros 2021).

Beyond the liberal-anti-liberal cleavage, for some countries, the display of their strategies aims to combat negative preconceptions, such as the Mexican case, which tries to show international rhetoric of non-tolerance regarding organized crime and violence. For other countries, it may serve a reconstructive purpose, as seen in the case of Colombia, which demonstrates the association between its foreign policy and the pursuit of peace and social reconstruction following decades of internal conflict. For other countries, such as Chile, it can serve a recognition purpose, utilizing its reputation as a "good student in the neighbourhood" as an extension of its "conceptual leadership." This initiative, widely employed by the country during the transition from dictatorship to democracy, demonstrates its credibility as a trustworthy actor.

Broad examples of these performative actions also include presidents' rhetoric to affect the perceptions of their relevant audiences, such as El Salvador's Nayib Bukele's strategy to convince the world that his country is no longer dangerous through a questionable prison system that is at odds with the rule of law and respect for basic human rights; the construction of a "country brand" at an international level, such as the statement "Brazil had returned" when Lula da Silva won the presidency again in 2023; or

the need to consolidate a story of legitimation and acceptance within the framework of important international organizations, as is the case with Javier Milei and its efforts to portray Argentina as a responsible debt creditor in the eyes of the International Monetary Fund and the United States. Within these performative strategies, the complicity of domestic political elites is key to understanding how states display this behaviour and construct their storytelling.

Do Political and Democratic Attitudes Explain Political Elites' Opinions on Foreign Affairs?

What do Latin American political elites think about foreign policy? Is there a relationship between these opinions and views on national democracy? Are these opinions divided into left- and right-wing camps?

To analyse elites' opinions on foreign affairs and their connection to democratic attitudes, we utilize data from the *Latin American Elites* project of the University of Salamanca (PELA-USAL). Specifically, we examine the opinions of parliamentarians from 2014 to 2022 in Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay, and Venezuela. As in any survey, there is a risk of self-selection among respondents, which is especially true for elite surveys. However, the PELA-USAL has a relatively high response rate for elite surveys.[3]

Specifically, we divide our sample into subgroups using two political attitudes. First, we divide respondents into left-, centre-, and right-wing parliamentarians.[4] Second, we use the only indicator of general democratic attitudes included across the seven countries, that is, the level of satisfaction with democracy. We group respondents who declare themselves to be "very satisfied" and "satisfied" on the one hand and those who profess to be "unsatisfied" and "very unsatisfied" on the other. This democratic

3 The sample includes 68 parliamentarians from the Chilean 2014–2018 congress, 74 parliamentarians from the Colombian 2017–2022 congress, 79 parliamentarians from the El Salvadorian 2018–2021 congress, 103 parliamentarians from the Mexican 2018–2021 congress, 73 parliamentarians from the Peruvian 2016–2021 congress, 69 parliamentarians from the Uruguayan 2015–2020 congress, and 67 parliamentarians from the Venezuelan 2016–2021 congress.

4 On a scale from 1 to 10, we categorize as "left" respondents that self-place between 1 and 3, "centre" between 4 and 7, and "right" between 8 and 10.

attitude has been demonstrated in the literature to be a key predictor of populist attitudes and behaviours (Kitschelt 2002).

Figure 1 and Figure 2 present the levels of favourability of parliamentarians in our sample towards the United States and China. We see that positions towards the United States and China correlate with left-right positions. Left-wing parliamentarians are much less favourable to the United States than centrist and right-wing parliamentarians. Similarly, towards China, we observe that left-wing parliamentarians tend to have a more favourable view of the Asian country compared to both centrists and right-wing parliamentarians and that centrists are slightly more favourable towards China than right-wing parliamentarians.

Figure 1 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and the USA, by left-right positions (left) and by satisfaction with democracy (right)

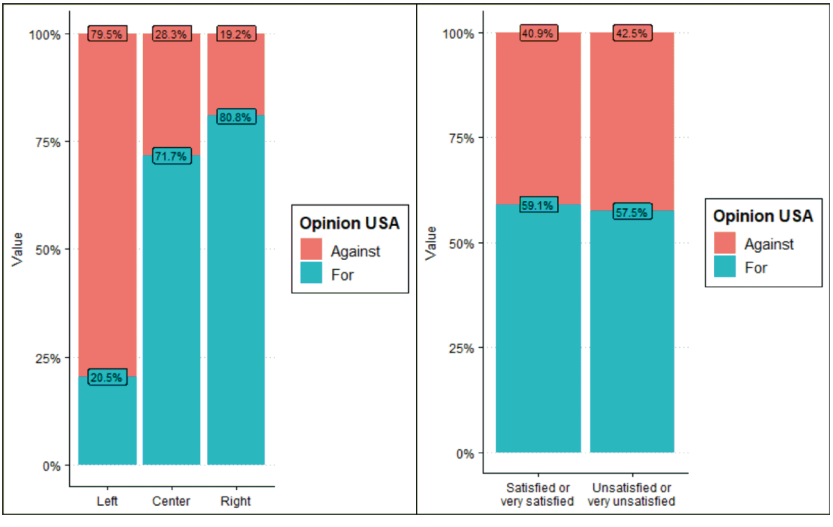
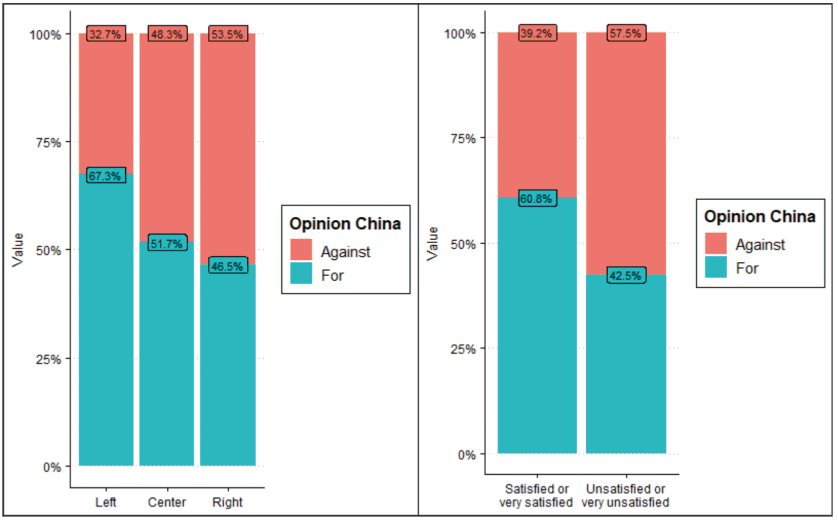


Figure 2 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and China, by left-right positions (left) and by satisfaction with democracy (right)



Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014–2022).

In Figure 7 in the appendix, we replicated the analysis with parliamentarians' positions towards Russia. We observe a very similar pattern to the one seen towards China, with more support on the left and less support among parliamentarians who are dissatisfied with democracy. This seems to suggest that elites view the world in a bipolar way, which matches their right-left identities.

Figure 1 suggests that the views of political elites toward the United States are polarized along the left-right spectrum but not so in the dimension of democratic satisfaction. When it comes to relations with China, Figure 2 suggests some left-right polarization, albeit less pronounced than with the United States, as well as a divide in democratic satisfaction. However, this analysis should be viewed with caution, as the global picture may mask local and national realities that differ significantly from the overall picture.

To study the relationship between these political attitudes and views on foreign affairs, given local and national realities, we run the previous left-right analysis country by country for the United States. In Figure 9 in the appendix, we observe that the left-right polarization of views on the United States remains stable across all the countries we studied. In Figure 10 in the appendix, however, we see that the relationship between left- and right-wing positions and views on China differs significantly across countries. On the other hand, when we examine the association between democratic satisfaction and perception of the United States in Figure 11 in the appendix and China in Figure 12 in the appendix, we observe stark differences between Venezuela and, to a lesser degree, El Salvador and all other countries.[5]

In Figure 3, we summarize the information from the previous analysis by focusing on the level of polarization along our two axes (left, right, and democratic satisfaction). For this, we simply plot the difference in favourability for each country (i) in the right versus the left (ii) in democratically satisfied versus unsatisfied parliamentarians. Uruguay was omitted from this plot because no parliamentarian expressed dissatisfaction with democracy.

We observe that across all countries, favourability towards the United States is skewed to the right. This general tendency is accentuated in Venezuela and somewhat attenuated in Mexico. Regarding satisfaction with democracy, we observe a notable difference in Venezuela, where parliamentarians who are less satisfied with democracy are significantly more favourable towards the United States. In Colombia, on the other hand, parliamentarians who are satisfied with democracy are somewhat more favourable toward the United States.

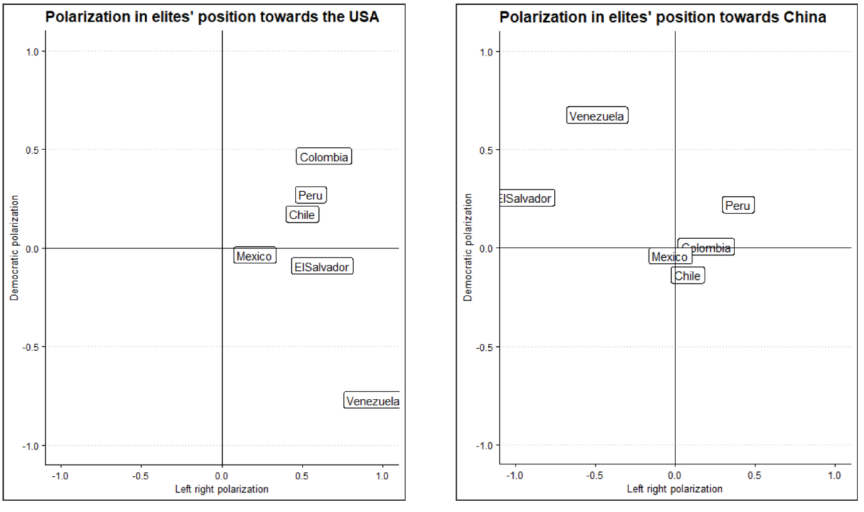
As for China, we see little polarization in Mexico, Chile, and Colombia, with these countries gravitating around the intersection of the axes. In Peru, there is a slight polarization, with favourability toward China unexpectedly tilted to the right. However, there are two noticeable cases of polarization: El Salvador and Venezuela. In El Salvador, the left-leaning pattern of favourability towards China is exacerbated. The most significant

5 In the case of Uruguay, there were no parliamentarians that declared unsatisfaction with democracy.

polarization in terms of democratic satisfaction is seen in Venezuela (and the second largest in terms of left-right). Favourability towards China in Venezuela is almost a perfect mirror image of favourability towards the United States. This suggests that in this country, foreign affairs are indeed profoundly polarized by political elites.

While it is challenging to draw significant inferences from these findings, Venezuela has experienced a substantial decline in the quality of its democracy. It is likely that, at least in the Venezuelan Congress, satisfaction with democracy is related to criticism of the country's democratic backsliding process and that some Venezuelan parliamentarians view China as an ally of the executive and the United States as an ally of the opposition.

Figure 3 – Elite polarization in selected countries. Favourability differences for the USA (left) and China (right)



Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014–2022).

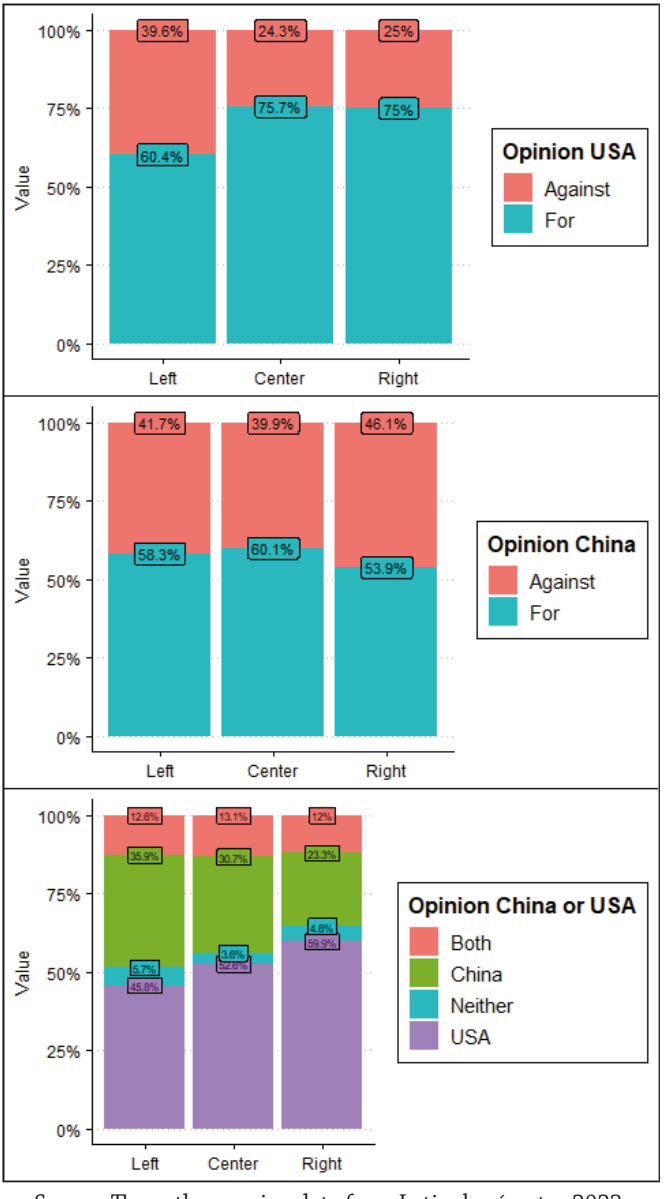
Do Political and Democratic Attitudes Explain Public Opinion on Foreign Affairs?

To analyse public opinion on foreign affairs and its association with political and democratic attitudes, we use data from the 2023 *Latinobarómetro*. We investigate citizens' views in Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay, and Venezuela. *Latinobarómetro* has representative samples for each country. We also use the weights provided by *Latinobarómetro* to ensure that our sample is statistically representative of traditional demographics (such as age and gender). We will commence by analysing the same countries as we did for parliamentarians and then extend the analysis to the 17 countries[6] with available data in the *Latinobarómetro*.

In Figure 4, we observe that, when considering left-right positioning, public opinion is significantly less polarized than that of elites regarding foreign affairs. Favourability for the United States is slightly lower among left-wing citizens, and likewise, favourability towards China is marginally lower among right-wing citizens. However, the differences are noticeably less pronounced than in the case of parliamentarians. When forced to choose between China and the United States, we observe a slightly stronger correlation between left- and right-wing positioning, but this difference remains smaller than for elites. Furthermore, we see that across the political spectrum, citizens tend to align, with most prioritizing their home country's relationship with the United States, even among left-wing individuals. In Figure 8 in the appendix, we run a similar analysis for Venezuela, Russia, and Ukraine. We observe the same patterns: some left-right polarization, but significantly less pronounced than that observed among elites, and an overall consensus regarding the valuation of different international relations. This seems to suggest that Latin American citizens tend to have a much attenuated view of the bipolarity in the world order and its connection to political identity. If anything, Latin American citizens seem to regard the world in a monopolar, US-centric, way.

6 These countries are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic.

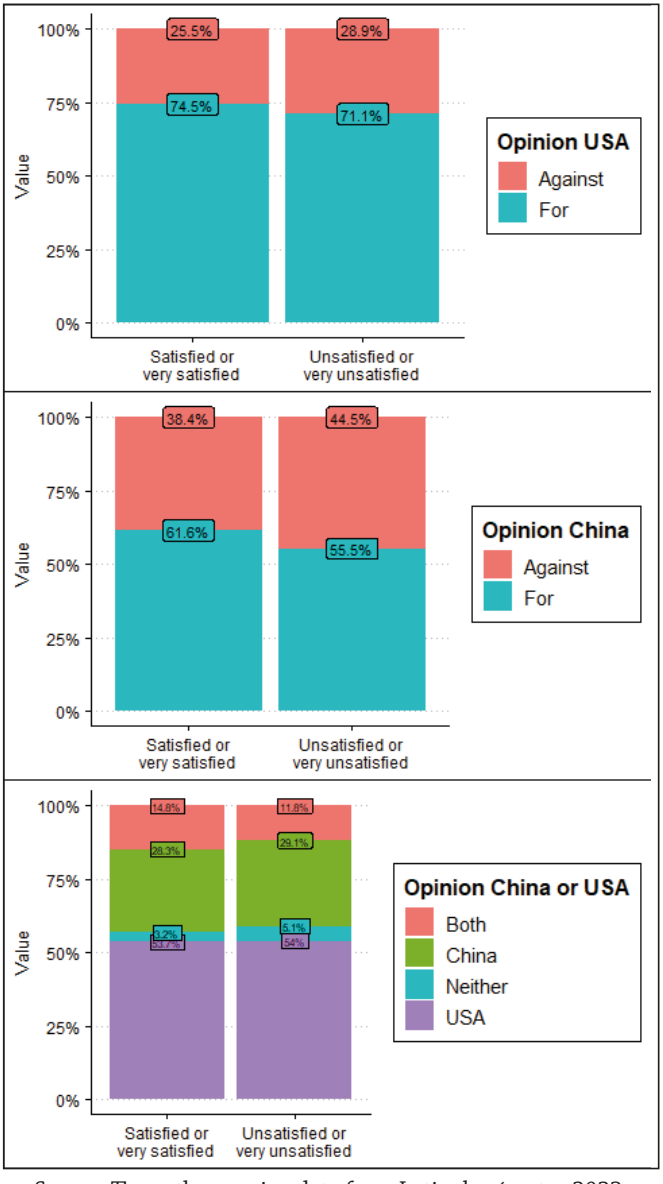
Figure 4 – Public opinion on the USA (top) and China (middle), and forced choice between the two (bottom), by left-right positions



Source: The authors, using data from Latinobarómetro 2023.

In Figure 5, we replicate our previous analysis with democratic satisfaction. In this case, the lack of polarization is even more noticeable. Unlike the case of elites, in this figure, we see little evidence of different views on China depending on levels of democratic satisfaction. We see that favourability towards both China and the United States is slightly lower among citizens who are unsatisfied with democracy. However, once forced to choose between China and the United States, the difference between satisfied and unsatisfied citizens mostly disappears.

Figure 5 – Public opinion on the USA (top), China (middle), and forced choice between the two (bottom), democratic satisfaction

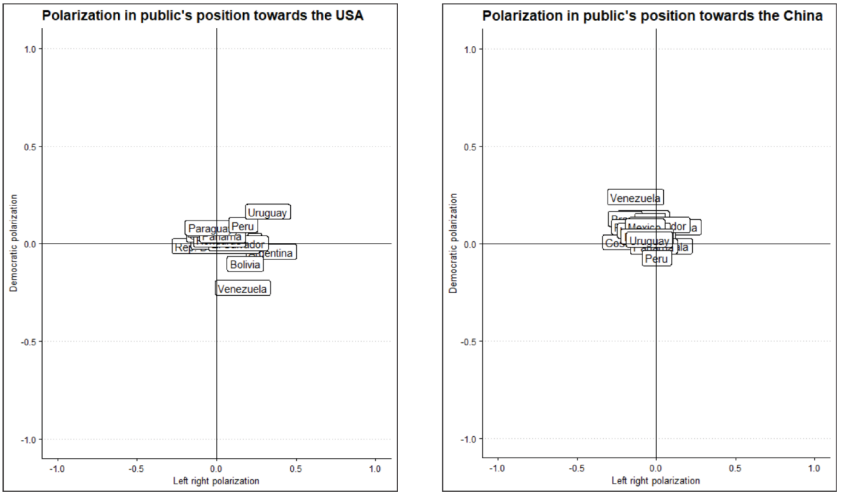


Source: The authors, using data from Latinobarómetro 2023.

When we analyse the forced-choice indicator (between China and the United States) by country in Figure 13, in the appendix, we observe a similar pattern, with low levels of left-right polarization in each country. Regarding democratic satisfaction, Figure 14 in the appendix indicates that across different countries, democratic satisfaction is generally not strongly associated with international relations preferences, with the possible exception of Venezuela, where a similar pattern is observed, as in the elite analysis.

We now replicate the analysis we carried out to represent elites' polarization of public opinion across 17 countries for which data are available in the *Latinobarómetro*. Figure 6 illustrates the results of this analysis for the USA and China. The most noticeable thing is how, compared to elites, public opinion is much less polarized about both the United States and China. Almost all countries are concentrated around the intersection of the two axes. In both cases, Venezuela stands out as the exception, where opinions are somewhat polarized, especially along the democratic satisfaction axis. There is also some polarization along the left-right axis in Uruguay and Argentina, where favourability toward the United States is tilted towards the right. In Uruguay, there is also some minor polarization along the democratic satisfaction axis, with citizens being slightly more satisfied with democracy and more favourable towards the United States. In other words, our analysis suggests that if there is any polarization in foreign affairs, it is mostly among political elites, with the possible exception of Venezuela.

Figure 6 – Public opinion polarization in 17 countries. Favourability differences for the USA (left) and China (right)



Source: The authors, using data from Latinobarómetro 2023.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we provide a brief analysis of public opinions and the views of the political elite in seven Latin American countries, as well as public opinions in 10 additional Latin American countries. We find that, at least until 2023, Latin American public opinion is not to blame for the lack of coordination in democracy-promoting diplomacy in the region.

Across the left-right spectrum and in terms of satisfaction with democracy, we find that elites are considerably more polarized than the citizens of their countries when it comes to international relations, which might push Latin American foreign policy doctrines to display erratic behaviour. This phenomenon might also explain a lack of coordination when aiming to defend democratic values, via coherent foreign affairs policies. Furthermore, we find evidence suggesting that polarization on the international relations dimension in cases such as Venezuela and, to a lesser degree, El Salvador is likely the result of internal polarization between governments and oppositions, including satisfaction with democracy.

In our view, this could imply that one way to combat democratic erosion is to establish a foreign affairs doctrine based on democratic values that, at the same time, empathizes with the most urgent concerns and priorities of citizens, which are commonly linked to economic and security demands.

Public opinion in Latin America does not seem to be polarized, or at least not as much as elite political opinion, but it is not indifferent. Latin American public opinion has its most immediate concerns rooted in pressing issues, such as organized crime, drug trafficking, neighbourhood security, economic security, and family security. Latin American progressivism must enhance its tools for addressing these concerns, avoiding the temptation of "Bukele-like" or "Maduro-like" responses and instead generating coordination initiatives that do not rely on the rigid institutional structure that characterized decades of failed regional integration. Current challenges require more flexible political initiatives that identify a common problem and build ad hoc integration from there.

Additionally, we find that, while there are some significant differences between countries, overall, until 2023, Latin American citizens consistently regarded some international relations more positively than others, with relatively positive views on the United States, even among the left-leaning citizens. Thus, the difference in opinions among left-wing parliamentarians and left-wing citizens regarding the United States is especially noticeable. We suspect that this configuration may have changed after Donald Trump arrived at the White House. Preliminary research is already indicating a deterioration in the Latin American public's view of both the United States' role in the region and its indicators of trust among the local elite (Ground News 2025). In any case, it is fair to note that this deterioration in Latin American public perception of the United States has been steadily evident since 2020, as many countries were primarily assisted by China rather than the United States during the pandemic (D'Sola 2021).

We observe at least three preliminary, concrete implications. First, if the United States were to abandon its status as the guarantor of the international liberal order, it would allow China's economic influence to translate into public support in some Latin American countries that have so far been polarized over China, both on the left-right spectrum and in

their views on democracy. Second, it could prompt Latin American countries to strengthen other strategic alliances. For example, the relationship with Europe could be seen as a way to defend multilateralism and the interests of small and medium-sized countries. However, considering that Europe is already preoccupied with the dramatic weakening of the historic Transatlantic Partnership between the United States and Western Europe, it is unlikely that the European Union will be able to substitute for the United States' role in the region. Finally, the United States' abandonment of Latin America could make the countries of our region more inclined to join platforms that openly seek to challenge the United States leadership in the world, as is the case with the BRICS, which has recently launched a major push to expand its membership to as many countries as possible (Stewart, Patrick, et al. 2025).

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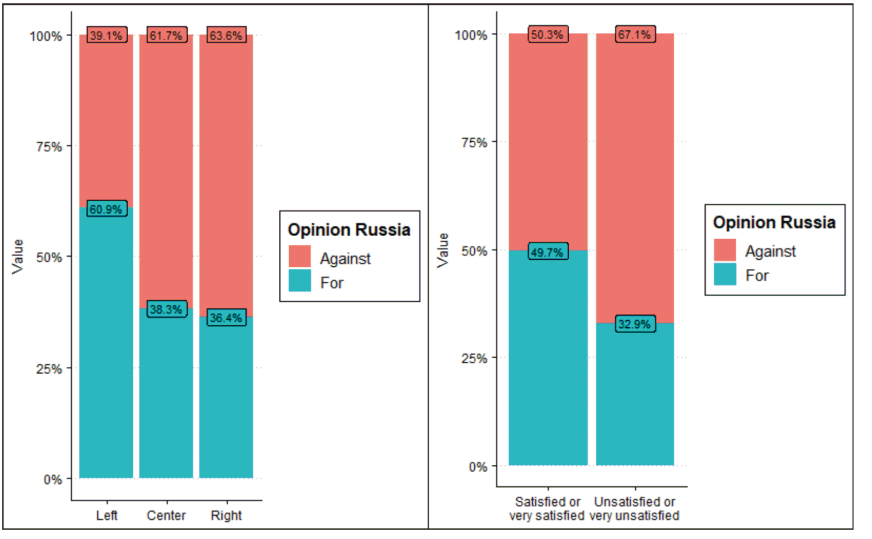
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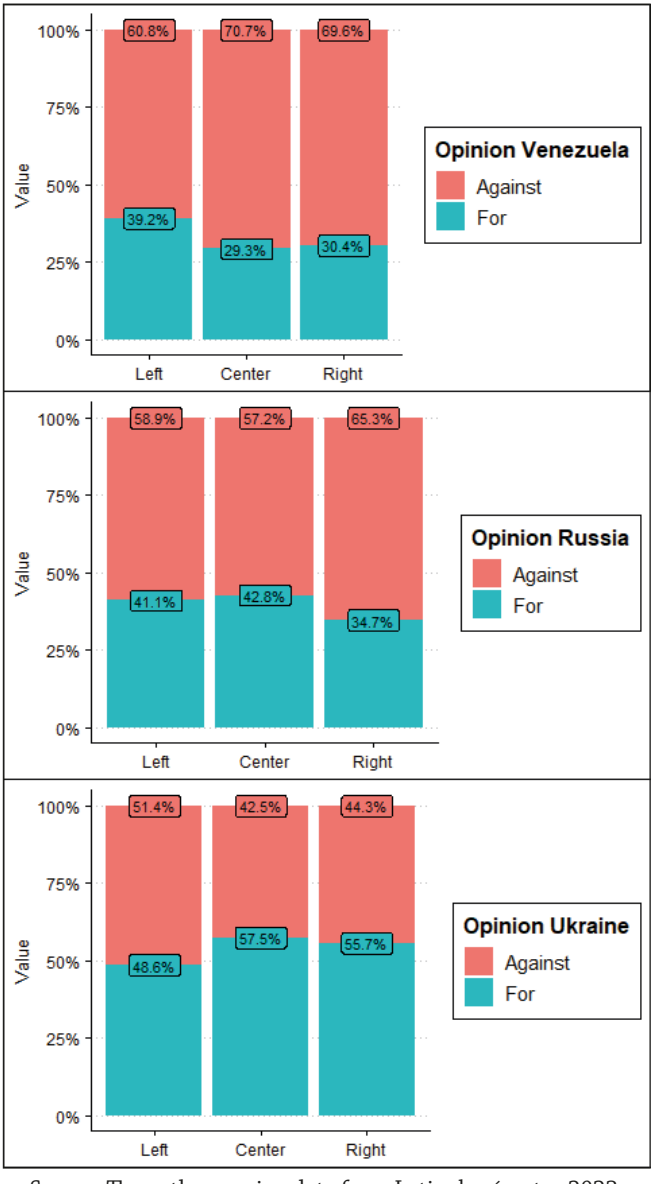
Appendix

Figure 7 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and Russia, by left-right positions (left) and by satisfaction with democracy (right)



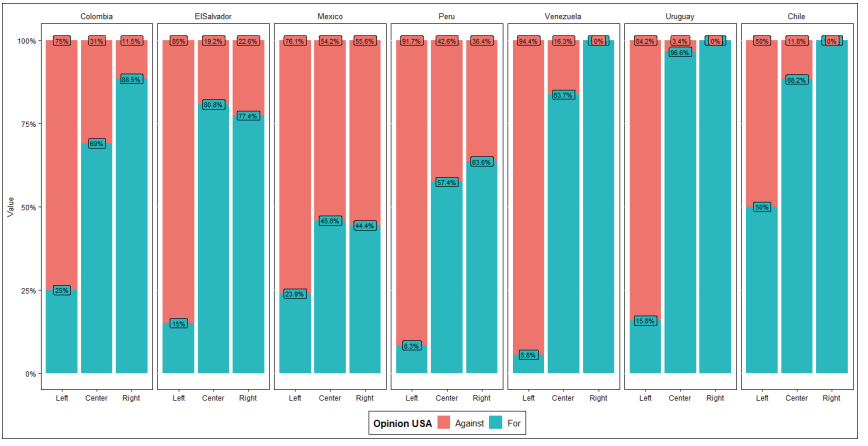
Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014-2022).

Figure 8 – Public opinion on Venezuela (top), Russia (middle), and Ukraine (bottom), left-right positioning



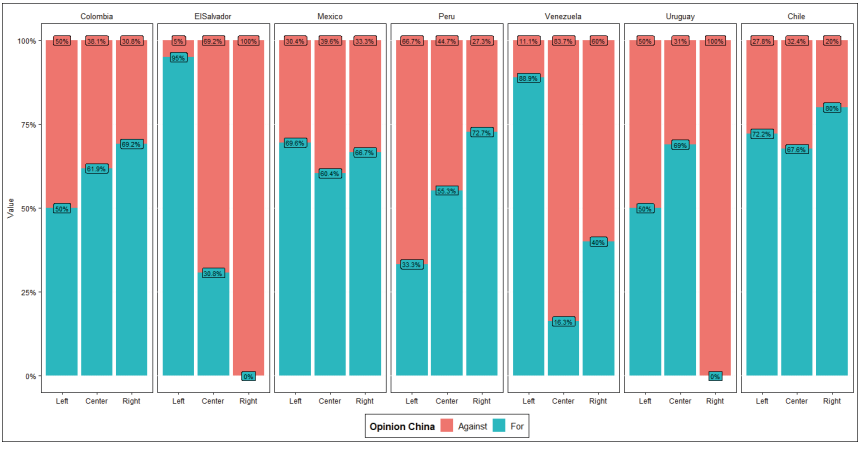
Source: The authors, using data from Latinobarómetro 2023.

Figure 9 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and the USA by country and left-right positions



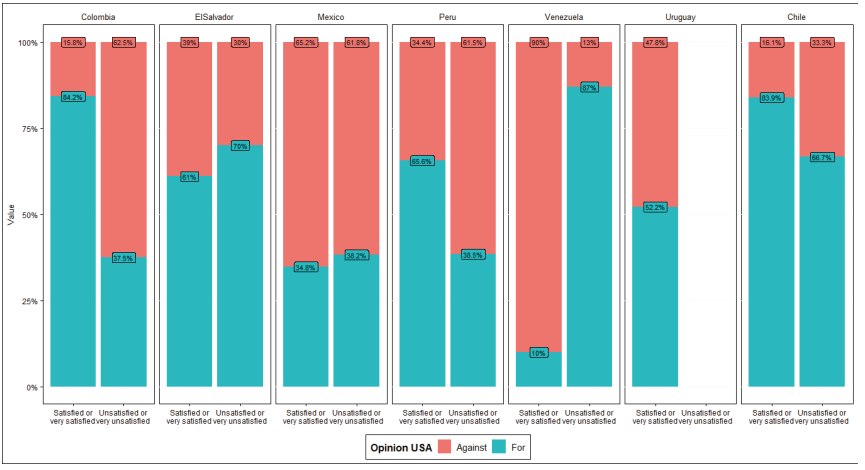
Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014-2022).

Figure 10 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and China by country and left-right positions



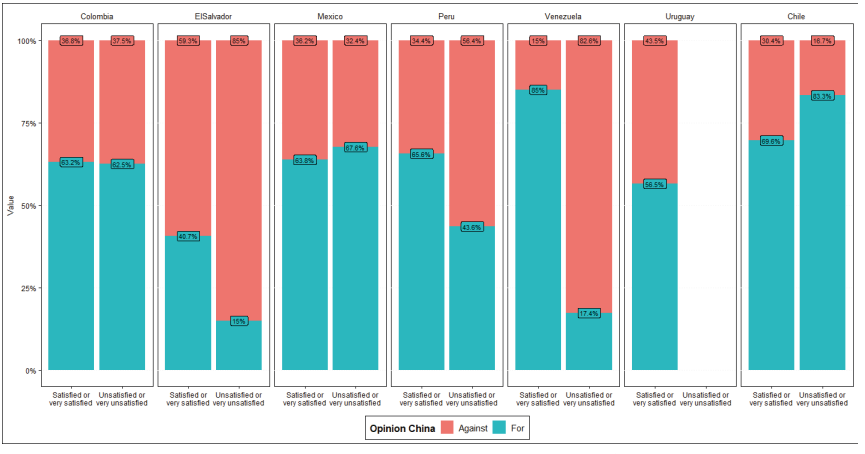
Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014-2022).

Figure 11 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and the USA by country and democratic satisfaction



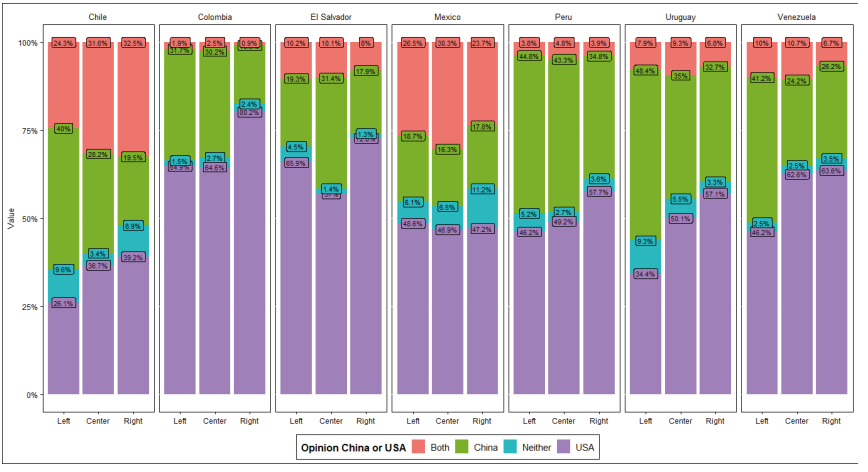
Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014-2022).

Figure 12 – Elite opinion on relations between the home country and China by country and satisfaction with democracy



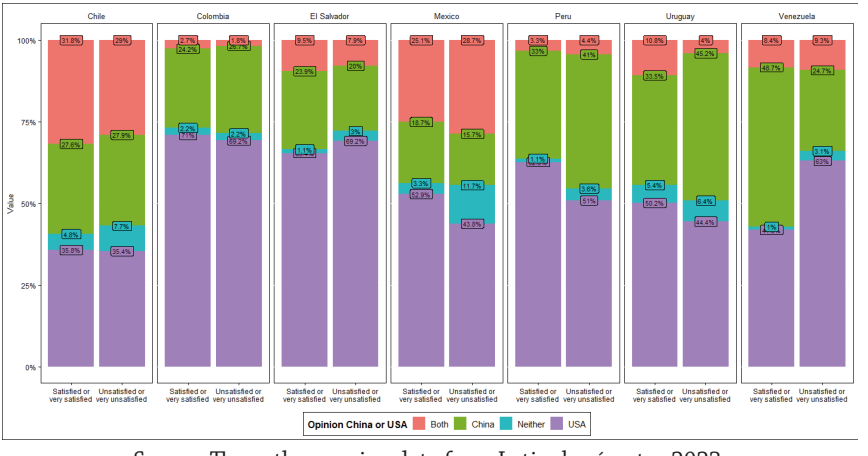
Source: The authors, using data from PELA-USAL (2014-2022).

Figure 13 – Public opinion by country on the forced choice between China and the USA, by left-right positions



Source: The authors, using data from Latinobarómetro 2023.

Figure 14 – Public opinion by country on the forced choice between China and the USA, by democratic satisfaction



Source: The authors, using data from Latinobarómetro 2023.

Democratic Resilience: A Comparative Analysis of Institutional Responses to Violent Attacks on Democracy in the USA and Brazil

Carlos da Fonseca[1]
Maria Victoria Hernandez Lerner[2]

I. Introduction

In recent years, conservative forces of an anti-democratic nature have gained significant momentum worldwide. As we write these lines, U.S. President Donald Trump, at the start of his second term, is testing the limits of his power, in a process that undeniably points to the construction of a populist and authoritarian political project, unprecedented in recent U.S. history. Brazil has also been hit by this conservative wave, having elected the far-right congressman Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018, for a mandate that emulated Trump's first four years as much as possible.

The Trumpist influence on Bolsonaro's government became evident in the first days after the election, when the then president-elect received Trump's National Security Advisor, John Bolton, to whom he gave a military salute, something of significance coming from a politician who always marketed himself as a military man. This influence continued

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2 Criminal and Human Rights lawyer. She holds a Master's degree in Law from the University of Brasília. She has served as Chief of Staff and Deputy Executive Secretary at the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, as well as Deputy Head of the Special Advisory Office at the Secretariat of Institutional Relations of the Presidency of the Republic. She currently serves as an advisor in the ministerial office of the Office of the Comptroller General.

throughout his term, ranging from the aggressive communication style to the authoritarian and chaotic nature of governing.

Even in their final stages, the governments of Bolsonaro and Trump remained in tune, with Bolsonaro emulating Trump's tactics in undermining the electoral system that brought him to power. Both leaders also rejected the outcomes of their failed re-election bids and conspired to overturn those results. This shared path led to significant unrest, with their supporters' launching insurrections at key governmental sites—Trump's supporters storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and Bolsonaro's supporters attacking the three branches of government on January 8, 2023.

Despite these similarities, Trump and Bolsonaro's current situations are starkly different. At the start of the year, Trump was preparing for a return to the White House, while Bolsonaro was focused on constructing his legal defence to avoid imprisonment. While doing that, he has leaned on his alliance with Trump, perceiving him as a beacon of hope amid his political struggles. This chapter will delve into this paradox and explore its underlying reasons.

The Same Authoritarian Populism, with Different Results

The American political system, celebrated for its rules and institutions that have inspired numerous democracies worldwide, including Brazil, has proven surprisingly ineffective in dealing with Donald Trump's authoritarian outbursts. These inclinations were hinted at during his first term, culminating in an unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election results, which incited an attack on the Legislative Branch as it prepared to certify Joe Biden's victory.

Following his defeat, Trump faced an impeachment process in the House of Representatives, marking the second impeachment of his political career and the first ever for a former president in American history[3]. In the ensuing months, his actions were scrutinized by a Congressional Committee, leading to numerous investigations and criminal charges. The

3 In February 2021, the impeachment process was effectively halted in the Senate, as it did not achieve the required two-thirds majority, with a final vote tally of 57 in favor and 43 against.

so-called January 6th Committee,[4] led by the Democratic Party, reviewed over 1 million documents and interviewed more than 1,000 witnesses, including several of Trump's former aides. Many of these witnesses confirmed Trump's refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election, his attempts to propagate false claims of widespread electoral fraud, his pressure on electoral authorities in various states (particularly Georgia) to change the election outcomes, and his involvement in the events of January 6, 2021.

Two of Trump's former aides, Peter Navarro and Steve Bannon, were convicted of contempt of Congress for their refusal to testify and received four-month prison sentences. The January 6th Committee also issued a subpoena for Trump's testimony, labeling him as "the center of the first and only effort by a U.S. president to overturn an election and obstruct the peaceful transition of power." However, Trump did not testify and instead filed a lawsuit against the Committee.

In December 2022, the Committee voted unanimously to refer the case against Trump and his lawyer, John Eastman, to the U.S. Department of Justice for prosecution. It also recommended that Trump be charged with obstruction of an official proceeding; conspiracy to defraud the United States; making false statements; and attempts "to incite", "to assist" or "to support" an insurrection. In parallel, it published its final report, consisting of 845 pages, and the transcript of the testimonies.

In the following months, Trump was prosecuted for numerous crimes, including "Attempting to overturn the 2020 U.S. presidential election"; "Racketeering to overturn the 2020 U.S. presidential election in Georgia"; and "Mishandling of national security documents" for the unauthorized possession of secret documents, carelessly stored in boxes at his Mar-a-Lago residence. At the same time, he was convicted in a criminal case for falsifying business records, also a historic first for a former president. His social media profiles were also blocked for casting doubt on the election results.

In November 2022, during the Congressional midterm elections, the Democrats braced for a potential "red wave," predicting significant victories

4 "United States House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol."

for the Republican Party in both Houses. All 435 House seats and 35 of the 100 Senate seats were at stake, with both chambers currently under Democratic control. Ultimately, the Democrats managed to mitigate the anticipated wave, increasing their Senate majority while narrowly losing control of the House. This unfavourable outcome for Republicans was largely attributed to voter rejection of candidates endorsed by Trump.

After all these setbacks, many analysts viewed Trump's political future as precarious. Nevertheless, the former president, who never accepted his 2020 election loss and refused to attend Joe Biden's inauguration, maintained his grip on the Republican Party. Even after the disappointing results of the 2022 elections, he remained politically active, launching his own social network (Truth Social) and using it to campaign for his candidacy in the 2024 elections.

In 2023, as the Republican presidential primaries approached, Trump had regained significant popularity among conservative voters, consistently leading opinion polls among Republican candidates. By the end of the primaries, which took place between January and June 2024, Trump secured the nomination with the backing of 76% of the party's delegates. A few months later, he defeated the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris, winning a non-consecutive second presidential term and becoming the second president in American history to do so, following Grover Cleveland at the end of the 19th century.

In the meantime, the trajectory of Jair Bolsonaro took a very different turn. In June 2023, the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) rendered him ineligible for eight years, leading to a decline in his political influence. Between February 2024 and April 2025, Bolsonaro organized five public events aimed at mobilizing support for an amnesty for those convicted of the January 8, 2023, attacks. While these demonstrations initially drew large crowds, attendance dwindled significantly, with his fourth event attracting less than 10% of the first's turnout.

Simultaneously, various investigations of both a legislative and judicial nature progressed against Bolsonaro and his political group. A Congressional Committee focused on the events of January 8, while the Federal Police conducted their own investigations. These efforts

culminated in a substantial inquiry that supported the Supreme Court's decision to indict Bolsonaro and several of his close allies for allegedly planning and attempting a coup d'état.

In recent months, although Bolsonaro still positions himself as the leading figure of the Brazilian right, his ineligibility and the likelihood of a conviction in the Supreme Court have rendered him an unfeasible candidate. This reality is reflected in the latest polls for the 2026 elections, which indicate that while he remains tied in voting intentions with current president Lula, he is also tied with other right-wing figures, including some whom he previously supported and who are now seeking his endorsement (Brasil de Fato 2025).

Given the current situation, Bolsonaro's political path may require him to support one of those candidates, hoping for their victory in the 2026 elections. If successful, he could then negotiate a presidential pardon for himself. However, this would depend on him accepting that he will not be able to run in the upcoming year—a step he has yet to take, likely fearing that doing so could diminish the political capital he still holds.

II. Testing the System: Donald Trump and Institutional Resilience in the U.S.

Donald Trump stands out as one of the most unconventional politicians in recent American history, and arguably one of the most successful. His journey from real estate and casinos to television paved the way for his entrance into politics as an outsider. However, a greater challenge than assuming this outsider persona has been his ability to maintain that stance while simultaneously gaining influence within the traditional party he ultimately came to represent.

In the nearly 15 years since he launched his political career, with a surprising speech at the 2011 "Conservative Political Action Conference," where he boldly criticized American involvement in the Iraq War, Trump accomplished a remarkable transformation. Not only did he carve out a niche for himself, but he also reshaped the party in his image, turning the Republicans, a political faction known for its conservative sobriety, led by East Coast elites and influenced by thinkers like Edmund Burke,

Roger Scruton, and Russell Kirk,[5] into a radical right-wing party with clear populist tendencies.

The most surprising aspect of Trump's appropriation of the GOP is that it persisted even after his first tumultuous term as president—one marked by many scandals, and which concluded in an unprecedented manner by American standards, with the defeated incumbent refusing to accept his defeat, instead encouraging an attempt at popular insurrection.

This behaviour added to the many unique traits that define Trump's career as an "extraordinary" politician, often in a negative sense. Notably, Trump introduced a routine of litigation into his political life, a habit that began during his time as a businessman. From 1973 to 2016, the year he first took office, Trump and his businesses were involved in over 4,000 legal cases, encompassing both lawsuits he initiated and those brought against him. The extensive inventory of these lawsuits is substantial enough to warrant a Wikipedia entry titled "Personal and business legal affairs of Donald Trump" (Wikimedia Foundation 2016), one that could easily serve as a textbook on criminal law. Some of these legal challenges have persisted beyond his first term in office, while others have emerged since 2020. The latter group was recently addressed in a detailed "guide" published by *The Atlantic* magazine (Graham 2025).

From this perspective, one of Donald Trump's most significant traits is his ability not only to survive but also to flourish during times of crisis, facing circumstances that would likely end the careers of less resilient politicians. Several factors contribute to this remarkable resilience:

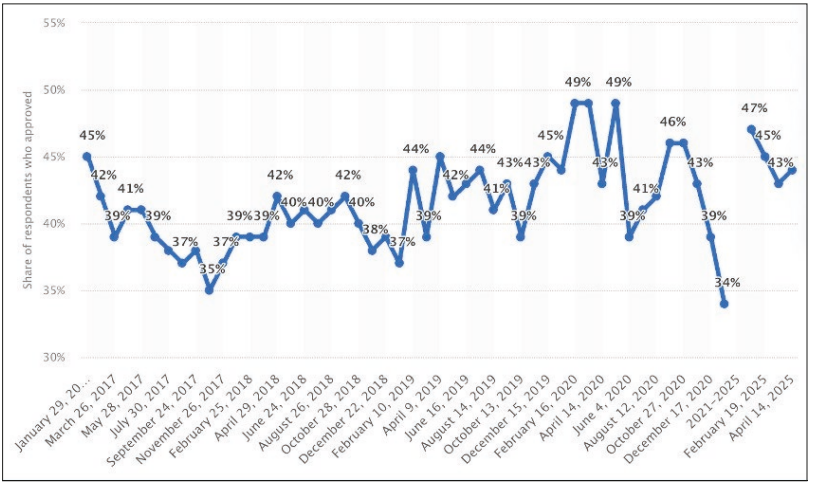
Trump's talent for communication is one of his most significant assets. He possesses the ability to connect directly with voters, a hallmark of populist leaders. This talent is further enhanced by the vast financial resources at his disposal, enabling him to establish his own social network after being banned from Twitter, where he had amassed nearly 89 million followers.

5 Founded in 1854, the Republican Party earned the nickname "Grand Old Party" (GOP) following the Civil War, during which it aligned with Abraham Lincoln and the Union against the Confederate Democrats. This nickname was inspired by the term "Grand Old Man," which referred to William Gladstone, who served as Prime Minister four times between 1868 and 1894 as a member of the Conservative Party (formerly the Whig Party). The use of the acronym GOP continues today, reflecting the party's historical ties to the British Conservative Party.

The propensity to spread false narratives and stick to them at any cost is another critical factor in Trump's approach. As reported by The New York Times, Trump "started his political career by stoking the lie that President Obama was not born in the United States. By 2024, he complained, falsely, that noncitizens would vote in the November election and throw the result to Democrats. He [also] declared on a debate stage that immigrants in Ohio were eating people's pets." After the 2020 presidential election, he spent years insisting, without proof, that the result had been rigged. According to *The New York Times*, this fiction "gave his supporters a grievance to rally around and insulated him from having to reckon with his electoral vulnerabilities or admit defeat" (Bigdood 2025).[6]

Maintaining High Approval Ratings: The sustained popularity of Donald Trump can be attributed to some of the factors previously discussed, which have enabled him to maintain considerable support even in the face of significant challenges. For example, following the January 6 Capitol attack, an Ipsos survey conducted on January 15, 2021, revealed that he still commanded a 34% approval rating among participants.

Image 1 – Donald Trump's Approval Rating (2017–2025)



Source: Statista 2026. https://www.statista.com/statistics/666113/approval-rate-of-donald-trump-for-the-presidential-job/.

6 Jess Bidgood. "How Do You Silence a Conspiracy Theory?" *The New York Times*, July 14, 2025: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/14/us/politics/conspiracy-epstein-files-trump.html.

However, acknowledging Trump's political attributes does not entirely explain his capacity to flourish in the post-2020 political landscape, particularly in comparison to Jair Bolsonaro's circumstances following his electoral defeat in 2022. To understand Trump's resilience, one must also consider the limitations inherent in the American political system and the Republican Party's challenges in effectively managing or constraining Trump's influence when necessary. Notably, some of these factors include:

The constraints of bipartisanship within the American political system present significant challenges in establishing the qualified majorities in Congress necessary for deliberation on critical issues. In the aftermath of the 2020 elections, despite the Republicans losing the presidency and the majority in the House of Representatives, they managed to retain control of the Senate. This situation ultimately hindered the progression of the second impeachment process against Trump following the events of January 6, 2021.

The Limitations of the American Electoral System: The decentralized nature of the American electoral system, governed by state authorities, lacks a national electoral court akin to Brazil's TSE. This absence has obstructed any potential processes that could render Trump ineligible, contrasting with Bolsonaro's circumstances. Furthermore, the U.S. electoral framework does not incorporate a legal provision akin to Brazil's "Clean Record Law" (*Lei da Ficha Limpa*). Under current American law, Trump could pursue a presidential candidacy even if convicted and incarcerated, and, if elected, he would have the authority to issue himself a presidential pardon.

The conservative majority of the Supreme Court has been a defining feature of the American judiciary since the appointment of Justice John Roberts in 2005. This majority has led to judicial interpretations of constitutional provisions that tend to favor conservative politicians and promote conservative agendas. A significant development in this regard occurred in July 2024, when the Court affirmed Trump's immunity for actions classified as "official," which encompassed measures he undertook while serving as president. This ruling effectively precluded any legal actions against him concerning attempts to coerce the Department of Justice to sway the results of the 2020 elections.

The Decline in Popular Support for Republican Presidential Candidates: In recent years, the Republican Party has increasingly relied on the peculiarities of American electoral law to win presidential elections. The Electoral College system, where delegates are selected by a "winner takes all" rule in each state,[7] enables a candidate to secure the presidency even without a majority of the popular vote. Historically, the GOP enjoyed significant political hegemony during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, both of whom won in the Electoral College and the popular vote. Since then, the only time a Republican candidate has won the popular vote was in 2004, when George W. Bush received 50.7% of the popular vote and 53.16% of the electoral college vote. In the 2024 election, Trump won in both categories but did not achieve an absolute majority of the popular vote, garnering 49.8% compared to Kamala Harris's 48.32%.

Table 1 – US Presidential Elections (1980–2024): Popular Vote and Electoral College

Year	Winning Candidate	Party	Electoral College (Number of votes and % of total)[8]		Popular Vote (Number of votes in millions and margin %)	
1980	Ronald Reagan	Republican	489	90,8%	43.9	9,7%
1984	Ronald Reagan	Republican	525	97,5%	54.4	18,2%
1988	G. H.W. Bush	Republican	426	79,1%	48.8	7,7%
1992	Bill Clinton	Democrat	370	68,7%	44.9	5,5%
1996	Bill Clinton	Democrat	379	70,4%	47.4	8,5%
2000	G.W. Bush	Republican	271	50,4%	50.4	–0,5%
2004	G.W. Bush		286	53,1%	62.0	2,4%
2008	Barack Obama	Democrat	365	67,8%	69,4	7,2%
2012	Barack Obama	Democrat	332	61,7%	65,9	3,8%
2016	Donald Trump	Republican	304	56,5%	62,9	–2,0%
2020	Joe Biden[9]	Democrat	306	56,8%	81.2	4,4%
2024	Donald Trump	Republican	312	57,9%	77.3	1,4%

Source: Compiled by the authors with information from Britannica 2011.

7 With the exception of Maine and Nebraska.

8 The total number of delegates in the American Electoral College has been 538 since the 1964 elections, won by Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson.

9 The 2020 and 2024 elections had the highest voter turnout since 1908, with total popular votes reaching 81.2 million and 77.3 million, respectively. Analysts attribute this remarkable turnout to the highly polarized political climate surrounding these two elections.

The scenario presented indicates that the last significant Republican popular leader was Ronald Reagan. In the 1984 elections, he secured an extraordinary 97.5% of the Electoral College and maintained a lead of nearly 20 percentage points in the popular vote against the Democratic candidate, Walter Mondale. This victory represented the largest margin in the Electoral College since Richard Nixon's triumph in 1972 and ranks as the third-largest for a Republican candidate since 1920, when Warren Harding was elected.

In recent years, Donald Trump has sought to embody the role of conservative popular leader that Ronald Reagan once held, even adopting his slogan "Make America Great Again."[10] The lack of other politicians with similar popular appeal within the conservative sphere contributes to the Republicans' reliance on Trump. This dependence results in the party's support for his misdeeds and a tolerance for his numerous flaws, excesses, and ongoing legal issues. Moreover, this situation raises significant concerns regarding the potential for Trump to cultivate an authoritarian political project, which could ultimately jeopardize the U.S. democratic system, which is set to commemorate its 250th anniversary in 2026.

III. Jair Bolsonaro and the Responsiveness of Brazilian Institutions

The rise of the far right in Brazil can be traced back to the June 2013 protests, which began as opposition to public transportation fare increases but quickly evolved into demonstrations with varied agendas, anti-political sentiments, and a strong moralizing tone. The lack of clear leadership and the expulsion of organized social movements fostered a cycle of widespread discontent, exacerbated by police repression and the radicalization of the protests.

This wave of dissatisfaction primarily targeted the Workers' Party (PT), reviving anti-PT sentiments that had intensified following the "Mensalão" scandal.[11] Even though the PT secured victory in the 2014 elections, the

10 The slogan "Let's make America great again" was used by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential campaign. Trump started using it in November 2012, the day after Barack Obama was re-elected. At the time, he said he was unaware of Reagan's use of it.

11 *Mensalão* was a vote-buying scandal that posed a significant threat to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government in 2005.

opposition party PSDB's refusal to accept the outcome and its questioning of the security of voting machines signalled a troubling trend of democratic destabilization. These same allegations were subsequently echoed by far-right factions.

The launch of Operation Lava Jato in 2014 accelerated the political turmoil in Brazil. What began as an anti-corruption investigation quickly evolved into a political-media phenomenon characterized by procedural abuses, selectivity, and violations of legal guarantees. Lava Jato fostered an anti-political culture and significantly undermined trust in institutions, particularly by targeting progressive figures like former president Lula. The actions of then-judge Sérgio Moro, who was later appointed Minister of Justice by Jair Bolsonaro, illustrate the troubling intersection of the judiciary and the political agenda of the new right.

The impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 marked a significant rupture in Brazilian politics. Based on tenuous accusations of lack of fiscal responsibility, the impeachment process was spearheaded by a discredited Congress and perceived by many segments of society as a parliamentary coup, representing a critical authoritarian turning point in the democratic regime.

Lula's imprisonment in 2018, resulting from a biased and politically motivated trial, effectively barred his candidacy at a time when he was leading in the polls, facilitating Jair Bolsonaro's election. This event marked the culmination of a cycle that began in 2013, characterized by a series of institutionally sanctioned yet politically biased occurrences that paved the way for an authoritarian project masked as legalism. This process was driven by a moralizing discourse and the erosion of democratic political foundations.

Rise and Fall of Jair Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro's rapid ascent to the presidency in 2018 must be viewed as a direct consequence of the exhaustion of political mediation institutions and the complicity of various sectors, including the Judiciary, media, business community, and Armed Forces. Throughout his presidency, he employed a strategy characterized by ongoing confrontations with

other branches of government, mobilization of his base through social media, systematic disinformation, and persistent attacks on the electoral system. This same approach was evident during his unsuccessful re-election campaign in 2022. Despite being formally elected by popular vote, Bolsonaro's administration operated within a framework of continuous disruption, eroding democratic norms and intentionally creating tension with constitutional boundaries. Similar to other modern authoritarian regimes, "Bolsonarism" preserved institutional appearances while effectively undermining conditions for fair political competition.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's victory in the 2022 presidential elections represented not merely a shift in power but a significant political event aimed at democratic preservation. His return to power followed 580 days of unjust imprisonment and an electoral campaign fraught with violence, disinformation, and a state apparatus favouring his opponent. This victory served both as a historical reparation and a reaffirmation of the ballot box as the sovereign instrument of democracy. Lula was elected by a diverse coalition that transcended traditional leftist boundaries, uniting liberal, democratic conservative, and social movement sectors around a shared objective: to thwart the continuation of an authoritarian agenda.

Lula's victory was not just about reinstating classic "Lulism"; it focused on preventing the collapse of Brazil's democratic regime. In this context, the election served as a plebiscite on the institutional survival of the country. Bolsonaro's refusal to publicly acknowledge his defeat, his absence from the inauguration ceremony, and his passive response to the coup-attempting uprising on January 8, 2023, underscore that, for him and his supporters, democracy was viewed as a means to an end rather than an intrinsic value.

Bolsonaro's downfall—cemented by his ineligibility in 2023 and ongoing criminal investigations—did not signify the end of the far right. This faction remains active, adapting to new conditions, reorganizing under new leadership, and focusing on undermining Lula's government. Nevertheless, the outcome of the 2022 elections represented a significant turning point: for the first time since 2013, democratic forces achieved an electoral, symbolic, and institutional victory over an authoritarian

project. They accomplished this through voting, coordinated institutional efforts, and active engagement from civil society.

Lula's election marked the beginning of a new political cycle and introduced the complex task of restoring trust in the democratic system without repeating past mistakes. Despite his defeat, "Bolsonarism" continues to pose a latent threat. The 2022 victory should be viewed as a hard-won pause rather than a definitive end. The future of Brazilian democracy hinges on how this pause is utilized: whether it will lead to meaningful structural reforms and increased political inclusion or whether it will fall into the pattern of superficial reconciliations that have historically preceded new crises.

January 8, 2023

The attacks on January 8, 2023, represented an attempted coup d'état in Brazil, orchestrated by supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro, who were unhappy with his defeat in the 2022 elections. On that Sunday afternoon, thousands of protesters, many of whom had camped for weeks outside Army barracks, marched to the Praça dos Três Poderes in Brasília and invaded the National Congress, the Supreme Court (STF), and the Palácio do Planalto, the seat of the presidency.

The assault was characterized by violence, vandalism, and the systematic destruction of public property, including artworks, historical furniture, and official documents. The symbolic and political aim of this attack was clearly to create institutional chaos, incite military intervention, and hinder the consolidation of the newly elected government, which had just taken office a week prior.

The Brazilian institutional response to the attacks was marked by a swift, coordinated, and emphatic reaction from all three branches of government, along with significant involvement from civil society. This response stands in stark contrast to the inadequate reaction of American institutions to Donald Trump's actions and the January 6, 2021, attacks. These were some of the key factors contributing to Brazilian democratic resilience:

Executive Power

On the day of the attacks, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had just taken office. In immediate response to the violence, he decreed a federal intervention in the security of the Federal District, suspending the local governor's powers and appointing an intervener directly answerable to the presidency. This decisive action, implemented on the same day as the events, facilitated the restoration of control through the National Force and the Federal Police. Moreover, unlike the response in the United States under Trump, the Brazilian president publicly condemned the attacks, reaffirming his commitment to democratic order and demanding accountability for those responsible.

Judicial Power

The Supreme Court (STF) and the Federal Electoral Court (TSE) played a crucial role in countering the authoritarian escalation in Brazil. During Bolsonaro's presidency, the STF took significant steps to address threats to the electoral process and the justice system, particularly through decisive actions by Justice Alexandre de Moraes. Following the attacks, the STF expedited existing inquiries, ordered the preventive arrests of financiers and organizers, and enhanced collaboration with the Federal Police, which conducted extensive operations nationwide. The TSE's actions culminated in declaring Jair Bolsonaro ineligible due to political abuse of power and misuse of communication channels, notably for unfounded claims against the electoral system. The enforcement of the "Clean Record Law" was critical in blocking his immediate return to the presidential race. This situation sharply contrasts with the American system, which allowed Donald Trump to continue his presidential campaign despite facing numerous lawsuits and having been convicted in at least one case.

Legislative Power

The National Congress played an ambivalent yet significant role in the aftermath of the attacks. Initially facing resistance, the establishment of an Inquiry Commission, composed of both representatives and senators, was ultimately approved. This commission gathered testimonies from

military personnel, civilians, financiers, and logistical operators involved in the coup attempt, which aided in consolidating evidence and moving forward with accusations. Centrists and left-wing congressmen took the initiative in defending institutions and condemning the coup attempt, while segments of the traditional right fluctuated between strategic silence and attempts to downplay the severity of the attacks. However, attempts at amnesty for those involved and proposals to revise the judiciary's actions did not gain traction, indicating a notable institutional containment of the far right.

Civil Society

Brazilian civil society played a pivotal role in upholding constitutional order following the attacks. Organizations such as the OAB (Brazilian Bar Association), CNBB (National Conference of Bishops of Brazil), ABI (Brazilian Press Association), social movements, unions, and universities issued public statements, participated in pro-democracy demonstrations, and advocated for a comprehensive investigation into the events. Additionally, the mainstream media, after years of ambiguous coverage regarding Bolsonaro's rhetoric, took a more assertive stance in denouncing the coup attempt and its financiers.

Furthermore, significant sectors of the Brazilian business community, which had shown support for "Bolsonarism" in previous elections, began to distance themselves from the former president following the severity of the attacks. Unlike in the U.S., where Trump retains a mobilized base and a media ecosystem that bolsters his narrative, the Brazilian far right has seen a gradual decline after the failed insurrection, evident in the decreasing attendance at subsequent events organized by Bolsonaro.

Developments from the Brazilian Institutional Responses

The contrast between the political trajectories of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness in curbing authoritarian tendencies. While both leaders initially employed similar strategies of electoral contestation and insurrectionary mobilization, Brazil's institutions demonstrated a capacity to effectively block the far

right's attempts at democratic subversion. This response has involved a convergence of government branches and active civil society engagement, resulting in Bolsonaro's ineligibility, the initiation of multiple criminal investigations, and a gradual demobilization of his support base. This coordinated effort has not been the result of any single institution but rather a collaborative reaction involving the judiciary, the newly inaugurated executive branch, the legislature, the press, social movements, and even segments of the business community.

Bolsonaro, who left Brazil before his successor's inauguration, initially employed a strategy of calculated retreat, avoiding the public eye in the days surrounding the January 8 attacks. As investigations by the Federal Police and the Supreme Court progressed, and in light of the backlash against the anti-democratic actions, his denialist rhetoric began to shift towards more moderate gestures, including public apologies and attempts at repositioning. His testimony to Justice Alexandre de Moraes later illustrated this change; instead of the confrontational stance his base anticipated, Bolsonaro exhibited a nearly embarrassing capitulation by acknowledging the legitimacy of the electoral process and refraining from directly challenging the STF. Analysts interpreted this shift as a strategic move for legal self-preservation.

This shift in Bolsonaro's posture, however, did not lead to a revival of his political prominence. Following the Federal Electoral Court's decision declaring him ineligible for eight years, his manoeuvring space diminished, even among his allies. His attempts to remain a popular leader—such as public demonstrations advocating for amnesty for those arrested on January 8—demonstrated waning momentum. Concurrently, other figures on the right began to fill the void left by his legal vulnerabilities, indicating that his remaining political capital may be gradually absorbed by a new generation of conservative leaders, many of whom were initially aligned with him but are now vying for his legacy.

The recent Brazilian experience can be seen as a testament to institutional resilience against authoritarian threats, particularly when contrasted with the surprising endurance of Trumpism in the United States. While Brazil has indeed experienced significant democratic erosion

over the past decade—starting with the 2013 protests, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the politicization of Operation Lava Jato, and the election of Bolsonaro—it is noteworthy that, unlike in the U.S., Brazilian institutions, though not without flaws, have managed to impose tangible limits on the drift toward authoritarianism.

However, it is premature to claim that these limits have consolidated into a new "minimum democratic standard." The system remains susceptible to illiberal outbursts, attempts at institutional capture, and a far right that, while seemingly in retreat, is still organized and present. The true test may arise during the 2026 elections: if a far-right candidate wins, it will be crucial to assess whether there will be, akin to Trump, an "authoritarian learning" that emerges from the failed experiences of 2023, which could mean a refinement of strategies aimed at institutional erosion, more cautious and less overt but equally perilous.

This hypothesis gains further credibility considering the strong symbolic and strategic alignment between Bolsonarism and Trumpism, both of which share similar methods, rhetoric, and references. If Trump's second term sees tangible progress in establishing a populist authoritarian regime, it could serve as a source of inspiration and legitimacy for analogous projects in democracies such as Brazil. From this perspective, maintaining institutional vigilance and encouraging democratic engagement will be crucial to prevent the country from descending into another cycle of instability and rupture.

IV. Trump 2.0 and the Rise of a "Competitive Authoritarian" Regime

In mid-June 2025, three events summarized the tumultuous political landscape in the United States. On June 12, Democratic Senator Alex Padilla was restrained and handcuffed by police while attempting to question Trump's Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristin Noem, during a press conference discussing the protests in Los Angeles and the involvement of the National Guard. The police justified their actions by claiming that Padilla had not identified himself (a claim that was categorically denied by television footage) labelling him a "threat" to the Secretary's security. Just three days later, a military parade in downtown Washington purportedly

celebrated the 250th anniversary of the American armed forces and, coincidentally, Trump's 79th birthday. Meanwhile, across various cities, millions protested against Trump's immigration policies and the overall brutality of his administration, brandishing signs that predominantly read "No kings." Given that the United States is approaching the 250th anniversary of its Independence—achieved during a war fought by these armed forces[12] to rid the country of its last monarch, British King George III—the coincidence of these events is striking.

Since its inception, Trump's second term has been characterized by a relentless and methodical effort to test the boundaries of presidential power, which many observers interpret as a precursor to an authoritarian agenda. This approach contrasts significantly with his first term, during which Trump, despite exhibiting authoritarian tendencies, lacked the experience and tools necessary to effectively pursue his objectives. In 2025, he returned to the White House prepared, accompanied exclusively by his most loyal advisors and armed with a strategic "roadmap" developed by prominent conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation, known as "Project 2025."

Presented in 2023, during the Republican primaries, the document revolves around a contentious interpretation of the "unitary executive" theory, which advocates for consolidating all executive power in the president's hands. Based on this principle, the project proposed a sweeping restructuring of the state, with significant implications for the existing constitutional order.

Among the proposed measures were replacing federal employees chosen through public tenders with individuals loyal to Trump, as well as politically manipulating strategic government agencies like the Department of Justice. Additionally, the plan called for dismantling key institutions,

12 The history of the United States Armed Forces began on June 14, 1775, with the establishment of the Continental Army, predating the Declaration of Independence and the formal founding of the United States. In close succession, the Second Continental Congress also created the Continental Navy on October 13, 1775, and the Continental Marines on November 10, 1775, to defend the nascent nation against the British Empire during the American Revolutionary War. These military forces were demobilized in 1784, following the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which concluded the Revolutionary War.

such as the Department of Education, which would undermine the implementation of essential public policies.[13]

From an economic perspective, the project proposed a significant reduction in taxes on the wealthy and big corporations, alongside cuts to social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. Additionally, it aimed to eliminate environmental regulations to benefit the fossil fuel industry and sought to undermine the autonomy of the National Institute of Health, reorienting the institute's scientific priorities and withdrawing funding for stem cell research.

In terms of civil and social rights, the Project proposed measures that included the elimination of legal protections against discrimination for LGBTQIA+ individuals and the revocation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. It also suggested that the Department of Justice should intervene in cases of alleged "racism against whites." Furthermore, the document proposed the criminalization of both sending and receiving medications related to abortion and birth control, as well as the elimination of coverage for emergency contraception, thereby demonstrating a clear alignment with the agendas of the fundamentalist Christian right.

Additionally, the "Project" proposed measures for the mass detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants, in clear violation of humanitarian principles and due process rights. In one of its most alarming recommendations, the document advocated for the involvement of the Armed Forces in internal policing operations, thereby undermining the longstanding principle of separation between military and civil authority.

At the time of its launch and throughout the 2024 electoral campaign, "Project 2025" ignited intense discussions and drew significant criticism from jurists, political scientists, and civil society representatives. Critics argued that the implementation of its proposals, which bore hallmarks of authoritarian regimes, would threaten the rule of law, the separation of powers, the secular nature of the state, fundamental civil liberties, and democracy itself. In response to the mounting pressure, Trump repeatedly denied familiarity with the document, labelling it as the work of "right-wing

13 The matter was brought before the Supreme Court, which ruled on July 14, 2025 to authorize the dismantling of the Department (Hurley 2025).

extremists" and dismissing its proposals as "absolutely ridiculous" (Hylliard and Marquez 2024; C-SPAN 2024; Kanno-Youngs and Green 2024). However, after being elected, he invited several of the Project authors to join his administration.[14]

Moreover, since assuming office, Trump has closely followed the roadmap established by Project 2025, which seemingly aims to establish a politically authoritarian regime. In the initial months of his administration, amidst a flurry of decrees, orders, and controversial statements touting the reconstruction of the U.S. international alliance system, Trump implemented measures designed to amplify presidential powers. This included dismantling the federal public apparatus by removing public servants he deemed not loyal enough and utilizing "purged" government agencies as political tools against his adversaries.

Shortly after assuming office, the president ordered the establishment of a task force within the Department of Justice specifically aimed at retaliating against his political adversaries. Known as the "Weaponization Working Group," this task force is led by Ed Martin, who previously served as a lawyer for several participants in the January 6 attacks.[15] In April, Trump directed the group to investigate Christopher Krebs, the former head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, who publicly disputed his claims of electoral fraud in 2020, and Miles Taylor, a former Department of Homeland Security official who authored a critical article about him in 2018. The following month, New York Attorney General Letitia James, who had sued Trump in 2022, was also targeted. By the end of July, the group continued to operate actively, with no clear definition of the boundaries regarding its actions directed at the president's opponents.

Simultaneously, Trump targeted major law firms working with the Democratic Party, prohibiting their hiring by government agencies and threatening to revoke government contracts with companies that engaged them. He also launched lawsuits against media outlets like ABC News, CBS News, Meta, Simon & Schuster, and The Des Moines Register.

14 Among them, Russell T. Vought was appointed by Trump to lead the Office of Management and Budget, while Stephen Miller was designated as his deputy chief of staff for policy. Additionally, Thomas Homan was appointed as Trump's "border czar."

15 More on the task force: Feuer, Goldman, and Thrush 2025; Leingang 2025.

Concurrently, he politicized the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), using it to investigate the funding and donation systems of PBS and NPR, as well as to address complaints regarding alleged "anti-Trump bias" from networks such as ABC, CBS, and NBC in relation to the 2020 fraud allegations.[16]

Donors to the Democratic Party also encountered retaliation under Trump's administration. In April, he directed the attorney general to investigate the fundraising practices of ActBlue, which serves as the primary donation platform for Democrats. Trump further targeted universities by instructing the Department of Education to investigate 52 institutions for implementing diversity programs and an additional 60 for allegations of antisemitism. He suspended hundreds of millions of dollars in previously approved funding for renowned institutions such as Brown, Columbia, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania, while also freezing $2.2 billion in grants for Harvard, threatening to withdraw its ability to accept foreign students and demanding that the IRS revoke its tax-exempt status.

Even Republican politicians were not immune to threats of violence for opposing Trump. Senator Thom Tillis from North Carolina was reportedly informed by the FBI about "credible" death threats against him should he vote against the nomination of Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defence.

The examples above were highlighted in a May 2025 article by Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Daniel Ziblatt. The authors contend that with these measures, Trump appears to have crossed the line that distinguishes democracies from autocratic regimes—and this at a faster pace than seen in autocratic leaders in countries such as Hungary, India, Turkey, or even Venezuela.

The authors were instrumental in developing and promoting the concept of "competitive authoritarianism" within the broader debate on authoritarianism following the Cold War. The concept was first introduced in an article by Levitsky and Way published in the *Journal of Democracy* (2002), in which they defined "competitive authoritarian regimes" as

16 Although these actions have a weak legal basis, the cost of suing a sitting president is high, especially for media conglomerates with federal regulatory interests.

systems that maintain formal democratic institutions, particularly elections, which play a role in the power struggle. At the same time, these institutions face systematic erosion by rulers who flout established rules and exploit power, thereby distorting their interactions with other political actors and heightening the costs associated with opposing the regime.

In 2018, Levitsky and Ziblatt further developed their analysis in the book *How Democracies Die*, dedicating a few chapters to Trump's first term. They argued that the U.S. had historically maintained its democracy due to a tradition of tolerance toward opposition and a voluntary "restraint in the exercise of power," which respected the "spirit" of existing norms. They pointed out that Trump's actions during the 2016 elections and the initial two years of his presidency indicated that, given the chance, he could deviate from this long-standing tradition.

In their 2025 article, the authors concluded that during Trump's second term, a definitive rupture occurred. The most visible indication of this shift is that, for numerous American citizens and organizations, the costs associated with opposing the government—manifested through investigations, lawsuits, audits, or even threats of violence—have risen significantly.

The article highlights that, in contrast to classical dictatorships, modern authoritarian regimes do not typically impose widespread repression from the outset. Instead, they adopt a selective and strategic approach to weaken, divide, and intimidate their opponents. By enforcing—or threatening punitive measures against—an expanding number of individuals and organizations deemed adversaries, these regimes gradually increase their power. This dynamic appears to be unfolding under Trump's administration, where journalists and lawyers risk being sued or facing federal investigations; university presidents must consider the implications of diversity programs; business leaders hesitate to donate to opposition candidates; and even elected officials refrain from criticizing the president due to fears of retaliation or violence from his supporters.

The most concerning conclusion drawn from the article's analysis is that this strategy of "selective repression" has proven to be effective. In recent weeks, several universities have cancelled diversity initiatives,

with some, such as Columbia, yielding to even more extensive demands.[17] Simultaneously, traditional donors have halted their public contributions to Democratic candidates, and media outlets have softened their coverage to avoid losing contracts or facing legal action. In the meantime, masked state agents are detaining immigrants on the streets of major cities and expelling many of them in clear violation of due process. As a result, the article concludes, American democracy appears to be increasingly mirroring regimes like Viktor Orbán's in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's in Turkey, or Narendra Modi's in India.

Conclusion

In a January 2025 *Foreign Affairs* article, political scientist Omar Encarnación compared the recent political trajectories of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, describing both as modern-day "caudillos"—authoritarian populist leaders with strikingly similar styles and ambitions. Despite these parallels, Encarnación highlights the stark contrast in their outcomes, exploring the key factors behind Trump's political resilience and Bolsonaro's fragility.

In recent years, speculation surrounding the political ambitions of Trump and Bolsonaro has captured the attention of many progressive journalists and political scientists in the United States. This interest grew as it became evident (to their dismay) that Trump would not be prevented from running—and winning—the 2024 elections. Simultaneously, they were astonished that Bolsonaro would likely be barred from running in the 2026 elections and face possible arrest for crimes like those committed by Trump (Fox 2023; Porter 2024; Bartlem, Jarenwattananon, and Detrow 2024; Nicas 2022).

As in many other publications, Encarnación's article outlines some of the institutional responses that the American and Brazilian political systems have employed to counter the authoritarian aspirations of the two "caudillos." However, his analysis goes a step further by emphasizing

17 In order to secure public funding amounting to $400 million, the university consented to ban the wearing of masks on campus during demonstrations, granted police powers to its security personnel, and agreed to intervene in the curriculum of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, contrary to the faculty's opinions and autonomy.

the contrasting attitudes toward democracy seen in the two countries. Indeed, while many Americans are increasingly sceptical about the value of preserving what they perceive as a dysfunctional democracy,[18] Brazilians continue to value democratic governance—a fact the author relates to the country's historical experience with authoritarian rule.

Considering the complexity of the political moment in Brazil, one can only hope Encarnación's assessment proves to be correct. For while Brazil's political system has indeed managed to counter Bolsonaro's authoritarian ambitions—unlike the U.S. system's response to Trump—there are no assurances it will successfully navigate the challenges ahead, particularly with the upcoming 2026 presidential election. With over a year remaining before this election, many right-wing candidates have already shown alignment with Bolsonarism, some even promising to pardon the former president. This could mark a return to the political tradition of compromise through amnesty for anti-democratic actions—a pattern that has historically preceded renewed ruptures with democracy in Brazil.

It also remains uncertain whether the Brazilian far right, known for emulating its American counterpart, will follow Trump's autocratic "learning" process, which saw him evolve from a first term marked by authoritarian voluntarism to a second term in which he systematically implements a strategy akin to a dictator's playbook.

At the time of writing, Donald Trump has announced trade tariffs against Brazil, partially attributing them to an alleged political "witch hunt" against Jair Bolsonaro. This decision is influenced, at least in part, by a campaign led in the U.S. by Eduardo Bolsonaro, the former president's son, who has been lobbying vigorously for a pardon for his father. This campaign illustrates how Bolsonaro's political survival now relies on mobilizing what Steve Bannon, Trump's former advisor, referred to as the "conservative international,"—which, in turn, underscores the

18 This perception largely stems from issues such as the enduring Electoral College system, political practices like gerrymandering, and restrictions on voting rights. The author argues that these factors have contributed to a gradual decline in support for democracy. According to a May 2024 NextGen/Forward poll referenced by the author, only 54% of Americans aged 18 to 40 concurred with the statement that "democracy can be an effective form of government."

importance of analytical efforts to understand the relationship between Trumpism and Bolsonarism.

Time will reveal whether this asymmetrical and one-sided relationship will meet the Brazilian far right's expectations by bolstering its influence—or whether it will instead energize opposition forces, particularly in support of President Lula's candidacy in the 2026 elections.

An initial analysis of the reactions from both political factions to Trump's announcement suggests that, for the time being, this relationship may be more detrimental to the right. It risks returning to the progressive camp the political banner of patriotism and sovereignty, which has long been co-opted by the right, with slogans like "Brazil above all" mirroring Trump's "Make America Great Again." Indeed, Bolsonaro supporters, who typically celebrate Trump's rhetorical excesses, quickly distanced themselves from the tariff announcement, attributing it to Lula's ideological foreign policy while conveniently overlooking Trump's specific mention of Bolsonaro.

If this trend continues, it could strengthen the type of civil society mobilization mentioned by Encarnación, especially as the 2026 elections draw near and far-right figures—including Bolsonaro—prepare to confront legal repercussions for their attempted coup. This scenario might provide Lula with a more compelling campaign message, potentially appealing to centrist voters in an election that is likely to once again center on the defence of democracy.

In any case, the strategy of the Brazilian far right poses significant dangers. It relies on a structurally asymmetrical relationship that reduces the cost for the U.S. concerning any excesses by Trump towards Brazil. Additionally, it is founded on the unpredictability of a president who is increasingly capricious and authoritarian,[19] operating with diminishing oversight from the accountability mechanisms of the American political system.

Perhaps the clearest indication of this danger to the right is the July 10 editorial from *O Estado de S. Paulo*, a conservative Brazilian newspaper

19 At a White House press conference on July 15, when asked about his decision to impose 50% tariffs on Brazil despite the history of U.S. trade surpluses, Trump replied capriciously, "Because I am able to."

that once celebrated the 1964 military coup in Brazil. In the editorial (2025), support for Trump was strongly condemned, in these terms: "It is absolutely deplorable that anyone in Brazil still defends Trump [...] Wearing a Trump hat today means aligning with a troglodyte who could inflict immense damage on the Brazilian economy [...] This is the harm caused to Brazil by an irresponsible figure like Bolsonaro, with the help of all those who support him politically in hopes of inheriting his electoral legacy."

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The United States, the 2022 Brazilian Elections, and the January 8 Coup

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This article examines relations between Brazil and the United States during the 2022 presidential elections, when the Biden administration (2021–2025) maintained a policy of defending democracy in Brazil and sent a clear message to the Brazilian armed forces that it would not support any military effort to overturn the election results. The essay begins with a brief history of the U.S. government's support of the 1964 civilian-military coup and continues with an analysis of the campaigns by progressive forces in the United States that mobilized against the Brazilian military regime (1964–85) and supported the consolidation of democracy in decades thereafter. The article then focuses particularly on the efforts of the U.S. Network for Democracy in Brazil (USNDB) and the Washington Brazil Office (WBO), two organizations that played a crucial role in criticizing the Bolsonaro government and defending the 2022 Brazilian presidential elections.

It is important to mention that in writing this essay, I am not a "neutral" scholar who proposes to offer a detached view of this process, balancing the perspective of those who attempted to overturn the 2022 election results with those who defended Brazilian democracy. My involvement in solidarity activities with Brazil began in 1973, when I collaborated with the Washington-based Committee Against Repression in Brazil to denounce torture and repression under the military dictatorship. It continued while I lived in Brazil from 1976 to 1981. There I actively participated in São Paulo student mobilizations against the dictatorship

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and simultaneously co-founded the country's first LGBTQIA+ group. More recently, I have played a central role in international campaigns against the far right and in favour of democratic processes in Brazil through a leadership role in the US Network for Democracy in Brazil (USNDB) and the Washington Brazil Office (WBO). As a historian, I am fully aware of the dangers of writing history while one is involved in making it, as well as the precautions one must take to ensure that a given reading of the past meets scholarly standards. I hope that my academic training has allowed me to present a convincing set of facts and arguments to back up my scholarship, even though I have been subjectively involved in the issues I present in this article.

* * *

The United States and Brazil have had a long and complex relationship that has oscillated between cooperation and conflict. Since World War II, when Brazil joined the Allies in the fight against fascism, the economies of the two countries have become increasingly intertwined. In the aftermath of that global conflict, Cold War tensions heightened fears among Washington policymakers that Brazil's socioeconomic problems, especially the inequality between rich and poor, were creating the conditions for a possible social revolution. This fear increased significantly with the victory of the Cuban Revolution and the response of the new government of John F. Kennedy (1961–63) to events taking place in Latin America.

There is almost unanimous agreement among historians about the role of the U.S. government in supporting the 1964 coup d'état. On July 30, 1962, President John F. Kennedy, the U.S. ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of the State for Inter-American Affairs Richard Goodwin held a meeting at the White House. The conversation was recorded by the new system that Kennedy had installed in his office to record presidential actions. In their conversation Gordon said: "I believe that one of our most important tasks is to strengthen the backbone of the military. To make it clear, quietly, that we are not opposed to any kind of military action, whatever it may be, if it is clear that the reason for that military action is…" The president completed the sentence: "Against the left." Gordon continued: "He, Goulart, is

handing the devil of the country over to…" Again, Kennedy completed: "Communists." Moments later, Goodwin commented: "…we may well wish them [the Brazilian military] to take power by the end of the year, if they can (Naftali 1997, 18–19)."

While Gordon, Goodwin, and Kennedy may have hoped for a quick end to President João Goulart's government, it would take longer than they anticipated for the Brazilian generals to coalesce into a coherent group capable of carrying out a successful coup. Meanwhile, Washington pursued a policy of encouraging the anti-Goulart forces. Covert funding for the political opposition and overt signals to the right wing encouraged those leaning toward a military takeover. At the same time, the new U.S. socioeconomic assistance program, the Alliance for Progress, publicly demonstrated American generosity to its neighbours to the south. The resources of the newly consolidated U.S. government agency, Aid for International Development (AID), as well as a complex set of programs that provided assistance to Brazil—from the Peace Corps and Food for Peace programs to the American Institute for Free Trade Union Development (AIFLD) and funding for military and police training—formed a bulwark to strengthen the country against Brazil's supposedly imminent turn toward communism.

The 1962 elections became one of the targets of this campaign. Partial access to CIA documents and other national security records allows researchers to identify in general terms the joint efforts with the U.S. Embassy to execute a government-backed destabilization plan supported by covert actions. In an interview with Gordon in March 1977, the former ambassador estimated that the U.S. government spent up to $5 million in the 1962 elections to support anti-Goulart candidates. Adjusted for inflation, that would be $33.7 million today, no small sum in the battle to win the hearts and minds of Brazilian voters.

The Kennedy administration's growing distrust of Goulart also prompted a new aid policy, drafted at a National Security Council meeting on December 11, 1962, that sought to bypass the Brazilian federal government by contracting aid directly with state and local entities. This policy, known as "islands of administrative sanity," violated provisions

of the Brazilian Constitution. Nevertheless, it gave Washington the opportunity to channel significant resources to Carlos Lacerda, the conservative governor of Guanabara state (Rio de Janeiro), a candidate in the 1965 presidential election and Goulart's most vocal public critic, as well as other anti-Goulart politicians.

The critical situation identified by policymakers in Washington demanded special attention. To that end, President Kennedy approved Ambassador Gordon's request to appoint Colonel Vernon Walters as U.S. military attaché to serve as a liaison between the embassy and the generals plotting to overthrow Goulart. Walters was the perfect candidate for the position. He had served with the Brazilian Expeditionary Force that had joined the Allies in Italy during World War II and spoke fluent Portuguese. In the period immediately following the end of the war, he had been deputy military attaché at the American embassy in Rio. The Army then assigned him to work on the Marshall Plan in Europe, and he later accompanied then Vice President Richard Nixon on his visit to Venezuela in 1958. When Walters arrived in Rio in 1962 as the new military attaché, thirteen Brazilian officers who had served with him in Italy went to welcome their American friend. The following morning, he met with the ambassador. According to Walters, Gordon gave him succinct instructions: "I want three things from you: first, to know what is happening in the Armed Forces; second, I want to be able to have some influence on them through you; third, more than anything, I never want to be surprised (Walters 1978, 374–75.)"

Walters scrupulously obeyed the ambassador. In his memoirs, *Silent Missions* (1978), Walters recalls that when he arrived in Brazil, the military officers who wanted to depose Goulart were organized into small conspiratorial groups and still had no communication with each other. He explains that the conspirators gradually developed a coherent organization and planning:

> In early 1964, through many friends, I finally got the impression that some of the conspirators were beginning to contact each other on a coordinated national scale. Mail began to travel. Contingency plans became more specific.

> Guidelines and reflection documents began to circulate. I learned about this through friends (381).

Among Walters' Brazilian military friends was General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, who commanded the Fourth Army in the Northeast, and later would become the first president during the military dictatorship. Castelo Branco visited Walters on at least two occasions in Rio while stationed in the Northeast, but the U.S. military attaché claims that they never discussed internal Brazilian matters. Upon returning to Rio de Janeiro as Chief of the Army General Staff, Castelo Branco met frequently with Walters. In his memoirs, the latter makes a point of repeatedly emphasizing that although he had had many conversations, meetings and informal social gatherings with Castelo Branco during the period in which the general led the conspiracy for the coup, the two never discussed politics.

Although the federal government has declassified most of the State Department documents on the 1964 coup, they have been redacted for national security reasons. Lines, paragraphs, and even entire pages remain blacked out and inaccessible to researchers. Thus, only circumstantial evidence suggests that Walters was a key figure in advising and/or assisting in the planning of the coup. At the very least, he appears to have assured the military conspirators that Washington would support the movement for regime change.

Walters also boasts that he accurately predicted the date on which the military would seize control of the government. Describing the revolt in the terminology of the coup planners themselves, he writes:

> I had calculated for some time that the anti-leftists were pressed for time. The revolution could not take place during Carnival or Lent, especially not during Holy Week, and it would fail if attempted on April 1, April Fools' Day. Easter that year fell on March 30. The revolution could only be made on the 31st. So, I informed my superiors (Walters 1978, 384).

Walters did not let Gordon be surprised.

The U.S. ambassador closely followed the event in 1964 that led up to the coup d'état, coordinating with the President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–69) the sending of a naval task force, known as Operation Brother Sam, to Brazil on the eve of the coup to intervene should a civil war break out between the pro and anti-Goulart forces. When Goulart decided not to resist the coup, the Pentagon discreetly ended the operation. Gordon then pressured Johnson to immediately recognize the new regime, which he did on April 2, 1964.

Thus, began two decades of U.S. economic, military, and diplomatic support for the military regime, a fact amply documented by numerous scholars. During the presidency of Ernesto Geisel (1974–79), the Brazilian government distanced itself from the close relationship it had nurtured with the United States under the governments of Castelo Branco (1964–67), Costa e Silva (1967–69) and Médici (1969–74). Geisel rejected U.S. President Jimmy Carter's human rights orientation in its foreign policy and sought support for the construction of a nuclear power plant from Germany rather than from its traditional U.S. partner.

Despite Washington's support for the Brazilian military regime during most of its rule, many modest efforts by a handful of Brazilian exiles and their U.S. allies registered opposition to the authoritarian regime and support for progressive change in Brazil, both while the armed forces were in power and in the years after the return to democracy. Those actions began in 1969 when former Congressional representative Márcio Moreira Alves, who had denounced the practice of state-sponsored torture in Brazil, traveled from exile in Chile to Washington to convince members of the U.S. Congress to cut off aid to the dictatorship. His visit inspired a group of U.S. specialists on Brazil to form a committee, the American Friends of Brazil, the following year that published material documenting the gross violation of human rights in the country.

In subsequent years, small groups of former Peace Corps volunteers, who had spent time in Brazil, academics, clergy, exiles, and others organized diverse activities throughout the United States to denounce the regime. These included actions of the Committee against Repression in Brazil, which organized protests in Washington, D.C. during the visit of

President Médici to the Nixon White House in December 1971. Activists published the *Brazilian Information Bulletin,* which denounced the on-going repression of the opposition, as well as government policies that harmed the Indigenous population, the environment, and the working class. By 1974, their work had managed to rebrand Brazil in the United States as a country of torture and repression, thus weakening the dictatorship's image abroad.

President Geisel's policies of controlled liberalization (*distensão*) that began in mid-1974 opened a process in which the opposition to the regime gained evermore political space to challenge the dictatorship's policies. One of the most significant new developments was the mobilization of industrial workers in Greater São Paulo, who organized a wave of strikes to improve their economic position and demand a return to democratic rule. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva emerged as the most important leader of this movement, who along with other labour leaders was charged with violating the National Security Act for his involvement in a major strike that took place in 1980.

In response, several Brazilians living in the United States and their U.S. allies formed the Brazilian Labor Information and Resource Center (BLI) that organized solidarity among U.S. trade unions with the Brazilian labour leaders. This included a visit of Lula to the United States to speak to the labour movement, Congressional leaders, and civil society organizations about his legal case and the political situation in the country. As the Brazilian unions established their own national organizations and set up their own vehicles for international articulations, the BLI wound down its efforts in the mid-1980s.

In the late 1980s, during the process of democratic consolidation, which included writing a new constitution and addressing many of the nation's problems, a third wave of activities developed in the United States to address environmental, Indigenous, labour, and socio-economic issues. Once again, a small coalition of Brazil specialists and Brazilians living along the East Coast formed the Brazil Network, which organized solidarity events with Brazilian social movements and produced a bulletin to inform an interested public about new developments in the emerging

democracy. This work was sustained by constant interaction with Brazilian organizations seeking to ensure socio-economic justice under the new regime.

In 2003, soon after Lula da Silva was elected president, a fourth period of activism in the United States focused on the defence of the new government's progressive agenda. The Brazil Strategy Network was founded at the national headquarters of the AFL-CIO, the largest labour federation in the United States and included the traditional mix of Brazil scholars, NGOs, and Brazilian activists, among them a significant number of immigrants organizing to defend their rights in the United States. The Network brought together both veteran activists working on Brazil and a new generation of Brazilian immigrants eager to join forces to articulate their concerns. However, the movement failed to gain significant traction as sectors of the U.S. Left thought that solidarity with the new progressive Brazilian government was unnecessary given the fact that a former leftwing labour leader had come to power.

Over the course of the 1990s, there was an upsurge in interest in Brazil in U.S. colleges and universities, reflected in the founding of the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA) in 1992 and the significant growth in the number of Brazilian immigrants living in the United States, many of whose children pursuing higher education sought out courses related to their parents' country of origin. The election of Lula in 2002 also increased interest in the country. Furthermore, Brazilian educational policies, as well as U.S. government programs, encouraged more graduate students and professors to study, teach, or do research in the United States. As a result, there was a significantly larger number of Brazilians circulating in U.S. educational institutions, adding additional interest to Brazilian Studies programs encouraging lively discussions about politics in their home country.

Members of these different groups converged in 2016 to protest the parliamentary coup against President Dilma Rousseff and the subsequent conservative government of Michel Temer. Small collectives began to form throughout the country, mostly led by young Brazilian women, many of whom had had previous experience in student activism in Brazil, social

movements or as militants of the Workers' Party. At the XIII International Conference of the Brazilian Studies Association, held at Brown University March 30 to April 2, 2016, members approved a resolution, "Brazilian Democracy is Seriously Threatened," which focused primarily on the ways that Judge Sérgio Moro had exceeded normal judicial practices in prosecuting former President Lula da Silva. Groups also mobilized nationwide against the impeachment process against President Dilma Rousseff and later the legislative reforms of the new Temer administration.

As the 2018 Brazilian presidential campaign year began, news of the assassination of Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman Marielle Franco shocked the world. Dozens of groups in the United States organized events to protest her murder. Brazilian residents also organized activities to mobilize immigrants to vote in the presidential elections, promoted "Lula Livre" activities related to the former president's incarceration, and joined forces in Brazil in the "Ele não" mobilizations on the eve of the presidential elections.

In response to the electoral victory of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro, two hundred activists—largely academic specialists working on Brazil and immigrants living in the United States—gathered at Columbia University Law School to found the U.S. Network for Democracy in Brazil. The new organization outlined its mission as a decentralized, democratic and nonpartisan national network with three objectives: "(1) Educate the U.S. public about the current situation in Brazil; (2) Defend progressive social, economic, political, and cultural advances in Brazil; (3) Support social movements, community organizations, NGOs, universities, and activists, etc., who will be vulnerable in this new political climate."

Over the course of the subsequent four years during the Bolsonaro administration, USNDB affiliate groups organized hundreds of different events, lectures, conferences, protests and other actions in the United States to denounce the policies of the extreme right government, whose president was named the "Trump of the Tropics" by the press. Trump's 2016 election and the extreme-right policies he carried out served as warning in Brazil about the ways the Bolsonaro government might execute its conservative policies.

At the December 1, 2018 national meeting that founded the USNDB, the gathered participants also approved a motion to establish the Washington Brazil Office to work with members of the U.S. Congress and international organizations on issues related to Brazil. In the two years prior to the Columbia University meeting, Brazilian activists in the U.S. capital had worked with the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), a progressive think tank. Among other activities, CEPR and Brazil activists collaborated with congressional representatives, senators, and their aides to generate documents, known as "Dear Colleague Letters," supported by other members of Congress and usually directed at the White House, a federal agency, or a foreign governmental representative on a specific policy or information-gathering matter.

The first of these letters, dated July 26, 2016, and addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry, contained the signature of 43 Congressional representatives. The text raised questions about the U.S. government's position regarding the Rousseff impeachment, which was soon to be voted on by the Brazilian Senate. The letter read in part: "[...] rather than showing concern regarding these troubling developments, our government has sent signals that could be interpreted as supportive of the impeachment campaign." It continued: "Because many Brazilians have labelled the impeachment process as a 'coup' against the country's elected president, it is especially important that U.S. actions not be perceived as supportive of impeachment." Although the letter revealed a small but clear voice among U.S. congressional representatives apprehensive about the threats to democracy in Brazil, the Obama administration failed to heed their concerns.

Among the first initiatives of the WBO was the organization of a delegation in collaboration with Amazon Watch of three Brazilian congresswomen to Washington in February 2020 who had been invited by Representatives Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Deb Haaland of New Mexico. Congresswomen Erika Kokay of the Workers' Party, Joênia Wapichana of Rede Sustentibilidade, and Fernanda Melchionna of the Socialist and Liberty Party (PSOL) attended congressional meetings and press briefings. They also participated in events with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the labour movement, and local universities.

Partially as a result of the visit, in May 2020 U.S. Representatives Deb Haaland and Hank Johnson of Georgia sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, signed by fifty-four members of Congress expressing grave concerns over President Bolsonaro's contempt for the rights of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities, while calling for the U.S. government to put human rights at the forefront of its relationship with Brazil. A month later, Congresswoman Deb Haaland and eighteen of her colleagues released a Congressional letter sent to Rodrigo Maia, the President of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, opposing the "Land Grabbers Law," which threatened indigenous land rights and millions of hectares of the Amazon Rainforest.

The election of Joe Biden in November 2020 opened a new phase in the WBO's activities. Jair Bolsonaro's U.S. presidential ally had been defeated, and some observers saw this as a hopeful sign that the Brazilian right-wing leader, even though he still had popular support and controlled the instruments of the State, could also be defeated at the ballot box. Moreover, a year previously Lula da Silva had been released from prison after serving 580 days of his sentence, and in April 2021, the Brazilian Supreme Court annulled the convictions against him, opening the door for him to be a presidential candidate to challenge Bolsonaro. However, the January 6, 2021 invasion of the U.S. capitol building by Trump supporters to overturn the U.S. presidential elections was an ominous sign for those who understood that Bolsonaro looked to Trump and other close allies in the Washington, such as Steve Bannon, for guidance on how to carry out politics in Brazil.

During his four years in office, Trump had managed to polarize the U.S. body politic. His denial of the 2020 electoral results and the attempted coup d'état leading up to and during the invasion of the Capitol had shocked the nation and the world. When it seemed that Bolsonaro intended to follow Trump's playbook by claiming that the Brazilian electronic voting system was flawed and by mobilizing his supporters within the armed forces and in the public at large, it alarmed democratic forces within Brazil and abroad.

In this regard, key members of the Biden administration, which continued to face hostile opposition from Trump supporters in the U.S. Congress and among the public, understood the danger that a similar extreme right in Brazil posed to ensuring free and fair Brazilian elections. Already in 2021, the White House began sending behind-the-scenes messages through the C.I.A. to the Brazilian armed forces indicating that the Biden administration would not support any attempt to subvert the democratic process in Brazil. When Bolsonaro suggested publicly on multiple occasions that the armed forces might need to protect the nation against possible electoral fraud and repeated his lack of confidence in the electronic voting system to a gathering of foreign ambassadors in Brasília, the White House and State Department issued public statements affirming their confidence in the democratic process in Brazil and the country's ability to carry out free and fair election. Given the fact that Lula led in all respected polls in 2022, this meticulously on-message campaign by U.S. government officials was clearly signalling to Bolsonaro that should Lula win the elections, as observers were predicting, the Biden administration would oppose any military or civilian effort to overturn the election results. In other words, despite Washington's interference in Brazilian elections in the early 1960s and its support of the 1964 coup, almost sixty years later, the Biden administration, along with leaders around the world, was affirming its support for Brazilian democracy.

Nevertheless, the escalation of anti-democratic rhetoric of the Right in Brazil, violence against Lula's supporters, and Bolsonaro's not-so-subtle overtures to the armed forces alarmed Brazilian human rights and civil society organizations, including those affiliated to the WBO. In response, the WBO organized a delegation of representatives from eighteen member organizations to visit Washington in July 2022 in partnership with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the Atlantic Council, CEPR, Amazon Watch, and Action for Democracy. The goal of the mission was to talk to members of Congress, representatives of the White House and the State Department, and the IACHR about the ongoing threat to democracy in Brazil.

The mission had two main objectives. First it called on U.S. officials to:

> Inform themselves about the situation in Brazil, where the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, calls into question the electoral system and the results of the polls, attacking the independence of the Powers, through actions directed against the Justice Electoral Court and the Federal Supreme Court (Washington Brazil Office 2022a).

Second, it appealed to these same U.S. officials and others to "manifest themselves, within their areas of action and influence, recognizing the reliability of the Brazilian electoral system and the validity of the election result, whoever the winner is, in October 2022." Among the twenty organized meetings that took place in Washington, the delegation met with U.S. Congressional Representative Jaime Raskin, who led the second impeachment process against Trump and served on the U.S. House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack. The mission also met with Senator Bernie Sanders, who along with Senator Tim Kane would sponsor a Senate resolution calling for an end to any U.S. aid to Brazil, should the military attempt to intercede with the election results. At the meeting on July 26, Sanders stated:

What I heard [from the delegation] unfortunately sounds all too familiar to me because of the efforts of [Donald] Trump and his friends to undermine American democracy. I'm not surprised that Bolsonaro is trying to do the same in Brazil. We really hope that the result of the [Brazilian] elections will be recognized and respected, and that democracy will, in fact, prevail in Brazil (Washington Brazil Office, 2022a).

In the following months, the WBO organized the publication of an international statement in support of democracy in Brazil in coordination with USNDB, the Common Action Forum, the European Network for Democracy in Brazil, and the Coletivo Passarinho, which was signed by prominent artists, intellectuals, and politicians. It supported a group of thirty-one representatives and eight senators, who sent a letter on September 9, 2022 to President Biden asking him to make "unequivocally clear to Bolsonaro, his government, and security forces that Brazil will find itself isolated from the US and the international community of

democracies if there are attempts to subvert the country's electoral process." (Washington Brazil Office 2022b) The WBO also participated in an international delegation that accompanied the electoral process in Brazil, and produced live election-night coverage of the first and second rounds of voting. As the delegation to Washington in July 2022 had requested, President Biden called to congratulate President Lula on his electoral victory less than an hour after the official results were announced.

However, much like in the United States, Bolsonaro's supporters did not accept the election results, initially blocking roads nationwide and then camping out in front of army barracks and demanding that the military intervene to overturn the election results. A week after the inauguration of President Lula on January 1, 2023, Sunday afternoon television viewers were shocked to follow live news coverage of the invasion of the Praça dos Tres Poderes in Brasília. The Biden administration immediately issued a statement condemning the attempt coup d'état. Three days later, sixty U.S. and Brazilian lawmakers released a joint statement in which they condemned the "authoritarian and anti-democratic actors of the extreme right," referring to the attacks on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 and on the three branches of the Brazilian government in Brasília on January 8, 2023. They also declared: "It is no secret that far-right agitators in Brazil and the US are coordinating efforts," citing meetings between Brazilian Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro and former advisers to Donald Trump, such as Jason Miller and Steve Bannon, who "encouraged Bolsonaro to contest the results of the elections in Brazil" (Washington Brazil Office 2023).

Whereas in 1964 the Johnson administration had supported the overthrow of the Goulart government, this time the Biden administration and many members of the U.S. Congress were on the right side of history, in large part because of the traumatic experiences of both Trump's presidency and the January 6 insurrection that almost annulled the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, but also in part because of the pressure by Brazilian civil society organizations. Despite divergent geo-political and economic interests that may exist between the two countries, the threat of a near-fascist takeover in the United States created sensibilities for U.S. foreign policymakers in which practice coincided with rhetoric.

Given the long-term close relationship between the Brazilian military and the U.S. government, the messages emanating from Washington, we can assume, caused a sector of the armed forces to pause before committing themselves to a coup to overturn the electoral results. Although the WBO had no direct channels to the Biden administration to influence or shape its policy regarding the elections, its articulations in Congress leading up to the elections certainly reinforced the White House's diplomacy. Reports of its activities in Washington, D.C., many of which were amply covered in the Brazilian press, were also encouraging to pro-democracy forces in Brazil, given the weight of the United States in the international arena.

As time goes by, historians, political scientists, and other observers will be able to best evaluate the extent to which international solidarity with democratic forces in Brazil, and especially social movements and civil society organizations, played a role in averting a military coup d'état in 2023. In this regard, it will be important to evaluate the work conducted in Washington, D.C., which was coupled with activities throughout the United States led by Brazilian immigrants, scholars of Brazil and NGOs. From a subjective (and possibly biased) perspective of someone who both has studied the history of U.S.-Brazilian relations during and after the military dictatorship and has been a long-time protagonist in solidarity actions, the WBO's campaigns in 2022 (coupled with work done nationwide since 2016), along with denunciations of torture and repression in the 1970s, U.S. labour solidarity with Brazilian unions in the early 1980s, and support for social movements at the end of that decade have been among the most successful efforts of international solidarity with Brazil over the last fifty-five years.

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Militarization and Democracy in Colombia: From the Uribe Era to the Post-Accords Period (2002–2024)

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Introduction

Militarization has been one of the most significant issues in discussions of democracy in Latin America, due to the historical record of military autonomy and involvement in internal security affairs since the post-independence period, when the armed forces took upon themselves the function of being the ultimate "guardians" of the nation and started to perform several tasks of the process called "nation-building," such as centralizing the state power; controlling the totality of the territory, defending its sovereignty, and integrating the different ethnic and social components of society, instilling the sentiment of belonging to that community (Rouquié 1984) This has also been the case in Colombia, although certain distinctions must be made to better understand the country's unique context. Colombia is not only the only country in the region where a military regime did not endure, but it has also experienced successive waves of violence involving various actors throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century—including episodes such as La Violencia (1948–1958) and even during the period of the National Front (1958–1974). The country still faces one of the longest internal armed conflicts in Latin America, with ongoing confrontations between the national government and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Given these characteristics, Colombia serves as an important case study for understanding how different forms of militarization can pose a

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threat to a democratic system based on the rule of law. With this in mind, this chapter seeks to examine how Colombian governments have dealt with this historical phenomenon in the 21st century. It is understood that from the early 2000s to the present, two main paradigms have shaped the country's approach: the first, established during the administration of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002–2010), was heavily focused on confronting internal armed groups through increased militarization. The second paradigm began under the administration of Juan Manuel Santos Calderón (2010–2018), marked by the signing of the Havana Peace Accords between the national government and the FARC in 2016, and was continued by the Gustavo Petro government (2022–).

The first section of this work consists of this introduction. The second discusses the concept and process of militarization in light of both classical and contemporary interpretations of civil-military relations, particularly in Latin America and Colombia. The third section analyzes the Uribe era and the intensification of militarization following the implementation of the Democratic Security Policy (PSD). The fourth section examines the new security policies adopted during the peace dialogues and after the signing of the Havana Peace Accords as efforts aimed at reducing militarization, both in terms of political autonomy and internal security operations.

The Military and Democracy in the Modern States

One of the fundamental features of modern states since at least the emergence of these institutions in the early 16th century has been the monopoly over the legitimate use of coercive force. Far from being ahistorical, this characteristic is the product of a long historical process initiated with mercantilist policies and culminating in the dissemination of this form of political organization during the 19th century (Weber 2007). Parallel to this, another dimension of modern states is the type of relationship their military forces have developed with civilian authorities—a problem that emerged especially after the rise of the first liberal and democratic governments. In this regard, the main concern has been the subordination of the armed forces to civilian control.

In this process, it is important to note that the experiences of modern states have not been uniform, particularly following the emergence of newly independent countries in Africa and Asia after the decolonization processes between the 1940s and 1970s. In light of this, Janowitz (1964) argues that although the experiences of Western states have not been homogeneous, the creation of mass democracies in these cases has generally led to a reduced military intervention in domestic political affairs. Based on this observation, the author proposes three models for the development of civil-military relations: the aristocratic model—typical of the early absolute monarchies of the Ancien Régime (prior to the 19th century); the totalitarian model—found in countries such as Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union during World War II.

However, for Janowitz, the most important model—due to its effectiveness and political stability—is the democratic one. This model is characterized by a clear differentiation between civilian and military elites. Furthermore, "civilian-political elites exercise control over the military through a formal set of rules, which specify the functions of the military and the conditions under which the military may exercise its power" (Janowitz 1964, 3).

Nonetheless, Janowitz states that this type of civil-military relationship is not typically found in the so-called "new nations"—those that emerged from the 20th-century decolonization processes mentioned above. In these cases, it is argued that the military has played a greater role in domestic political, economic, and social transformations. This stems from the weakness of civilian elites and political institutions. According to the author, "it is the result of the sheer quantity of resources that the military establishment, in comparison with other bureaucratic institutions and professional groups, has been able to accumulate" (Janowitz 1964, 4–5).

Another classic work that discusses the various historical developments in civil-military relations is Huntington (1985). His argument is that civilian control over the military can take two forms: subjective and objective. While the former is considered highly ineffective due to the intensification of competition among civilian groups that it entails, the latter is regarded by the author as more effective. According to Huntington, the most effective

way to strengthen civilian control over the armed forces is to enhance the "professionalism" of the military. This is achieved by shaping the military's ethical and ideological commitment. Consequently, countries can be categorized according to the relations among power, professionalism, and ideology. In general, developed nations are characterized by anti- or pro-military ideologies, high military political power, and high military professionalism. In contrast, underdeveloped nations—including those in Latin America—tend to exhibit anti-military ideologies, high military political power, and low military professionalism.

Therefore, although military institutions in Latin America have undergone many changes from the late 20th century to the present, it is possible to identify a distinct pattern in civil-military relations. One of the most enduring historical patterns of military activity in the region is militarization. This concept carries two meanings in the political history of Latin America: on the one hand, the tendency of military organizations to be constantly involved in domestic affairs, portraying themselves as guardians of the political order against internal enemies; on the other, the recurrent deployment of the armed forces in internal missions against various types of "threats" to society and the state—both of which continue to be present across much of Latin America (Battaglino 2025).

The first aspect of militarization—the military's involvement in domestic political affairs—began during the post-independence nation-building processes of the 19th century. Since then, to varying degrees, the armed forces have regarded themselves as defenders of the nation and political order against a range of perceived enemies, including "dangerous classes," opposition political parties, and other social groups believed to threaten national stability. However, it was mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, with the consolidation of the National Security Doctrine, particularly in South American countries, that this aspect of militarization became deeply rooted in military institutions. This doctrine provided a systematic ideological justification for military takeovers of state apparatuses during this period (Leal 2002).

The second dimension of Latin American militarization relates to the roles and missions assigned to military organizations, especially in the

post-Cold War decades. In this context, there has been extensive use of the military to perform functions typically assigned to civilian agencies, such as internal security (combating transnational organized crime and "terrorist" groups), disaster relief (providing necessary infrastructure to protect civilians in natural or man-made disasters), and social programs (delivering aid to impoverished communities or regions) (Pion-Berlin 2016). This expanded role of the military results from a combination of factors: the weakness of civilian institutions, public distrust of police forces, the perception of the military as "non-political" or "uncorrupt," and the political necessity of demonstrating responsiveness to national problems (Pion-Berlin 2001; Battaglino 2025).

From a democratic standpoint, both dimensions of militarization pose significant threats to the development of democratic governance in these societies. In the first case, beyond the risk of military coups, militarization leads to the politicization and eventual deprofessionalization of the armed forces. It also undermines civilian rule by exerting pressure on different levels of government and political elites. Additionally, it fosters a societal perception of incapacity for self-governance and creates a political culture in which adversaries are seen not as legitimate opponents, but as organized threats to the nation.

In the case of the militarization of public security, the democratic risks are especially evident in the extra-legal use of lethal force against civilians (e.g., during protests, constitutional interventions), arbitrary and discriminatory law enforcement—particularly targeting racially and socioeconomically marginalized groups—and increased corruption with diminished accountability to civilian authorities. As such, increased military involvement in public security tends to result in more frequent human rights violations. This applies not only to the armed forces but also to police institutions, whose methods of violence historically resemble those used by the military. Although this phenomenon is widespread in Latin America, the ultimate outcomes of such militarized coercion have not yielded the intended benefits: homicide rates remain high, drug production and consumption have not declined, and the public security crisis in urban centres persists (Hoecker 2023).

Regarding the degree of militarization across both dimensions, the Colombian case presents a range of complexities compared to other South American political systems. First, until the 1970s, Colombia experienced several episodes of violent confrontation between the Liberal and Conservative parties, particularly during the period known as La Violencia (1948–1958). During this time, the Colombian armed forces underwent a process of professionalization, with the establishment of military academies and institutions. As a result, the military did not attempt to seize state power through a coup, as occurred in countries of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay) (Leal 2002; Vargas 2008).

Nevertheless, between the 1950s and 1970s, the Colombian military was transformed into a counterinsurgency force tasked with combating internal armed groups composed of Liberal partisans from the La Violencia period. It was in the 1960s and 1970s, however, that the military developed two core principles that would guide its ongoing involvement in domestic security: a radical anti-communism and the perception of an "internal enemy"—both rooted in the Colombian interpretation of the National Security Doctrine during the Cold War (Leal 2002). This dual logic was institutionalized through the so-called Plan Lazo, a military program based on two pillars: counterinsurgency operations against guerrilla groups—primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN)—and the provision of social and economic aid to marginalized rural populations. This latter component became known as Civil-Military Action (Leal 2002).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the military continued to play a central role in domestic politics. In 1978, the Security Statute was enacted, granting the military greater autonomy to operate within civil society against perceived internal enemies. This period saw an increase in human rights violations, including the persecution, torture, disappearance, and execution of social leaders, trade unionists, and campesinos. Military justice was often applied to civilians—facilitated by the declaration of states of exception. Moreover, military intelligence activities intensified, targeting individuals and social groups (Leal 2002; Pizarro 2017).

During the 1980s, the military expanded its counterinsurgency activities not only against guerrilla groups and their sympathizers but also in opposition to peace processes. This opposition was manifested both through direct pressure on the national government and through continued violence against leftist groups, as seen in the Patriotic Union massacres during this and the following decades. Another hallmark of this period was the recurring collaboration between army officers and paramilitary groups, which often engaged in violent campaigns against guerrillas and leftist leaders in rural areas (Gutiérrez and Barón 2006). Thus, although military autonomy in Colombia may be considered partial compared to other South American cases, this did not prevent the armed forces' extensive involvement in internal security—an involvement that intensified in the 1990s when the Colombian government incorporated the logic of the "war on drugs" into its national security policy (Pinzón 2015).

One final note regarding Colombia's militarization process concerns the role of the United States. This collaboration began primarily after the Colombian government sent an army battalion to the Korean War in 1950. From that point on—and especially following the shift in U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere after the Cuban Revolution—the U.S. government expanded its counterinsurgency training programs with the Colombian army, facilitating the spread of the National Security Doctrine through the provision of equipment and training programs attended by Colombian officers (Leal 2002). In the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. government also encouraged the Colombian military's involvement in anti-narcotics operations, providing aid through the Department of State (DOS), Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) (Lizarazo 2008; Pinzón 2015).

The Uribe Era: Democratic Security Policy and Militarization

The 2002 elections marked a turning point in Colombian democracy. It was the first time a presidential election was won by a candidate from outside the traditional political parties, and that same year, the national government terminated its last peace talks with the FARC prior to those initiated in 2012. However, the most significant outcome was the rapid

shift in state security policy under the administration of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002–2010). One year after his victory, Uribe introduced the government's official security doctrine—the so-called Democratic Security and Defence Policy (Política de Seguridad Democrática, PSD)—which became a paradigm for how the military would be engaged in domestic affairs. The changes brought about by this policy significantly intensified the Colombian militarization process in both its political and public security dimensions.

Broadly speaking, the PSD is presented as a defence and security strategy aimed at consolidating a democratic state governed by the rule of law. Its primary strategic objectives include: consolidation of state control over national territory; protection of the population; eradication of illicit drug trafficking; maintenance of credible deterrence capabilities; and increased accountability of the armed forces and the National Police. Among its main operational guidelines are: coordination of state actions—particularly those involving the Colombian Military Forces and the National Police; strengthening of state institutions; consolidation of territorial control; protection of citizens and national infrastructure; enhanced interinstitutional cooperation; and improved communication of state efforts. The institutional references for the PSD include the National Security and Defence Council, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Ministry of Defence, and other supporting structures such as the National Police and civilian intelligence institutions, notably the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) (Colombia 2003).

According to the official document, the PSD constituted a holistic state strategy to confront internal armed groups, especially the FARC and ELN, which were the principal remaining guerrilla forces in Colombia at the time. Under this new policy, both the internal autonomy of the military and its involvement in domestic security affairs increased dramatically. One of the administration's first actions was to declare a state of emergency to grant expanded powers to military institutions—though this was later ruled unconstitutional by the Colombian Constitutional Court. The Uribe administration also strengthened the DAS, increasing its collaboration with the armed forces in surveillance of political figures and even the execution of social leaders and individuals identified as guerrilla sympathizers.

Another notable initiative was the creation of "community surveillance networks" throughout the country, effectively militarizing civil society and aligning civilian populations with the government's security agenda (Moreno 2012).

The militarization of society was further reinforced through the introduction of a civilian training program for counterinsurgency, which produced so-called "peasant soldiers." Another key element of the PSD was the war rhetoric adopted by the government: armed groups were no longer treated as political actors with legitimate claims, but were instead classified as "terrorist organizations," effectively denying the possibility of negotiation or reintegration into Colombian society. Framed in this way, these groups were portrayed as enemies to be eliminated by all available means. Guided by this logic, the Uribe administration issued Ministerial Directive 029 of 2005, which established criteria for providing financial compensation to military personnel who demonstrated having killed guerrilla combatants. This directive led to one of the most notorious scandals of the Uribe government – the so-called "false positives," in which members of the armed forces murdered civilians unaffiliated with any guerrilla movement in order to receive the promised rewards (Valencia and Moreno 2023).

On one hand, the Uribe era saw a major increase in the military's deployment for internal security operations, evident in both the military programs initiated by the administration and the reform of the armed forces between 2003 and 2008. One of the cornerstones of the PSD was the "Meteor Plan," which aimed to secure transportation infrastructure in rural areas through the establishment of seven specialized Meteor military units. The Ministry of Defence also created three GAULA groups focused on hostage rescue; six high-mountain battalions; and thirteen Urban Antiterrorist Special Forces units (Vargas 2012).

On the other hand, the armed forces were extensively mobilized in domestic operations against drug trafficking and armed groups. The most important initiative in this regard was the "Patriot Plan," launched in 2003. It was structured around two main pillars: territorial control—namely, protecting key infrastructure such as transport, communications, and energy

systems and increasing military presence in areas previously dominated by guerrilla forces—and offensive operations, entailing intensified direct engagement with armed insurgent fronts, particularly in Colombia's southern departments. The plan had two phases: the first, called "Liberty I," began in June 2003 in the department of Cundinamarca and aimed to break the FARC's encirclement of Bogotá and its surrounding areas, which had persisted since the late 1990s. The second phase, "Liberty II," ran from November 2003 to January 2004, expanding military deployment to peripheral territories using highly mobile units (Pabón 2008; Vargas 2012).

A key component of this overall strategy was Plan Colombia, launched in 2000. Approved by the United States Congress, this program aimed to support the Colombian government's efforts to combat illicit drug production and trafficking. To this end, the U.S. government provided financial aid, weaponry, equipment, and training to Colombian military and police forces. After 2001, and with the implementation of the Patriot Plan, U.S. assistance expanded beyond counternarcotics to include broader support for counterinsurgency, in line with President George W. Bush's global war on terrorism. Through Plan Colombia, the U.S. trained and equipped several military and police units between 2003 and 2010, including the Army Aviation Brigade, the Special Operations Brigades, the Counterdrug Brigade (consisting of three battalions), the Rapid Deployment Force, and the GAULA units (Rojas 2015).

Thus, it can be concluded that the implementation of the PSD during the Uribe administration intensified militarization in Colombia in three main ways. First, it increased the political autonomy of the military, which was tasked with developing and executing a national war strategy to neutralize both the FARC and the ELN in Cundinamarca and other departments. Second, militarization manifested through the greater involvement of military institutions in internal security operations, particularly in the fight against drug trafficking and other armed groups. Both dimensions contributed to a rise in human rights violations across the country, as exemplified by the "false positives" scandal, and led to increased persecution, torture, and killings of social leaders. Finally, militarization extended deeply into Colombian society through the enlistment of civilian populations as collaborators with the armed forces and National Police, as

seen in the "peasant soldiers" program and the formation of community surveillance networks. This process was further amplified by U.S. military assistance provided under Plan Colombia.

Peacebuilding in the Post-Accords Era: New Roles for the Military

When peace negotiations between the Colombian national government and the FARC began in 2012, the political elites aligned with the administration of Juan Manuel Santos recognized the need to implement reforms within the three branches of the armed forces—particularly the National Army—in order to adapt them to the new security landscape shaped by the peacebuilding process. This also entailed a revision of the armed forces' role in the post-accord period, both in terms of their relationship with civilian elites and their responsibilities in internal security. The changes observed in Colombian civil-military relations since then can be traced to two key moments: the revision of the Army's main doctrine in 2016, and the introduction of the "human security" and "total peace" agenda in 2022.

The first transformation began in 2012, when the Ministry of National Defence launched a reform process within the Colombian military forces—especially the Army—initially through the new campaign plan known as "Victory." However, the most definitive changes occurred between 2015 and 2016, when the Army adopted two foundational documents: the Military Strategic Plan 2030 and the Damasco Doctrine manuals. These frameworks redefined the Army as a "multi-mission force"—that is, an armed institution whose objectives extended beyond the application of lethal force against criminal organizations to include a broader range of functions such as civic action, environmental protection, and infrastructure development (Colombia 2015; 2016). The goal of these reforms was to transform the military into a more "citizen-oriented" institution, whose operations would not be limited to kinetic interventions, thereby marking a shift in the militarization process, particularly concerning internal security involvement.

Within this same context, the Santos administration also sought to reverse the military's partial autonomy by integrating military institutions

into the peace process from its inception in 2012. Military and National Police officers were included in the peace negotiations as a way of aligning the transition in military doctrine and strategic planning with the post-accord context. Nevertheless, this did not prevent continued autonomous actions by the Colombian military, as illustrated by illegal surveillance and infiltration operations targeting peace negotiators in Havana, carried out by the Army's Technical Intelligence Battalion I. Another indication of persistent military autonomy was the resistance of former National Army Commander General Eduardo Zapateiro to implementing the Damasco Doctrine. Zapateiro went so far as to publish a new strategic document—"Future Army Transformation Strategic Plan 2042"—in which the Damasco Doctrine was omitted entirely (Arias 2025). This demonstrates that, despite Santos's efforts to enforce civilian control over the military, the institution retained significant freedom of action, at times operating independently of civilian authority.

The second moment of change in civil-military relations occurred under the government of Gustavo Petro (2022–present), following an escalation of militarization during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, after four days of nationwide protests against President Iván Duque's (2018–2022) proposed tax reforms, it was announced that General Eduardo Zapateiro, then Commander of the Army, would take charge of the public forces (military and police) in the country's southwest region. This decision led to widespread abuses, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances of protesters, sexual violence, and other illegal practices (Arias 2025). Signalling a clear break with previous approaches to national security, the Petro administration initiated a series of institutional reforms within the armed forces.

From the outset of his presidency, Petro aimed to de-escalate the militarization of Colombia's security apparatus. This strategy was based on three main actions. First, Law 2272 of 2022 was enacted, grounded in the concepts of "human security" and "total peace." This law expressed the government's willingness to engage in dialogue with the remaining internal armed groups. It also established the Social Service for Peace, which enables young people to participate in community service programs as an alternative to compulsory military service (Colombia 2022).

A second measure involved replacing the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD)—a police unit known for using coercive force against social protests—with the Dialogue and Order Maintenance Unit, in response to extensive human rights violations by the National Police. Finally, the government expanded its counter-narcotics policy through the continuation and strengthening of the National Integral Program for Crop Substitution, initially launched during the implementation phase of the Peace Accords (Arias 2025).

Another important element in this recent demilitarization process relates to U.S. security assistance in the context of peacebuilding. In recent years, there has been a discernible shift from militarized aid to programs more focused on socioeconomic development, primarily led by the U.S. Department of State and USAID. In 2013, the latter launched the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), a program aimed at consolidating state territorial presence through social investment in areas previously controlled by armed groups (USA 2013). The following year, USAID initiated another development program—the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS)—implemented in two phases: from 2014 to 2018, and from 2020 to 2025. Both phases were designed as components of an integrated policy to support the Colombian peacebuilding process through investments in sustainable development, infrastructure, and youth employment (USA 2014; 2020).

In conclusion, recent developments in Colombia's security policy reflect significant changes in how the state has approached militarization. In both of the aforementioned periods, reforms have taken the form of institutional measures—either through doctrinal shifts within the armed forces or the introduction of legal frameworks aimed at reducing militarization in civil-military relations. While these initiatives may contribute to fostering a more balanced relationship between political and military elites and thus to the strengthening of democratic institutions, structural reforms remain essential. Democracy in Colombia will only be fully realized when a political culture rooted in military subordination and reduced military involvement in internal security is successfully cultivated.

Final Considerations

This work has analyzed the process of militarization in Colombia during the 21st century and its implications for the country's democratic institutions and values—both at the level of the state and within civil society. As demonstrated, Colombia represents one of several cases in which militarization has shaped national security through two interrelated dynamics: the relative autonomy of the military vis-à-vis civilian elites and the hypertrophy of armed institutions' engagement in public security missions. Both dimensions can be traced back to the emergence of the National Security Doctrine in the 1960s and 1970s, which instilled a mentality within the Colombian armed forces grounded in radical anticommunism and the perception that the nation faces a persistent threat from a wide range of "internal enemies."

The Democratic Security Policy (PSD), formulated and implemented by the Uribe administration in the 2000s, further reinforced this antidemocratic trajectory by deepening both dimensions of militarization. On one hand, the policy expanded the military's operational autonomy in conducting the war campaign, particularly through the design and execution of the Patriot Plan (2003–2004). On the other, it increased the deployment of military personnel in internal missions targeting drug trafficking and organized crime, both in rural and urban areas. The Uribe government thus utilized militarization as a central strategy for overcoming the internal conflict with guerrilla groups. While this approach may be considered militarily effective—given the significant damage inflicted upon FARC and ELN in terms of their organizational and operational capabilities—it had substantial negative consequences for democratic governance in Colombia. These consequences are reflected in the increase in human rights violations, widespread extrajudicial killings, and the state's ongoing inability to hold military actors accountable.

Conversely, the peace process initiated in 2012 and culminating in the signing of the Havana Accords in 2016 placed pressure on the government and the Ministry of National Defence to undertake structural reforms within the armed forces to adapt to a new security context oriented around peacebuilding. Two moments were particularly significant in the

articulation of new institutional guidelines for the military: the decision of President Juan Manuel Santos to revise the Army's doctrine through the adoption of the Damasco Doctrine, and the implementation of the "Total Peace" policy under the administration of Gustavo Petro. In the former case, the proposed transformation envisioned a fundamental shift in the operational philosophy of the armed forces, guided by the concept of a "future army." While the new doctrine emphasized respect for human rights, it also continued to rely on the military for internal security operations, now rebranded under the label of a "multi-mission force." In the latter case, Petro's policy aims to advance the peace process through dialogue with various armed actors, accompanied by the implementation of what his government has termed a "human security" policy. This framework seeks to leverage the military's institutional capabilities to promote social equity in Colombia. Nonetheless, it also reinforces the ongoing reliance on the military to perform internal roles, a reflection of the persistent weakness of civilian institutions.

Therefore, while it may be acknowledged that the governments of Santos and Petro have sought to curb militarization by promoting military subordination—particularly in areas related to human rights—these efforts have not fundamentally altered the structural realities in Colombia. The armed forces continue to enjoy significant latitude in shaping their own transformation projects and remain heavily involved in domestic operations, including efforts to combat organized crime. Although this militarized approach may provide short-term solutions to institutional fragility, it does not represent a genuine reversal of the militarization trend. On the contrary, it risks entrenching it further, thereby undermining the prospects for a robust democratic political system in Colombia. A final and crucial observation is the inadequacy of merely institutional reforms in defence and security policy. The challenge of militarization in Colombia ultimately requires the development of a transformed political culture—one that reconfigures the relationships between the armed forces, civilian state institutions, and society at large—in order to effectively address and dismantle the entrenched dynamics of militarization.

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Toward an International Order of Free Peoples: Democracy, Populism, and Authoritarianism in Latin America

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2004) published a renowned book titled *A Democracia na América Latina: rumo a uma democracia de cidadãos e cidadãs* [Democracy in Latin America: Toward a Democracy of Citizens]. This work, the result of theoretical reflections and research using both qualitative and quantitative data, quickly achieved great resonance and impact, becoming a transcendent and even paradigmatic contribution. Without providing an exegesis of the book, it is important to note that many analysts and a significant portion of public opinion consider the UNDP text a turning point in Latin American democracy studies and research. In other words, it represented a theoretical, methodological, and epistemological transformation of the political-social transitology typical of the 1980s and 1990s—that is, in the context of Samuel Huntington's "third wave" of democratization (1993)—toward a generation of academic works focused on the quality of the democracies that actually existed in the first quarter of the 21st century, a period that coincides with the so-called "third wave" of global autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

Indeed, numerous research centres and specialized analysts warn that, from a political and social perspective, a wave of autocratization currently prevails worldwide. This has serious implications for the erosion

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of democracy, even in countries in Western Europe and North America, as well as in Latin America, the Afro-Asian world, and other regions of the globe. Looking back, the impact of the current wave of autocratization in Latin America and the Caribbean has not had as disastrous or spurious an impact as previous waves. Even considering subregional, national, and even local/provincial peculiarities, most societies and states on this continent have shown considerable attachment, resilience, preference, and appreciation for representative democratic and republican regimes.

Meanwhile, numerous academically validated studies confirm the growing and persistent public dissatisfaction with the functioning of governments (Mounk 2019). This situation has ultimately had a negative impact on the legitimacy of regimes, states, political society, and the rulers themselves (Rosanvallon 2011). At the same time, it should be noted that the democratic transitions of the 1980s and 1990s generated very high expectations, particularly in political, social, economic, and cultural terms. These expectations were particularly linked to the eventual recovery of economic growth, reduction of structural inequality, productive transformation, and reduction of violence. Along the same lines, the UNDP book (2004) clearly stated that, in addition to organizing free, fair, and periodic electoral processes—that is, addressing political-electoral competition—Latin American democratic governments would have to assume their responsibilities in the face of very significant and even overwhelming structural challenges.

In other words, the legitimization and authorization of governments through elections—undoubtedly a central and essential component of any representative democratic and republican regime—has been the relatively easier and more feasible aspect of political and social change processes (Tilly 2007). The complicated and difficult aspect has become—and continues to be—public administration, governability, and resolving the central problems of society and the state. This is all without disregarding other challenges currently facing Latin American democracies, such as political and administrative corruption and related crimes, the devaluation of parties and party systems, the emergence of anti-political discourses and autocratic temptations—especially caudillismo, demagoguery, militarism, caesarism, and the cult of personality, among others— the peculiarities and contradictions

of political culture, or the fragility of civil society and its impact on social cohesion (solidarity, equality, freedoms, republican civic spirit).

In light of these observations, this article poses the following research question: How and why have Latin American countries managed to maintain a prevailing and dominant democratic regime over the past decade, despite a global trend toward autocratization? Methodologically, the text employs an interpretive essay style and documentary analysis. Also noteworthy is the use of an interdisciplinary approach, with a strong emphasis on contemporary democratic theory, particularly studies and research on the quality of democracy, following the line of argument developed by Italian political scientist Leonardo Morlino (2011).

The text is organized into four sections, followed by concluding remarks and a bibliography. The first section introduces the article's fundamental concepts, including the analytical components necessary for researching the quality of democracy, considering its multiple dimensions—procedure, content, and result—as well as the different academically validated approaches to democracy: electoral, deliberative, liberal, egalitarian, consociational (or consensual), participatory, and majoritarian. The second section reflects on the results of measurements conducted by research centres on the state of democracy in Latin American countries. These results include related to the continuity, change, and rupture of the aforementioned regimes. The third section explores the challenges posed to contemporary democratic regimes by the phenomenon of populism, which is understood as a political strategy (campaign and government). Finally, the fourth section examines the impacts, risks, and threats of autocratization present on the continent and worldwide, which may ultimately erode the democratic regime. It is worth noting from the outset that, encouragingly and with few exceptions, most countries in the region remain steadfast, deeply rooted, and resilient within the democratic-representative and republican paradigm.

Theoretical and Methodological Preamble

Researching the democratic regime and its multiple dimensions is an extremely complex task. Moving beyond common-sense views on the

subject, it is clear that conceptualizing democracy requires a broader, more rigorous, and interdisciplinary reflection, particularly within the social sciences and humanities. The situation becomes even more intricate when we include the theoretical and methodological particularities of studies on the quality of democracy, as well as topics related to the change, continuity, and rupture of political regimes—that is, waves of democratization or autocratization—and even the peculiarities of specific political contexts (Linz and Stepan 2008).

Contemporary democratic theory recognizes and validates the existence of at least seven main and interconnected approaches to the political system in question. They are electoral, egalitarian, deliberative, participatory, consociational (or consensual), liberal, and majoritarian democracy. Clearly, a detailed assessment of each of these approaches to democracy would exceed the scope of a brief academic text. Therefore, for the purposes of this piece, it suffices to recognize that any conceptualization of democracy must seek to engage with and interact with them. In this regard, Leonardo Morlino (2020, 13, our translation) proposes that the concept in question can be understood in the following terms:

> A good democracy, or a high-quality democracy, is a stable institutional order that enables citizens to enjoy freedom and equality through properly functioning institutions and mechanisms. We can gauge the quality of a democracy by the degree of support and satisfaction among the citizens living within it (quality in relation to the outcome), which ensures high institutional stability due to the support it receives from civil society; this, hypothetically, allows us to affirm progress in the realization of democratic values.

Morlino's conceptualization is certainly one of several available alternatives, especially from the perspective of political science (Munck 2016). *Pars pro toto*, it is a successful attempt at a theoretical and methodological approach to a subject matter that is recognized as multidimensional, porous, and constantly evolving.

It is worth noting that this conceptualization aligns with the electoral democracy approach, also known as the minimalist or Schumpeterian

approach. Electoral democracy emphasizes the crucial importance of political competition among candidates and parties for elective office (executive and legislative), the conduct of free, fair, and periodic elections, and political citizenship. This is one of the most important procedural dimensions of the quality of democracy and has a significant impact on regime change and continuity (Urbinati and Saffon 2013).

The concept of egalitarian democracy, in turn, is also explicitly present in the Morlinian definition cited above. In this analytical approach, the focus is on examining the effective exercise of full citizenship (civil, political, and social). This includes an analysis of the relatively equitable (or unequal) distribution of resources and opportunities generated by society and the state. Similarly, the possible existence of discrimination against minority or subaltern groups (gender, race, ethnicity, urban-rural divide, sexual orientation) and its impact on political representation are examined. Thus, equality constitutes a content dimension of the quality of democracy (Sigman; Lindberg 2019).

Deliberative democracy is deeply influenced by the thoughts of Jürgen Habermas and his followers. In short, this approach emphasizes the importance of discussion in the public sphere, particularly in decision-making processes of collective interest. Deliberation requires respect for the arguments of different actors and relies on persuasion to achieve increased social capital, political culture, and institutional trust (Cohen 2007). The participatory democracy approach follows the same principles. Generally, participatory democracy holds that citizens should not limit their interaction with the *polis* solely or primarily to election periods. Instead, following modern and contemporary theorists, this approach values the different types of participation available to citizens, both in conventional or strictly electoral terms, as well as in movements, popular assemblies, cyberactivism, civic associations, and even in unconventional episodes (mass popular mobilizations, protests). These are two additional procedural dimensions of the quality of democracy (Santos 2002).

The consociational or consensual approach to democracy emphasizes the importance of dialogue among stakeholders in the political system—particularly between the government and the opposition, as well as

between majorities and minorities—in the pursuit of broad agreements, national unity, and support for state policies. Morlino's conception of democracy endorses high-level political dialogue among actors most directly involved with the ruling class. It is understood that this consensual and proportional approach fosters interinstitutional accountability and democratic responsiveness (Lijphart 2003). In contrast to the consociational or consensual model mentioned earlier, there is also the majoritarian approach to democracy. In this model, it is confirmed that, within the context of political competition and governance, the parties with the greatest popular support should have the opportunity to exercise political power responsibly. These are two approaches that are eminently procedure- and results-based, highly relevant to research on the quality of democracy (Powell 2000).

Last but certainly not least is the approach of liberal—or Lockean—democracy. This model is characterized by advocating the imposition of limits on authorities in order to preserve individual and collective freedoms. In this sense, liberal democracy advocates for the establishment of the Rule of Law (Maravall and Przeworski 2009). A state with these characteristics is legitimized to guarantee freedom through a balance of powers, a rule of law throughout the national territory, public order, the formulation and implementation of republican public policies (bureaucracy), the fight against corruption, access to justice, and the pre-eminence of civil power based on popular sovereignty, among other indicators (Dworkin 2005).

From the above, it can be inferred that Morlino's conception of democracy is broad, demanding, and even paradigmatic. For this reason, we consider it appropriate to use it as the theoretical and methodological foundation for this text. It is also worth noting that political and social phenomena such as authoritarianism and, to a lesser extent, populism are fundamentally opposed to democracy (Vittori 2017).

In fact, a political regime can be considered authoritarian when it is not based on popular control of political power, when there are no free, fair, and periodic elections for the selection of authorities, and when citizenship (civil, political, and social) is restricted. Similarly, authoritarian regimes lack pluralism or other procedural, content, or result dimensions

inherent to democratic regimes. They also lack the minimum institutional prerequisites mentioned above. Rather, authoritarian regimes are dominated by arbitrariness, tyranny, and despotism. A basic typology of contemporary authoritarian models could include single-party governments, personalist (Caesarist) monarchies, military regimes, theocratic regimes, illiberal regimes, hybrid regimes, totalitarian regimes, and absolutist regimes (Laruelle 2022).

From the perspective of this article, it is important to note that authoritarian governments have predominated in Latin America since the era of independence in the 19th century (Caetano 2011). In 1978, for example, only three countries—Costa Rica, Colombia, and Venezuela—could claim with any degree of certainty to have a democratic regime (Linz 1978). Between 1974 and 2000, in the context of Samuel Huntington's "third wave" of democratization (1993), most countries on the continent achieved significant political and social progress. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, a wave of global autocratization has become predominant (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) —that is, a period of de-democratization and autocratization in many countries around the world, including in Latin America.

In short, from a theoretical and methodological perspective, this text contributes to the studies and research on the quality of contemporary democracy, particularly in its Morlinian version. It seems clear and indisputable that the topic in question is extremely relevant in sociopolitical, academic, and civilizational terms. Hence the importance of advancing the construction of an international order of free peoples, as indicated in the chapter's title. Ultimately, the aim is to examine the present and future of relations among the continent's communities, societies, and states, all within the context of a constantly changing global order (Bobbio 2009).

The Quality of Actual Democracies in Latin America: Testing Their Limits

Between 2012 and 2025, Latin American and Caribbean democracies faced a turbulent landscape, in terms of both objective (procedural aspects of electoral democracy) and subjective (citizen support for the regime)

factors, as well as in terms of their respective international roles. In fact, the capacities for popular control over public decision-making and for political equality in the exercise of that control were, at best, stabilized—a finding that can be considered encouraging, given an adverse context of global autocratization.

For the purposes of this article, it is appropriate and pertinent to discuss the data from the Global State of Democracy (GSoD), sponsored by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA 2023).[2] In summary, this database is based on four main attributes: a) representative government; b) fundamental rights; c) rule of law; and d) participation. In an effort to quantify and qualify these main attributes, the database offers a dozen sub-attributes and a hundred performance indicators for the political system in question.

It is worth noting that the International IDEA database (2023) currently provides information on 173 countries from 1975 to 2021. It comprises a series of reports on changes and continuities in political regimes (democracy and authoritarianism), which, in addition to addressing the temporal and spatial scope of this text, enables a minimum of comparative analysis, as well as the identification of trends (dependency trajectories), evaluation of the different components and aspects of existing democracies, and construction of country profiles. Along the same lines, basic parameters have been established to measure the quality of democracy, as well as a classification of the three main types of contemporary political regimes: (i) democracies (high, medium or low performance); (ii) hybrids; and (iii) authoritarian regimes. All of this would contribute to the production of more consistent, objective, and evidence-based interpretive analyses.

Examining the database regarding Latin American and Caribbean countries over the past ten years makes it possible to identify positive and problematic trends, as well as challenges, opportunities, and threats. In fact, among the most important trends and findings is the confirmation that, from a minimalist or procedural-electoral perspective of democracy, the Latin American and Caribbean macro-region remains one of the three most prominent in the world, alongside Western Europe and North

2 Available at https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gsod-indices.

America. Furthermore, the aspirations of the peoples and governments of the continent remain within the representative-democratic paradigm, suggesting a significant degree of entrenchment, resilience, and legitimacy of the political regime, particularly with regard to its intrinsic and instrumental value (Sen 2018). With the exception of four countries on the continent considered authoritarian, an initial assessment of the International IDEA report (2023) confirms that the representative-democratic regime is predominant in 21 of the 25 states for which data is available (Table 1).

Table 1 – Quality of democracy in Latin America, by performance, 2021

	Attributes				Type of Political Regime (performance)
	Representative Government	Fundamental Rights	Rule of Law	Participation	
Costa Rica	0,87	0,83	0,85	0,64	democratic-A
Chile	0,88	0,71	0,83	0,72	democratic-A
Uruguay	0,88	0,75	0,78	0,69	democratic-A
Barbados	0,76	0,74	0,75	0,72	democratic-A
Trindad and Tobago	0,79	0,69	0,73	0,70	democratic-A
Jamaica	0,79	0,70	0,75	0,63	democratic-M
Suriname	0,72	0,69	0,71	0,57	democratic-M
Peru	0,78	0,58	0,74	0,52	democratic-M
Argentina	0,87	0,62	0,65	0,52	democratic-M
Panama	0,82	0,64	0,59	0,48	democratic-M
Colombia	0,75	0,53	0,65	0,52	democratic-M
Brazil	0,78	0,60	0,66	0,47	democratic-M
Mexico	0,71	0,47	0,58	0,46	democratic-M
Ecuador	0,73	0,58	0,55	0,50	democratic-M
Guyana	0,62	0,60	0,57	0,44	democratic-M
Bolivia	0,57	0,52	0,52	0,48	democratic -M
Dominican Republic	0,72	0,61	0,63	0,42	democratic-M
Paraguay	0,66	0,55	0,59	0,37	democratic-B
Honduras	0,59	0,46	0,50	0,30	democratic-B
Guatemala	0,66	0,43	0,57	0,31	democratic-B
El Salvador	0,66	0,41	0,43	0,32	democratic-B

Nicaragua	0,33	0,31	0,27	0,21	authoritarian
Venezuela	0,27	0,36	0,30	0,05	authoritarian
Haiti	0,40	0,38	0,55	0,29	authoritarian
Cuba	0,20	0,35	0,28	0,36	authoritarian

Source: Internacional IDEA (2023).

At the same time, far from presenting a laudatory or misleading narrative, the data from International IDEA (2023) also identify problematic trends, gray areas, ambiguities, and other challenges faced by the continent's existing democracies. First, while democratic regimes predominate, it is also evident that the performance of these democracies varies significantly. In operational terms, it is observed that only 5 of the 21 democracies examined would be classified as high-performing, alongside 16 countries with by medium- and low-performing democracies. It is thus possible to observe the persistence of intraregional differences, particularly in Central America, the Caribbean, and, to a lesser extent, in South America. Likewise, progress is needed in nearly all countries in the region to combat corruption, ensure judicial independence (rule of law), promote gender equality (fundamental rights), and strengthen government accountability.

The data from International IDEA (2023) are comparable and consistent with the findings of other studies on the quality of democracy in Latin America, particularly those from the Latinobarómetro (2024) and the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) project (2025).[3] In this regard, the 2024 Latinobarómetro report noted that citizen support for the democratic system fluctuated between 1995 and 2024: it reached a high of 65% in 1997 and 1998 and a low of 48% in 2018 and 2023, recovering slightly to 52% in the latest survey, in 2024. Meanwhile, support for authoritarianism remains high (16% in 2024), as well as the so-called "indifferent" (25% in 2024).

Similarly, the V-Dem project (2025) confirms that democratically oriented governments have predominated in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially between 2012 and 2025. When comparing the results of the International IDEA and Varieties of Democracy studies, similarities

3 See also the Democracy Index (EIU, 2025), particularly the so-called "bell-shaped" and "U-turn" processes of democratization and autocratization.

can be observed regarding the typology of political regimes. Basically, the sources agree on the conceptualization of Liberal Democracies (LD) or High-Performance Democracies; Electoral Democracies (ED) or Medium- and Low-Performance Democracies; Electoral Autocracies (EA) or Hybrid Regimes; and Closed Authocracies (CA) or Authoritarian Governments.

A more detailed analysis of the most recent V-Dem report results (2025) will be presented in the fourth section of this article. It is worth highlighting that both documents emphasize the excellent performance of democratic quality in countries such as Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, Jamaica, and Barbados. They acknowledge the progress achieved by electoral democracies in a second subgroup of 14 states. The same sources express concern about the results in six countries with essentially authoritarian governments or undergoing a process of de-democratization, such as those prevailing in Nicaragua, Venezuela, Haiti, and Cuba, as well as the peculiar cases of Guyana and El Salvador (Table 2).

Table 2 – Political Regimes and Quality of Democracies in Latin America, 2002–2024

Country	2002	2012	2024
Costa Rica	LD	LD	LD
Chile	LD	LD	LD
Uruguay	LD	LD	LD
Barbados	ED	ED	LD
Jamaica	ED	ED	ED
Trinidad and Tobago	ED	ED	ED
Suriname	ED	ED	ED
Argentina	ED	ED	ED
Peru	ED	ED	ED
Panama	ED	ED	ED
Colombia	ED	ED	ED
Brazil	ED	ED	ED
Ecuador	ED	ED	ED
Dominican Republic	ED	ED	ED
Paraguay	ED	ED	ED

Bolivia	ED	ED	ED
Mexico	ED	ED	ED
Honduras	EA	EA	ED
Guatemala	ED	ED	ED
Guyana	ED	ED	EA
El Salvador	ED	ED	EA
Venezuela	ED	EA	EA
Nicaragua	ED	EA	EA
Haiti	EA	EA	CA
Cuba	CA	CA	CA

LD = Liberal Democracy; ED = Electoral Democracy; EA = Electoral Autocracy; CA = Closed Autocracy. Source: Compiled by the author based on V-Dem (2025, 52).

Despite numerous upheavals, including public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, the data above suggests that the quality of Latin American democracy has demonstrated a high degree of resilience and robustness. This is especially evident when compared to the disastrous consequences generated in this region by previous waves of autocratization. In fact, from a minimalist, Schumpeterian, or procedural perspective on democracy, one can observe a reasonable alternation in the exercise of political power (executive and legislative) in most countries in the region. Furthermore, voter turnout is relatively high, political competition is intense, and the results of electoral processes are generally accepted and recognized by most actors—primarily those within the party systems (both ruling and opposition). Similarly, other procedural dimensions of democracy have shown gradual progress that deserves appreciation and recognition, such as the rule of law and accountability (interinstitutional and electoral). Similar progress can be seen in the content dimensions (freedom and equality/solidarity) and the results dimension (responsiveness) of democracy.

Therefore, it is encouraging to note that the overall performance of Latin American democracies has been positive and above the global average over the past decade, according to research centres specializing in the subject. Of course, the challenges and opportunities facing actual democracies on the continent remain enormous and overwhelming. Among

these pending tasks, consolidating the rule of law with an unequivocally republican, constitutional, and democratic orientation is commonly cited. This includes ensuring the independence and depoliticization of the judiciary, insisting on the fight against corruption (transparency, morality, and integrity), reducing violence and citizen insecurity, promoting evidence-based public policy formulation and implementation, and ensuring civilian control over military and police forces (Levine and Molina 2007).

Similar statements could be made regarding accountability (transparency, integrity, open government), the expansion of republican freedoms, equality and solidarity (civil, political, and social citizenship), or the quality of leadership. The same can be said regarding the urgent need to strengthen civic coexistence (political culture), the development of civil society and the consolidation of electoral bodies, and political and social pluralism (including freedom of expression). Likewise, regarding the encouragement of participation (in conventional ways, such as movements and associations, as well as non-conventional participation) or deliberation and related issues in the realm of international politics (regional integration, democratic clause). These are significant topics in the effort to improve existing democracies in the macro-region, especially in an adverse global context marked by persistent populist impulses and clear, unequivocal autocratic threats from national and international actors (Walker 2016). It should be added that all of this is also part of the effort to build an international order of free peoples on the continent and beyond.

A Bull in a China Shop: The Populist Challenge

Populism is one of the most controversial and debated sociopolitical phenomena in the social sciences, primarily due to its impact on the quality of democracy (Freidenberg 2007; Vilas 1995). It is well known that contemporary populism emerged in a world undergoing transformation due to industrialization, urbanization, and the disintegration of traditional social institutions, as well as a growing gap between voters' preferences and needs, on the one hand, and the political system's capacity to

process these demands, on the other.[4] Fundamentally, populism can be understood as a form of sociopolitical action and imagination situated in moments of change and crisis the articulation of relations between rulers and the ruled (Rovira 2014). Consequently, a populist moment creates opportunities for massive social mobilization and for the emergence of charismatic leaders who claim legitimacy and representativeness through a belligerent, confrontational, and, in some cases, disruptive political style (De la Torre 2020).

It should be noted that populism is characterized by narrative and empirical ambiguity. Various approaches to populism exist, particularly those that emphasize its discursive nature and capacity to expand the demos (Laclau 2001). Others highlight its political and electoral strategy (Weyland 2001), as well as its impact on macroeconomics, public administration, institutions, and governance. Additionally, some authors emphasize its ability to mobilize the people in favour of direct, deliberative, or participatory democracy, viewing it as a form of charismatic legitimacy of power. Others take a sociocultural approach (Mudde and Rovira 2017).

Several scholars specializing in this topic have proposed a wide range of alternatives for conceptualizing and interpreting specific cases. Examples include the work of John Keane (2009) and Pierre Rosanvallon (2021). These publications primarily highlight populism's capacity to establish lasting political identities, expand citizenship (civil, political, and social), as well as its fear of potential despotism and elite betrayal. They also emphasize populism's inclination to combat perceived internal or external adversaries and its tendency toward personalism, institutional decay, *continuismo*, and demagoguery (Urbinati 2019).

In the first quarter of the 21st century, populism emerged in various countries, taking on different political and ideological forms on both the right and the left. Studies and research on the quality of democracy generally regard populism as a harmful and troubling trend due to its potential to erode the political system (Bermeo 2016). Populism is often viewed as a strategy of subversion (demagoguery of "enlightened

4 The first sociopolitical movements considered populist emerged in Russia and the United States during the second half of the 19th century. Latin American populism has roots dating back to the 1930s (Vergara 2019).

prophets," administrative irresponsibility, clientelism), anti-politics, or fragile institutionalization (personalism). However, it is also understood that much of the academic and socio-political debate has sought to ignore or dismiss possible manifestations, potentialities, and contributions of this phenomenon. This is the case with the notion of anti-oligarchic popular power (Vergara 2020), unconventional (anti-authoritarian) political participation, plebeian republicanism (against tyrannies), or deliberative democracy (Pettit 2012).[5]

Between 2012 and 2025, certain charismatic leaders on both the right (Jair Bolsonaro and Juan Orlando Hernández) and the left (Nicolás Maduro and Evo Morales) employed populist strategies with varying degrees of success or failure. This leads us to discuss the quality of political leaders and the ruling class, as well as the nature of competition and party systems. For the purposes of this text, it suffices to state that populist leadership is fuelled by repressed political, social, and economic demands, as well as challenges directed at oligarchic elites, institutionalized privileges, excessive social inequality, and corruption, violence, and bureaucratic indolence (Przeworski 2019).

From this perspective, it seems clear that, in Latin American countries, we must challenge, rather than glorify, the populist myth—that is, a narrative cantered on an idealized relationship between the people and their leader in an eternal struggle against villains and traitors (both domestic and foreign) who harm the nation and its destiny (Casullo 2019). At the same time, it is urgent to elevate political culture gradually, strengthen the foundations of civic spirit and republican freedom (public

5 Beyond the well-known, complex, and turbulent relationship between democracy and populism, it is important to consider the other vertex of the triangle: the correlation between populism and authoritarianism. Beyond the well-known, complex, and turbulent relationship between democracy and populism, it is important to consider the other vertex of the triangle: the correlation between populism and authoritarianism. Although it is not possible to delve deeper into this topic of academic debate due to space limitations, it is clear that the relationship is equally difficult and multifaceted. Authoritarian leaders often seek legitimacy by implementing "populist" policies that could be classified as "bread and circuses." Such policies can be quite effective, even in the contemporary era. However, in some cases, sociopolitical mobilizations exhibiting populist characteristics may pressure autocratic regimes to open up. Ultimately, populist actions against authoritarian regimes may lead, intentionally or not, to democratically oriented transitions. Therefore, the relationship between populism and authoritarianism requires new research in historiography and political science. The deliberate actions of the so-called "friends of the people" generate this conceptual and empirical detail that needs to be better studied.

interest, solidarity, the common good), and persist in building the rule of law. Similarly, it is plausible to argue that oligarchic privilege and caudillist-militarist tyranny (Caesarism) can be countered with effective institutional reforms, capable of raising the quality of evidence-based public policies and fostering the formation of a renewed social contract (Rosanvallon 2018).

Lastly, it is important to recognize that, as long as the structural deficiencies fuelling it persist, the sociopolitical "demand" for populist leadership is likely to remain strong in countless countries across the continent and around the world. This appears to be the case with Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, a young and charismatic leader who, by employing "hardline" rhetoric against crime, has managed to maintain the support of over 90% of the population, surpassing any other current Latin American leader. At the same time, El Salvador is undergoing an accelerated process of de-democratization. Some research centres suggest that the country falls into the category of personalism, a hegemonic party system, and electoral authoritarianism (Avelar 2025).

In short, from the perspective of studies and research on the quality of democracy, containing populism poses significant theoretical, methodological, and empirical challenges (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019). Notably, this is a campaign and governance strategy, as well as a form of popular mobilization and party identity-building that has worked relatively well for its adherents in different countries around the world, whether right- or left-wing candidates and governments. In Latin America specifically, populist leaders have garnered significant popular support and accumulated power by striving to channel the political, social, and economic demands of subaltern groups that have frequently been ignored, disregarded, or marginalized by successive governments. To this end, populist leaders have not hesitated to employ demagoguery and anti-political rhetoric. In this sense, contemporary populism would be a byproduct of democracy itself, as it feeds on its unfulfilled promises and on citizens' growing dissatisfaction with the delegitimization of parties and other traditional political-institutional actors (Dahl 1989).

In retrospect, the populist phenomenon and its impact on the quality of democracy are worthy subjects for continued academic research. The populist strategy is undeniably linked to systemic and structural political and social demands, particularly in countries undergoing transformation. Therefore, studying the correlations between populism and republican institutions emerges as a priority for researchers interested in the topic. At the same time, the use of the concept in pejorative or discriminatory contexts should be avoided. Ultimately, although populist leaders are detrimental to the quality of democracy, they end up being fellow travelers (Vergara 2019). Similarly, as long as poverty, social exclusion, and political inequality persist, it is quite plausible that populism will continue its adventures, demands, and contradictions (ECLAC 2024).

The New Face of Authoritarianism: Marginal Notes on the "Third Wave" of Autocratization and Its Repercussions in Latin America

Huntington's (1993) "third wave" of democratization, which spanned from approximately 1974 to 2000, has been replaced by a new wave of autocratization, as expected. This "third wave" of autocratization, as described by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), has been identified virtually everywhere. Processes of democratic erosion and/or de-democratization have occurred alongside blatant cases of autocratization, including coups d'état, foreign invasions, concentration of power, and state implosion. Notably, this process of regime erosion and/or global autocratization has been observed even in countries considered traditional or consolidated democracies (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Meanwhile, key states such as China, Russia, and Iran have developed models of autocratization with some effectiveness and impact on other countries. These are the so-called hybrid, illiberal, or competitive authoritarian regimes.

The V-Dem report (2025) is quite clear on this point. Based on available data from 179 countries, including 25 in Latin America and the Caribbean, the report states that, currently, 88 states can be considered democracies (29 liberal and 58 electoral), while 91 nations can be considered autocracies (56 electoral and 35 closed). These figures are quite concerning. Broadly speaking, 29% of the world's population lives in democratic countries,

while 71% live in autocratic states.[6] This evidence corroborates previous findings from the same V-Dem project (Table 3).

Table 3 – Types of political regimes according to the Varieties of Democracy project, 1972–2022

	1972			2022		
	Number of Countries	Percentage of World Population (%)	Share of Global Output (%)*	Number of Countries	Percentage of World Population (%)	Share of Global Output (%)
DLD	20	17	56	32	13	39
DED	16	19	20	58	16	15
AEA	36	12	12	56	43	21
ACA	86	52	12	33	28	25
Total	158	100	100	179	100	100

*Data from 1992. LD = Liberal Democracy; ED = Electoral Democracy; EA = Electoral Autocracy; CA = Closed Autocracy.

Source: V-Dem (2023).

For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that, in most of the cases studied—including those in Latin America and the Caribbean—the strategy of de-democratization and/or autocratization included measures to restrict freedom of expression and government censorship of the media. There was also repression of civil society organizations, the weakening of the rule of law, and a decline in the quality of elections (electoral accountability). Additionally, political violence was directed at opponents, and disinformation (e.g., hate speech) was used to curtail channels for deliberation and participation. Academic and cultural freedom was reduced, and polarization increased. In certain cases, strategies

6 According to the most recent report from the V-DEM project (2025), more than 5.7 billion people—71% of the world's population— currently reside in countries with authoritarian-oriented governments. This situation includes the peculiar case of de-democratization recently observed in India. In operational terms, this primarily involves one-party states, theocracies, absolute monarchies, competitive authoritarian regimes (hybrid or illiberal), and personalist or military dictatorships. There are also some failed states, generally governed by violent political and social actors (ethnic militias, warlords, criminal gangs).

such as irregular interruption of terms of office, self-coups, civil-military coups, and military aggression by external powers against countries with democratic governments have been implemented (Diamond 2015).

Recent experience in Latin America and the Caribbean suggests that six of the 25 countries for which data are available show qualitative and quantitative results consistent with a high degree of democratic erosion and/or autocratization. These are political regimes correlated with Electoral Authoritarianism (hybrid or illiberal) in El Salvador, Guyana, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and with Closed Authoritarianism in Cuba and Haiti. Conversely, according to the same source, there has been a recent restoration or recovery of democracy in Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Suriname, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, and Brazil.[7] These countries generally experienced irregular interruptions to their terms and other situations that undermined democracy, but managed to reverse them through institutional, electoral, and republican means.[8]

Before concluding this section, it is important to briefly comment on the weakening of democracy driven by political leaders elected in free, fair, and periodic elections who, during their terms in office, promote the aggrandizement and concentration of power, restrict freedoms, generate polarization and misinformation, seek to remain in power indefinitely, and undermine the credibility and institutional framework of the rule of law and accountability (both electoral and inter-institutional). Paradoxically, the quality of political leadership and democracy is threatened by those who have made a constitutional promise or oath to uphold the norms and rules of institutional functioning. It should be added that such caudillist,

7 It is worth noting that the reviewed evidence unanimously confirms the existence of a democratic renewal process in Brazil following a troubling period of democratic system erosion. This observation is particularly relevant both at the national level and in terms of its intraregional, hemispheric, and global repercussions. The opposition's victory in free and fair elections in October 2022 and the inauguration of the new government in January 2023 were significant political and social events with positive ramifications even on the international stage (Domínguez and Suppo 2023). This underscores the importance of continuing to work toward building an international order of free peoples, especially in the Global South (Kerche and Marona 2025).

8 According to the V-Dem report (2023), the most important factors influencing the democratic renewal of these nations were: large-scale popular mobilization against governments with authoritarian impulses or tendencies, the independence of judicial authorities and electoral bodies, the unification of political and social opposition, massive political participation by citizens in elections, and the international community's support for the democratic system.

coronelist, or Caesarist tendencies have emerged in countless countries, whether high-, middle-, or low-income, and among politicians on the right, left, and center. Thus, it is evident that both civil society and the international community must monitor and denounce these types of movements that aim to erode democracy and lead to autocracy (Haggard and Kaufman 2021).

In short, as previously mentioned, the past decade has been quite turbulent for Latin American and Caribbean democracies. The "third wave" of autocratization identified by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) has been observed on the continent, particularly in terms of the erosion of democracy. It has been marked by episodes of irregular interruptions of presidential terms, self-coups, ungovernability, and other similar phenomena (Tomini and Wagemann 2018). However, compared to the impact of previous waves of autocratization, it is clear that, over the past decade, most societies and states in the region have demonstrated significant resilience and democratic entrenchment. Thus, it seems evident that the most responsible and republican political and social actors must continue to work toward an increasingly open, inclusive, and pluralistic political regime.

Concluding Remarks

Promoting high-quality democracy, curbing populism, and combating the rise of autocracy present momentous political and social opportunities and challenges to the citizens, societies, and states of Latin America and the Caribbean, both now and in the near future. In fact, over the past decade, Latin American and Caribbean democracies have achieved quite reasonable gains, demonstrating an encouraging entrenchment and resilience of the political system. Notably, even in a global context of autocratization, the region is currently the third most democratic in the world, surpassed only by Western Europe and North America. In other words, 19 of the region's 25 countries, home to over 87% of the population, have democratic regimes (Casas-Zamora 2023).

At the same time, most countries accept elections as the appropriate and legitimate mechanism for legitimizing governments and gaining

access to power. Democracy is also seen as a highly valuable, and even decisive, asset for fostering human development, economic growth, social cohesion, and regional integration (UNDP 2024). These are additional arguments to encourage other researchers to delve deeper into this interdisciplinary field of study on the quality of democracy, including its multiple dimensions (procedure, content, and results), theoretical and methodological approaches (electoral, consociational or consensual, egalitarian, deliberative, participatory, liberal, or majoritarian) and empirical cases (local, national, and subregional). It is important to note that democracy urgently needs tools and results to convincingly oppose old and new adversaries, competitors, and autocratizers, as well as structural challenges, including poverty, inequality, corruption, privilege, and impunity (Walker 2016).

That said, democracy is likely to continue thriving on the continent in the near future. The agenda for improving the quality of democracy in Latin America is well understood. Research centres and qualified analysts generally emphasize the need to persist in establishing an eminently republican and democratic rule of law (Pettit 2012). This includes numerous specific tasks, such as revising institutional design—including at the constitutional level—improving public administration, reducing impunity, violence, and corruption, ensuring the independence of the judiciary and electoral bodies, and advancing the integrity, morality, and efficiency of the civil service, to name a few (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023).

Accelerating the modernization of democracy is also recommended, particularly with regard to electoral technologies. This includes adopting electronic voting, digitizing administrative processes, and embracing open government (Borge et al. 2022). From a more philosophical perspective, many authors speculate on the urgent need to establish a new social contract between political and social actors (citizens, communities, societies, and states) with the aim of restructuring the *polis*, all within a post-pandemic context. It is worth noting that Brazilian authorities could increase international cooperation in this area, particularly given the successful experience with electronic voting machines.

Thus, it can be inferred from the above that Latin America's democratic political regimes are an extremely important asset and, therefore, deserve to be preserved, protected, and valued. In fact, according to internationally validated research, the majority of the continent's population recognizes and accepts the legitimacy of the state, the regime, the system, and the elected leaders (Morlino et al. 2019). However, the same sources suggest that public discontent regarding government performance persists, especially regarding structural challenges, inertia, and indolence—that is, the triggers that ultimately fuel populism and authoritarianism. Therefore, what has been done so far is important yet insufficient to guarantee the quality of truly existing democracies. Furthermore, in some countries in Latin America, the threat of autocratization remains evident, serious, and undeniable. Hence the indispensable and unavoidable responsibility to continue working toward the construction of an international order of free peoples on the continent.

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Public Diplomacy in Brazil: Between Promotion and Democratization[1]

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Introduction

Brazilian democracy has faced considerable scrutiny, particularly during Bolsonaro's administration, raising questions about the consolidation of its democratic practices and institutions. Furthermore, since redemocratization in Brazil is still a relatively new phenomenon, establishing and reinforcing democratic norms remains a work in progress that requires ongoing assessment and adjustment to new situations.

Democracy, however, extends beyond institutional arrangements; it encompasses social relationships grounded in participation, accountability, and the commitment to address public concerns. In this sense, Public Diplomacy emerges as a crucial element in fostering a more profound democratization process, not merely promoting national interests abroad, but also enabling more inclusive and participatory forms of both national

1 This research is based on the master's thesis entitled "Between Continuities and Ruptures: The Case of Brazilian Digital Public Diplomacy in the Administrations of Jair Messias Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva" presented by Paula Renata Silva Santos and supervised by Dr. Zhao Alexandre Huang and Dr. Bárbara Vasconcellos de Carvalho Motta in June 2025. The dataset used is available at: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.29320631.v1.

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and international engagement. Unlike traditional diplomacy, in which communication is typically understood as a "purposeful communication about politics" (McNair 2011, 4) that fosters interaction and exchange between nations, Public Diplomacy opens communication channels between governments, foreign and domestic publics, civil society actors, activists, and transnational networks.

This research examines Public Diplomacy by considering both external and internal factors, focusing on two main aspects: the shift from a traditional model to a more interactive one—illustrated by the use of social media—and the potential changes in foreign policy resulting from the presidential transition between Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—especially when considering democracy issues involving each of the politicians.

The emergence of social media has amplified the scope of diplomatic presence, using tweets, posts, and visual narratives to connect with audiences (Bjola and Holmes 2015, 208). This shift not only increases the potential of a narrative-based Public Diplomacy, through which diplomatic institutions aim to directly influence the worldview of digital publics by offering narratives that help them understand world events, but mainly opens the possibility for "two-way communication." In this dynamic, unilateral messaging is potentially replaced by a relationship-building process via dialogue and exchange between political actors and the audience, although challenges to embracing more interactive and relational functions still remain.

Brazil's Foreign Ministry (Brazil 2022) conceptualizes Public Diplomacy as an instrument for bolstering transparency and democratizing information access for domestic audiences. This involves disseminating details regarding Brazilian diplomatic activities to the national public and engaging society in foreign policy matters. In this context, digital media, a cornerstone of contemporary Public Diplomacy, serves as a pivotal channel for disseminating this information. Following this discussion, our research investigates the evolution of Brazil's Public Diplomacy in relation to democratic principles and examines how Itamaraty has conducted its activities on the Ministry's Instagram during the antagonistic administrations of Bolsonaro and Lula.

Through a content analysis, we analysed Itamaraty's Instagram posts of 2019 and 2023, the two first years of each government, focusing not only on traditional components, such as national promotion, but also on contemporary aspects, including the democratization and transparency of diplomatic practices, and public interaction.

Public Diplomacy and Democracy

The term Public Diplomacy (PD) was first coined by Edmund Gullion in 1965 as an attempt to disassociate the spread of public information from the idea of propaganda, as the latter had become synonymous with the dissemination of strongly biased information and/or a problematic way of communication (Cull 2006, 15). During that period, the United States sought a term that would clearly differentiate its "democratic information practices" from those of the Soviet Union (Cull 2009, 17). As Cull notes, the United States Information Agency (USIA) (1953-1999) welcomed the term Public Diplomacy since it granted diplomatic status to the Agency's work. Moreover, the term contained an implicit argument for the centralization of Public Diplomacy mechanisms, suggesting a single concept of a nation's approach to international opinion (Cull 2009).

Initially, PD was characterized by a top-down, unidirectional approach, wherein governments disseminated information to foreign audiences through conventional capital-intensive methods, such as radio, exhibitions, and libraries (Tago 2017). This process emphasized the logic of unilaterally transmitting information to what were perceived as passive audiences abroad (Huijgh 2016). This mode of communication, often termed "one-way communication" (Melissen 2005), did not anticipate interactions or feedback, granting the sender comprehensive control over the message's content and dissemination. Consequently, despite the adoption of the term "Public Diplomacy" to distance oneself from propaganda, this traditional form often exhibited a strong propagandistic dynamic (Cull 2006; Gonesh and Melissen 2005).

Public diplomacy became, then, an academic discipline, situated within the fields of political science and international relations, studying the process and practices conducted by nation-states and other international

actors to engage global publics in the reach of national interests. As Huijgh (2016) notes, Public Diplomacy is a multifaceted concept, practice, and multidisciplinary field. Functioning as a diplomatic practice, it predates its formal conceptualization and scholarly foundations, centring on diplomatic communication between political entities and people, typically in foreign countries, but also, according to some perspectives, domestic publics. Like other diplomatic tools, Public Diplomacy evolves in response to societal shifts such as democratization, globalization, and advances in communication.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Public Diplomacy and democracy is ambiguous. While it is often overlooked that Public Diplomacy also has non-democratic origins—including Soviet practices after the revolution or China's current state-led public diplomatic communication—it is within participatory democracies that Public Diplomacy thrives. As Melissen (2011) observes, Public Diplomacy has become a metaphor for the democratization of diplomacy itself, with a growing number of actors—beyond state officials—playing a role in an area once restricted to a few. Crucially, success in diplomacy today increasingly depends on the government's ability to collaborate with actors outside the state, particularly those embedded in transnational civil society.

Since the emergence of digital media and other Information and Communication Technologies, new behaviours have emerged, and the exchange of information has become more interactive. According to Gilboa, information and communication technologies "have significantly affected the practice and theory of PD because they have created a global arena for direct dissemination and interactivity" (2016, 546). Such transformations have led to the differentiation between what is understood as Traditional Public Diplomacy and New Public Diplomacy—or Twenty-First-Century Public Diplomacy or Public Diplomacy 2.0 (Gilboa 2008; Huijgh 2016; Melissen 2005; Zaharna and Huang 2022).

Although countries still engage with conventional methods of Public Diplomacy, most simultaneously seek innovative approaches as "Traditional Public Diplomacy strategies continue to stress more over fewer, faster over slower, and louder over quieter styles of communication"

(Snow 2020, 10). The emergence of the "New Public Diplomacy" marks a paradigmatic shift, not by rejecting traditional methods but by integrating new communicative practices and online tools (e.g. blogs, podcasts, and social media), moving communication to real-time interactions and expanding to a world audience (Cull 2009; Tago 2017). Huijgh (2013) even notes that digital technologies have blurred the boundaries between domestic and international audiences, creating a more interconnected diplomatic environment. In this sense, unlike the Cold War-era focus on government-to-people communication, modern PD promotes people-to-people exchanges, fostering two-way interaction and relationship-building (Istad 2020) and encouraging mutual understanding (Cull 2009). One radical transformation is the shift in focus from mere message transmission to dialogic engagement (Zaharna 2010; Zaharna and Huang 2022). Reinforcing the PD character, this transformation helps move beyond propaganda towards building (inter)national connections (Kruckeberg and Vujnovic 2005; van Doeveren 2011). However, the mere use of new communicative practices and online tools does not guarantee one that will indeed interact with the public, as exemplified by Cull (2013), analysing the US State Department's emphasis on one-way broadcast media, and Huang (2022), investigating China's Twitter communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of digital platforms has become particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic as it accelerated the digitalization of diplomacy, compelling political leaders to adopt tools like Google Meet, Skype, and Zoom for diplomatic engagements (*Bcw Twiplomacy* 2020). This context brings a critical debate: the differentiation between "digitalization" and "digital diplomacy." According to Bjola and Manor (2024), whereas digitalization refers to the technical process of incorporating new technologies into diplomatic work, digital diplomacy involves a broader outlook, imposing different "grammar rules" that must incorporate elements such as visual simplicity, emotional framing, computational personalization, and engagement hybridization (i.e. the integration of both physical and virtual activities to avoid online fatigue).

This digital transformation significantly affects the working routines of Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). Digital diplomacy modifies not

only Public Diplomacy practices but also how diplomats approach strategy, negotiation, and crisis management (Bjola and Holmes 2015). According to Bjola (2018), technological acceleration forces Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) to develop their understanding of digital technologies and integrate them into foreign policy strategies. If the MFAs cannot adapt to the situation, they risk losing their ability to influence international policy outcomes effectively (Bjola 2018).

Besides the promotion of digital diplomacy through official websites, MFAs' integration into social media has become an established trend. Social media not only enhances proximity between MFAs and the public, bypassing traditional intermediaries (e.g. the media) (Rashica 2018), but also gives feedback regarding the reached audience. The rise of Big Data enables digital Public Diplomacy to manage data flooding and turn it into a source of productive and usable information, thus developing more targeted strategies (Bjola 2018; Maltby 2011). Moreover, the accessibility and cost-free nature of social media allow countries, regardless of their global standing, to participate in the digital realm of Public Diplomacy.

Nevertheless, digital diplomacy introduces significant challenges. First, high exposure in digital spaces can increase diplomatic vulnerabilities, especially due to the celerity, permanence and virality of online content (Sandre 2013). Second, the elimination of intermediaries raises the risk of misinformation and disinformation (Tucker et al. 2018). Third, there remains a knowledge gap among diplomats and MFAs in utilizing social network technologies (Rashica 2018). Finally, issues of data protection and cybersecurity remain a critical concern, and MFAs and diplomats must be prepared to avoid the presence of hackers and information leakage (Adesina 2017).

Public Diplomacy and Democracy in Brazil

According to Itamaraty, Public Diplomacy traditionally entails government communication with foreign audiences to inform and influence public opinion, and that, unlike official diplomacy, it prioritizes transparency, targets broader, albeit often strategically selected, audiences, and focuses on shaping the attitudes and behaviours of various publics

rather than engaging exclusively with governmental actors. Yet, Itamaraty also includes the national public as a target audience for Public Diplomacy, "disseminating the activities of Brazilian diplomacy to the national public, as well as an instrument for dialoguing with society on issues related to foreign policy"[4] (Brazil 2022).

An analysis of the Ministry's Institutional Strategic Planning (Brazil 2020) reveals that several of Brazil's strategic objectives are closely aligned with Public Diplomacy. These include: (i) promoting Brazil's image and culture internationally; and (ii) enhancing the visibility of Brazilian products and identity abroad. According to the Ministry's Integrated Value Chain (Cadeia de Valor Integrada do Ministério das Relações Exteriores, in Portuguese) Public Diplomacy falls under the purview of the institutional communication management sector, which is also responsible for the Ministry's website and social media platforms. Together, these elements demonstrate that Public Diplomacy is not merely symbolic, but also a strategic and operational priority within Brazil's foreign policy agenda.

Pestana (2020) emphasizes that reinforcing the country's image as a responsible and constructive global citizen is a key aspect of Brazil's Public Diplomacy. One particularly salient dimension of Brazil's Public Diplomacy has been its cultural diplomacy, historically deployed to "win hearts and minds." According to Pestana (2020), its roots can be traced back to the early 20th century, notably under the leadership of Barão do Rio Branco. A former journalist, Rio Branco integrated media outreach into his foreign policy practices, engaging both domestic and international audiences through press participation and the strategic use of major international events, such as the Latin American Scientific Congress of 1905 and the Pan-American Conference of 1906.

However, Brazilian foreign policy has traditionally been perceived as a state policy, characterized by a strong sense of continuity and institutional stability (Burges and Bastos 2017). This view reinforces the notion that foreign policy operates largely outside the sphere of everyday public political debate and remains controlled by the diplomatic bureaucracy (Burges and Bastos 2017). Given Itamaraty's historically traditionalist

4 Translation from the Portuguese version of the website.

and insular orientation, scholars such as Milani and Pinheiro (2013) argue for a critical reassessment of the Ministry's role within the wider context of Brazilian public administration and its interactions with civil society. In this regard, the increasing integration of digital technologies, especially social media, offers a valuable avenue for narrowing the perceived gap between Itamaraty and the public.

Itamaraty has gradually, albeit cautiously, adapted to this shift, acknowledging the need to modernize its communication practices. The mere presence of the Ministry on social media platforms signals an awareness of the demands of contemporary diplomacy, even if this engagement remains timid. Among Itamaraty's digital initiatives, one notable example is the Itamaraty Digital Project, which involves creating a virtual repository to preserve and modernize the Ministry's archival units (Brazil 2025). This initiative not only enhances transparency but also broadens public access to diplomatic documents and institutional memory. In parallel, Itamaraty has expanded its online service, such as the consular services page (*Portal Consular*, in Portuguese), which facilitates interactions between citizens abroad and the state.

Despite these advancements, Pestana (2020) argues that meaningful transformations remain necessary, especially in light of a communication environment continuously defined by algorithmic mediation and competing narratives. The Ministry must invest in training personnel with digital literacy to navigate new forms of communication (Pestana 2020). In this regard, Kos-Stanišić and Car (2021) highlight that Brazil still lags behind in fully using the internet's potential for Public Diplomacy. Although the country has embraced the logic of New Public Digital Diplomacy, in order to rebrand itself as a modern and attractive international actor, its efforts remain largely confined to static web pages, with underdeveloped engagement on dynamic social media platforms.

Currently, Itamaraty maintains a presence on eight digital platforms: Bluesky, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Yet, the degree of emphasis on the domestic audience is evident in the discrepancies between different language versions of the Ministry's website. While the Portuguese version lists all eight platforms, the English and

Spanish versions include only five. In our view, this asymmetry suggests a prioritization of national publics in Brazil's digital diplomacy strategy. The timing of Itamaraty's social media engagement is also interesting. While the Ministry's official page on Public Diplomacy does not specify when it began its online presence, archival research shows that the oldest post on its Instagram account dates from September 18, 2015, during the administration of Dilma Rousseff. With this in mind, in the next section, we analyse how Brazil has operationalized Public Digital Diplomacy during the first year of Bolsonaro's (2019) and Lula's (2023) presidencies, on social networks, through its engagement on Instagram.

Public Diplomacy in Antagonistic Contexts: A Composite of the Bolsonaro and Lula Administrations

As a political figure, and especially as president, Jair Bolsonaro's conduct posed a threat to Brazil's democratic order (Human Rights Watch 2021). Conversely, Lula's election campaign was predicated on the discourse of combating the potential democratic dangers emanating from Bolsonaro's re-election and, consequently, safeguarding Brazilian democracy. In this sense, it is pertinent to examine how foreign policy, through its Public Diplomacy dimension, evolves in these apparently disparate periods and to comprehend how democratic concerns and popular participation in Itamaraty affairs manifest in these two eras.

The present analysis focuses on the initial six months of Bolsonaro's term and the first six months of Lula's third term in office. This time frame is of particular significance as it encompasses the initial 100 days in office, a period during which administrations delineate their agendas. The material furnishes a substantial amount of content, thereby enabling a meticulous examination of the extant publications.

In this sense, after establishing the time frame, all Instagram posts from the relevant periods were collected. Each post was saved using MAXQDA's Web Collector, preserving complete publication data, including images, captions, likes, and comments. These posts were also organized into a chronological Excel table, recording data such as the number of likes/comments, language used, presence of hashtags/emojis, and who

appears in the images. While some data were obtained directly from the tool, elements such as hashtags, emojis, language, and people were manually counted.

In MAXQDA, content was further analysed through a coding system that categorized each post's themes and elements. This helped identify recurring themes and other intersections. To allow for synthesis and comparison between Bolsonaro's and Lula's periods, different code types were created, including: content types (12 codes, e.g., calls to action, cultural promotion, bilateral meetings); subjects/themes (52 codes in Bolsonaro's sample, 92 in Lula's, with overlaps); people appearing in images (16 codes, e.g., president, diplomat, citizen, political figures); web language (3 codes: call to action, informal tone, addressing the public).

The codes for web language were literature-based and pre-defined, while the others emerged during the analysis. The study employed both quantitative methods (e.g., counting hashtags and code frequencies) and qualitative methods (e.g., interpreting meanings and communication patterns). In this context, content analysis was selected as the research method, as it facilitates the establishment of codifications and categorizations, thereby enabling the identification of patterns and trends within themes and communication structures (Stemler 2000). Therefore, we can compare the two administrations based on specific parameters.

General Information

During the first six months of Bolsonaro's presidency, 71 posts were published, the first of which was on January 1, 2019. That day marked the inauguration of the new president, and the ministry made five posts about the event, indicating special attention to the occasion. On the other hand, the first six months of Lula's presidency featured a total of 97 publications. This shows an increase in the amount of content made available from one sample to the other. However, the inaugural post was not published on the day of the presidential inauguration, i.e., the first day of government. Actually, it was published on January 3, 2023, marking the day on which Minister Mauro Vieira assumed his position as head of Itamaraty. Despite the difference in the number of posts made, in both

periods, the Ministry published content on a monthly basis, showing a pattern of attention in feeding Itamaraty's Instagram page.

Language Used

It is noticeable in both cases that there is a preference for using the Portuguese language over all others for communicating with the public. In the sample related to Bolsonaro's administration, it is noteworthy that all captions are in Portuguese, with only two posts being translated into other languages (one into English and Spanish, and the other into English only). In the case of Lula's third term, this focus becomes exclusive. Portuguese is the only language used in the posts, and no other languages are used in the translation of the content. Despite Itamaraty's efforts to establish an online presence in various languages, as evidenced by its presence on the official website and on X (formerly Twitter), there is a conspicuous absence of such efforts on its primary Instagram account. Instead, the dissemination of information in other languages on this social media platform is primarily related to the accounts linked to Brazilian embassies and consulates.

This demonstrates a clear target public for the posts on this specific account: the domestic audience. This phenomenon is curious, considering that the prevailing discourse on Public Diplomacy tends to prioritize communication with external audiences. Consequently, the utilization of this virtual space for discourse with Brazilians can be regarded as a tangible manifestation of the ministry's commitment to fostering closer ties between the Brazilian populace and foreign policy agendas.

Public Engagement and Interaction with the Audience

The relationship with the audience in this case permeates several elements. First of all, it can be said that during Bolsonaro's term, the posts received a total of 65,188 likes and 2,456 comments. When comparing this period with the Lula period, it is essential to note that during the second one there was an increase in the total number of likes, reaching 73,466; however, because there was a greater number of posts, the average per post dropped from 918 (during Bolsonaro's period) to 757. One thing that

stands out during the Lula period is the significant drop in the number of comments, to 1,269, which can be explained by a behaviour that goes against the more democratic practices of Public Diplomacy: the restriction of public comments.

During the initial six-month period of the Bolsonaro administration, all posts had open comment sections, with only two posts remaining without comments. On the other hand, in the initial six-month period of the Lula administration, restrictions prevailed. A significant proportion of the posts, amounting to 79.4% (n = 77), were accompanied by restricted comment sections. This restriction hinders the public's capacity to engage directly and participate in the content disseminated on the social network, which goes against the principles of New Public Diplomacy. The lack of a free space for citizen expression inhibits the publication of negative feedback on government-linked platforms. This results in a reduced understanding of how the audience is responding to that content.

Another problematic issue in relation to interaction with the public is the Ministry's ability to respond to comments left by the audience. In both periods examined, the Itamaraty account failed to respond to the messages left by the audience on its social media posts. In this regard, an analysis was conducted to determine the extent of one-way communication (with a greater emphasis on broadcasting and passive audiences) and two-way communication (with a greater emphasis on interactivity and audience participation) in each of the periods under analysis.

Despite the Bolsonaro administration's evident limitations in terms of interaction, as evidenced by its failure to respond to comments, a review of the parameters established by Melissen (2005) and Istad (2020) reveals that, during the period under investigation, Itamaraty exhibited certain characteristics of two-way communication. This type of communication process occurs when there is dialogue and exchange between diplomats and the audience, relationship-building processes related to the possibility of interaction, mutual understanding, and an engaging audience or recipient (Melissen 2005; Istad 2020). In this context, it can be attributed to the constant accessibility of the comment sections, which fosters the potential for interaction, albeit not always manifested in actual engagement.

Moreover, the comments made by the public, which are visible to other users, enable third parties or ministry members to access the public's opinion, thereby establishing a "public message-response" relationship.

However, during Lula's administration, the instrumentalization of Instagram as a platform aimed at broadcasting is evident. In this sense, the way of interacting with the audience in this period is strongly based on one-way communication (Melissen 2005; Istad 2020). The messages are mostly sent unilaterally by the government, which, by restricting the comments section, makes it clear that it has no intention of receiving feedback or interaction. Here, Itamaraty controls the communication, and the user becomes more of a passive recipient.

Analysing in more detail the likes and comments in each period, it is apparent that in both scenarios, posts focusing on members of the Foreign Ministry were among those with the highest positive feedback (likes). During Bolsonaro's term, three of the five most popular posts pertain to the Brazilian diplomatic corps (Posts 11, 19, and 46). Notably, Post 11, which depicts the swearing-in of the new diplomats, garnered the highest number of likes during the period under analysis. Notably, this post received significantly higher positive feedback than any other post in this period.

Similarly, during Lula's term, three of the five most liked posts (Posts 1, 3, and 6) are associated with prominent individuals within the ministry, namely the foreign minister and the secretary general. In this respect, the inauguration of Maria Laura da Rocha is particularly noteworthy, as she is Brazil's first female secretary general of foreign affairs, and her post was the second most liked, representing a historic moment for Brazilian diplomacy.

Regarding the posts with the most comments, different patterns were found. During Bolsonaro's period, four of the five posts with the most comments are related to the agendas of the Bolsonaro government itself. One example is a publication that shows a meeting with the Venezuelan representative, supported by the Bolsonaro government (but not by Venezuela), Juan Guaidó.

In Lula's case, the data is even more striking. A total of four posts show comments (Posts 62, 82, 92, and 96), and one post received a comment, but it was hidden by Instagram (Post 5). Post 62, which highlights Lula's visit to Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), merits particular attention for two reasons. First, it was the post that received the most interactions (i.e., likes and messages) in the sample. Second, the post received a substantial number of negative reactions, mainly related to the restriction of comments on Instagram. Many users expressed concerns in the post about the inability to comment on previous content, but the ministry did not respond or provide any clarification. In this sense, the restriction, in conjunction with the lack of clarification regarding it, raises questions about the extent to which the online space can be democratic.

A curious phenomenon emerges when examining the four posts containing visible comments. Despite the absence of a thematic correlation due to the diversity of the issues addressed, a common characteristic emerges: all four posts were disseminated in conjunction with other Instagram accounts, a practice known as a collaborative post. A further examination reveals a consistent pattern: in all four cases, the Itamaraty account functions solely as a secondary account, responsible for accepting the collaboration request, while the primary account, belonging to the other organization or ministry,[5] is the one that makes the post. This is evident in the names of the other accounts appearing before the Itamaraty account.

Written Communication

During Bolsonaro's term, it can be observed that the communication team primarily expresses itself in a more traditional and neutral tone, avoiding the polemical terms employed by the president and the foreign minister, such as (anti) globalism. However, it tries to introduce some of the language features of the Internet. Notably, 43.7% (n = 31) of the posts contain hashtags, and 25.4% (n = 18) contain emoticons or emojis, elements that are typical of the language used on social networks. Also, on seven occasions, the caption of the posts speaks directly to the user,

5 *Secretaria de Comunicação* (Post 62), *Tribunal de Contas da União* (Post 82), *Agência Brasileira de Cooperação* (Post 92), and *Casa Civil* (Post 96).

such as "Have you ever thought about becoming a diplomat?!" and nine times there are calls to action, such as "Tag in the comments so you don't miss this opportunity!" including two posts that are only geared towards this type of action. Equally important to note is that the captions added to the images in the analysed posts are concise and often lack detail. As a result, the messages are not only straightforward, focusing on the visual aspect of the photographs, but also have a low degree of verbal sophistication and linguistic complexity. This can be seen, for instance, in the first post made by the administration, which has no caption and only shows an image with the hashtag "*VemPraPosse*", meaning "come to the (presidential) inauguration," featuring the colours of Brazil.

In contrast, during Lula's term, the captions are more extensive and provide more details about the information contained in each post, when compared to the previous sample. Additionally, while the tone adopted is predominantly formal, the Lula administration employs informal vocabulary more frequently compared to the previous government, adopting a language more suited to use on the Internet. A total of 24 instances of more informal expressions can be found in the publications.

An example of this can be seen in the use of terms that are common in spoken language, but unexpected for official speeches. In some posts, Itamaraty's Instagram chooses to make informal use of the pronoun we/us and opts to write "a gente" instead of "nós." The caption employs a style that is more jovial and less traditional. Additionally, hashtags were used in 48.5% (n = 47) of the posts, while emojis were employed in 46.4% (n = 45) of them.

This period also presented an increase in publications with more engaging phrases. The account referred directly to the user 21 times during the Lula administration. An example of this can be seen in post number 54, which reads "Do you know what the #Itamaraty has done to support Brazilians abroad these past #100days?" In terms of calls to action, these are the ones with the most expressive number, appearing 36 times, as in "Follow us on (social) networks!" (post 59).

Another factor that stands out in the posts' captions is the visible creation of a narrative that includes the new government. This narrative,

which appears in a number of posts, presents the rebirth of Brazil, mainly through the recurrent use of #oBrasilVoltou (Brazil is back). In this context, a constant implicit parallel is drawn between Brazil under Bolsonaro and the real Brazil that would have returned with Lula.

Visual Composition

The visual aspects are the points of greatest convergence between the two periods. In both cases, there is a predominance of images of individuals: 78.9% (n = 56) for Bolsonaro and 63.9% (n = 62) for Lula. Additionally, the ministers (Ernesto Araújo and Mauro Vieira) are the figures most depicted on Itamaraty's Instagram during each of the periods. When viewed through a more expansive lens, it becomes evident that, in the two cases under analysis, the group most frequently represented is the one formed by Brazilian diplomats, given that the minister and the secretary general of Itamaraty also serve as diplomats.

Also, in both cases, the images posted on Instagram contributed to a more formal, objective, and professional representation of the individuals depicted. Despite images displaying smiles and friendly encounters, often featuring vibrant colours in the posts, the photographs are captured in a classic style. Even those that show the backstage environment exhibit a style reminiscent of traditional diplomatic photography, characterized by a high degree of formality. This finding highlights the patterns observed by Mølle, Adler-Nissen, Golovchenko, and Eggeling (2024) regarding diplomatic representations online: the symbolic authority of their profession, the performance of social order, and the professional ideals of international mediation.

Content of the Posts: Categories

In the Bolsonaro sample, it was possible to see that 25.4% (n = 18) of the posts were linked to Itamaraty work updates; 22.5% (n = 16) to bilateral meetings; 15.5% (n = 11) to festive dates; 12.7% (n = 9) to Itamaraty events; 7% (n = 5) to multilateral meetings; 5.6% (n = 4) to Itamaraty's promotion; 4.2% (n = 3) to dissemination of Brazilian culture;

2.8% (n = 2) to Bolsonaro's administration promotion; 2.8% (n = 2) to call to action; and 1.4% (n = 1) to backstage content.

In the Lula sample, an extra category was added: Info Services. This addition was necessary because a significant number of posts were made to provide information to citizens, whether it be how to update a document, what consular services they have access to, or an explanation of the difference between the work of the embassy and the consulate. In short, this category would be linked to content with more practical aspects for the audience. During this period, Instagram emerged as a prominent source of helpful information for the public.

Thus, when analysing the distribution of categories in the second sample, it was possible to see that 27.8% (n = 27) of the posts were linked to bilateral meetings; 23.7% (n = 23) to Itamaraty work updates; 12.4% (n = 12) to Info Services; 11.3% (n = 11) to Lula's administration promotion; 8.2% (n = 8) to festive dates; 8,2% (n = 8) to Itamaraty events; 6.2% (n = 6) to multilateral meetings; and 2.1% (n = 2) to Itamaraty's promotion.

One information that stands out when comparing the two periods is the increase in "*administration promotion*" content from one period to the other, from 2.8% to 11.3%. Many of the posts are related to a recap of Lula's first 100 days in office and, above all, the "Brazil is back" narrative. The Lula administration's promotion of Brazil covers various topics, such as foreign policy, social aid, education, and health. Some topics, for example, do not seem to be directly related to the work of Itamaraty, as evident in post 67, which discusses the federal government's work on the topic of school safety.

Content of the Posts: Themes

Regarding the distribution of theme codes, fifty-two codes were assigned to Bolsonaro, and ninety-two codes were assigned to Lula. The ten most recurrent codes for the Bolsonaro period were: Trade (eleven times), United States (seven times), Venezuela (seven times), Cultural Diplomacy (six times), Brazilian Diplomats (six times), Argentina (five times), Chile (five times), Meeting with South American Countries (five times), Africa (five times) and Inter-ministerial Cooperation (five times).

In addition to examining the codes that are part of the most recurring group, it is important to understand which ones are excluded.

The topic related to the environment was not coded at all in the analysed sample, and the term "direitos humanos" (in English, "human rights") is notably absent from the sample. It is particularly noteworthy to mention the absence of the latter, given that the defence of human rights appears as one of the constitutional principles guiding Brazilian foreign policy.

On the other hand, the ten most recurrent codes for Lula were: Environment (nineteen times), Latin America and Caribbean Initiatives (eighteen times), Africa (eighteen times), Consular Services (sixteen times), Guidance for Citizens (fourteen times), Trade (fourteen times), Inter-ministerial Cooperation (thirteen times), United Nations (thirteen times), Europe (twelve times), Human rights (twelve times). Although there are indications of repetition, as illustrated by the codes on Africa, trade, and inter-ministerial cooperation, it is evident that, when making a general comparison of these codes with the previous analysis, significant differences emerge.

The initial discrepancy can be observed in the most recurrent code (Environment). During Lula's term in office, the environment emerged as the most prevalent topic of discussion on this social network. In contrast, during the previous administration, there was a complete absence of topics related to the environment. Other relevant codes were identified in this analysis, including the Amazon (six occurrences) and Climate (five occurrences). This observation signifies a notable shift in the agenda with the transition in government, underscoring the strategic importance that Lula's team assigned to environmental issues.

A thorough examination of the prevailing themes during these periods provides a comprehensive understanding of the country's attempts to present a particular image to its public and the extent to which each government sought to project its own identity. During the Bolsonaro administration, the primary focus was on cultivating an image of Brazil associated with economic concerns, particularly trade. In contrast, under

Lula, the country's image was characterized by a stronger alignment with the environmental agenda.

Furthermore, the presence of themes such as cultural diplomacy, interministerial cooperation, consular services, and guidance for citizens demonstrates the utilization of social media as an informational platform for target audiences. This platform serves as a conduit for disseminating information regarding the ministry's endeavours, as well as providing practical insights that directly impact the daily lives of citizens, such as access to events and information regarding available services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Brazil has sought to evolve its political practices and incorporate virtual spaces as a means of implementing Public Diplomacy. Nevertheless, challenges persist. The primary emphasis is on promoting the organization. Despite the emergence of compelling evidence regarding the democratization of foreign policy, as evidenced by the dissemination of debates across social networks such as Instagram, it is imperative to consider certain salient factors.

Despite introducing a communication style that is more palatable to the audience and the platform format, the ministry's approach to investing in its relationship with the public still presents specific challenges. The primary deficiency lies in the difficulty of creating communication that is focused on relationship-building and community-building. Even when the comments section is available to the public, the ministry does not respond to questions posed during either period. Thus, Instagram serves less as a platform for fostering interactivity and more as a broadcasting platform.

It can, therefore, be seen that Itamaraty has adapted to the new times, especially when it comes to Digital Public Diplomacy. The first step is clear: the ministry understood that it needed its own space on social networks and is constantly feeding its public with content. As a fairly traditional institution, Itamaraty has not given up visually demonstrating a more professional image of its diplomatic corps, but it has adapted its language to the digital public, which is an important step.

By joining Instagram, Itamaraty has also been able to get closer to the public. The ease of access to information about the ministry's work helps to reduce the feeling that the ministry is too distant and insulated. The fact that people can leave comments can also help citizens feel more active and encouraged to participate in foreign policy discussions. Nevertheless, Itamaraty must still overcome significant challenges to improve its presence online. Regarding the digital environment, an authentic connection with the public is not facilitated by the mere transmission of messages without reciprocal interaction. The public must perceive the Itamaraty Instagram account as a platform that fosters some kind of dialogue and brings the Brazilian government closer to its audience.

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Part III
Democracy in Context: Emerging Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges

Algorithmic Transparency and Democratic Accountability: Global Frameworks and Regional Perspectives

Atahualpa Blanchet[1]

Introduction

In the digital age, the intersection between algorithmic governance and democratic accountability has become a defining challenge for institutions, regulators, and civil societies. As digital platforms increasingly mediate public discourse, the opacity of algorithmic decision-making, particularly in content recommendation systems, poses serious risks to democratic processes. These systems not only shape individual perceptions of reality but also influence collective behaviours, polarize public opinion, and can be weaponized during electoral campaigns.

From the second half of 2023 onward, Brazil began presiding over the MERCOSUR bloc, assumed the presidency of the G20 during 2024, and will lead the BRICS in 2025. This sequence, which took place during the third term of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, enabled the alignment of discussions around key issues for strengthening democracies, such as the integrity of information in digital media, as well as coordinated actions to mitigate hate speech and political violence fuelled by the misuse and appropriation of digital and communication tools. For this reason, progress and consensus can be seen, materialized through a series of multilateral instruments and cooperative actions in public policy.

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Within the framework of the MERCOSUR regional bloc, it is also worth highlighting the Declaration of Principles on Human Rights in the Context of Artificial Intelligence and the Special Declaration on the Integrity of Information in Digital Media. Both instruments were approved and enacted during Brazil's pro tempore presidency of MERCOSUR in the second half of 2023. These instruments complement another one approved in the first half of the same year, whose theme is the Promotion of a Culture of Peace and the Fight against Hate Speech and Political Violence.

These instruments embody the background and structural variables of political violence in the region, amplified by sophisticated tools capable of influencing the perception of reality of thousands and millions of people through the use of a digital device that fits in the palms of their hands. Through so-called recommendation algorithms, digital platforms choose, by means of a profile reading carried out through data collection, what will appear in a given user's feed and in what order. They also, of course, select what will not appear, determining the reach of certain content and prioritizing specific types of approaches and narratives in a space and arena that is public but not neutral.

The political and economic use of these tools to generate environments and contexts more favourable to maximizing interests places the so-called big tech companies at the centre of the debate about the influence they may exert on democracies across the most diverse latitudes. Across the globe, we have witnessed how algorithmic infrastructures are instrumentalized for political purposes, turning digital platforms into powerful tools of influence that threaten electoral transparency and equality.

Over the past few years, the Democracy Observatory of the MERCOSUR Parliament promoted discussions about the role of digital platforms in processes like the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, in which fake news and the dissemination of false information through the firehosing strategy used platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram to influence the results at the polls, leading a far-right candidate to the presidency of the republic.

Although the role of parliamentary diplomacy is still incipient and with limited degrees of effectiveness, the regional Parliament, a few years later,

was the first international body to denounce a coup d'état that occurred in Bolivia in 2020, widely known to have received international support from actors interested in the country's lithium reserves, a key resource for the production of batteries for electric vehicles. Coincidentally, one of the main interested parties became the owner of the Twitter platform a few years after the event.

This type of dynamic was observed in the United States during the 2016 electoral process. The Cambridge Analytica case revealed how data from users of digital networks can be handled for political and electoral purposes, demonstrating in practice the use of microtargeting and algorithmic targeting strategies, although questions remain regarding the actual potential and effectiveness of such actions in influencing voters' behaviour (Karpf 2019).

During the 2022 presidential elections, Jair Bolsonaro's campaign also extensively leveraged WhatsApp to carry out political microtargeting, spread disinformation, and promote conspiracy theories. Investigations by *Agência Pública* and *UOL* (2020) revealed coordinated digital operations that exploited social media algorithms to manipulate public opinion and undermine confidence in the electoral system.

These emblematic cases illustrate how algorithmic systems are not only driven by commercial interests but also serve strategic political goals, reinforcing the urgent need for regulatory mechanisms that ensure transparency, auditability, and accountability in digital platforms.

Algorithmic transparency, as a principle, is also closely related to safeguarding the quality of democracy in the 21st century. Concrete transparency mechanisms, as well as the exchange of good practices through international cooperation, can contribute to mitigating the risks of democratic deficits arising from the use of AI and big data systems. Yuval Noah Harari (2024), for example, examines the interrelationships between the information environment, power, artificial intelligence, and political systems.

Furthermore, global instruments such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021), the G20's Digital Economy Working Group declarations (2023) and BRICS' commitments on digital

cooperation and governance (BRICS 2023) provide a multilevel framework for promoting transparency and algorithmic accountability.

Throughout 2024, projects related to the implementation of the UNESCO Recommendation in Latin American and Caribbean countries actively contribute to addressing the implications of using artificial intelligence systems for upholding democratic values during electoral processes.

In a connected effort, the consultation process with experts for the development of a UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Neurotechnology (2024a, 2024b) mapped more than 100 experts across the region in fields such as neuropsychology, artificial intelligence system development, neurorights, ethics and philosophy professors, human rights specialists, and neurologists bringing together professionals from the humanities, health, and information technology sectors.

The debate on the development of the Recommendation is still ongoing. Nevertheless, this chapter will share some insights on the work carried out and the need to address the implications of neurotechnology and its integration into the programming of digital platforms. Although still a relatively emerging topic, it is more than necessary to bring it to the forefront of the agenda on the use of AI and its application in influencing individual and collective perceptions of reality and its potential political consequences. For this reason, part of this chapter is dedicated to exploring specific notions related to neurotechnology.

1. The Rise of Algorithmic Mediation in Public Discourse

Digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) deploy recommendation algorithms designed to optimize user engagement. These systems, governed by opaque commercial logics, determine what users see, when, and how. The consequence is a personalized public sphere, where information flows are fragmented, echo chambers are reinforced, and collective deliberation becomes increasingly difficult.

Algorithmic systems no longer just reflect preferences; they actively shape them. As Innerarity (2020) suggests, these technological mediators

have become a new form of political power, one that operates without being democratically elected or held accountable. The absence of transparency about how these algorithms function, the data they use, and the outcomes they prioritize, undermines the basic principles of public reasoning.

Scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff (2019) have also warned of the consequences of opaque algorithmic systems. In particular, she identifies a new form of economic domination, *surveillance capitalism*, where behavioural data is not only extracted but used to predict and modify behaviour at scale.

Electoral processes, long protected by legal guarantees of fairness and transparency, now face new vulnerabilities stemming from algorithmic manipulation. During the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and the 2018 Brazilian elections, algorithmic recommendation systems on social media platforms were exploited to amplify disinformation, sow mistrust in democratic institutions, and influence voter behaviour.

The use of microtargeting, dark ads, and engagement-based ranking models can distort democratic deliberation by exposing voters to tailored content designed to provoke emotional reactions rather than informed decision-making. In this context, Harari warns that those who control data can potentially control societies, especially when combined with emerging neurotechnologies that interact with human cognition and attention.

In response to growing concerns about digital integrity, several multilateral forums have begun to outline ethical and regulatory instruments to promote transparency and accountability. The G20, through its Digital Economy Working Group (2023), emphasized the need for "human-centric AI governance" and the development of trustworthy digital infrastructures in its 2023 declaration.

Similarly, the BRICS countries have advanced initiatives on data sovereignty, AI ethics, and algorithmic transparency. Their 2022 joint statement recognized the need to develop governance mechanisms that respect national particularities while ensuring responsible innovation.

At the regional level, MERCOSUR's Digital Agenda (2021–2025) includes commitments to algorithmic explainability, transparency in platform governance, and the promotion of ethical standards in AI

deployment. These initiatives, although still in early stages, represent critical efforts to construct a digital order anchored in democratic values and public accountability.

In recent years, the MERCOSUR regional bloc has taken important steps toward safeguarding democratic values in the digital era. Notably, under Brazil's pro tempore presidency in the second half of 2023, MERCOSUR approved two key instruments: the Declaration of Principles on Human Rights in the Context of Artificial Intelligence and the Special Declaration on the Integrity of Information in Digital Media.

These documents complement another regional declaration adopted earlier in 2023 that addresses the Promotion of a Culture of Peace and the Fight against Hate Speech and Political Violence. Together, these statements constitute a regional commitment to confronting the structural drivers of political violence and information manipulation in the digital sphere, particularly through algorithmically mediated content.

At the heart of these efforts is the growing recognition of the need to ensure algorithmic transparency in digital platforms. This principle, which entails the ability to understand, audit, and hold accountable the decision-making processes of algorithmic systems, is essential to mitigate the risks of manipulation, discrimination, and opacity in digital interactions. In the context of electoral processes and public debate, the opacity of algorithmic recommendation systems responsible for determining which content is shown or hidden from users poses a significant threat to democratic deliberation. Transparency mechanisms must be accompanied by enforceable frameworks for audibility and accountability, allowing regulators, civil society, and users themselves to scrutinize the functioning of these systems.

Algorithmic transparency is also a cornerstone of the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence from 2021, which identifies it as one of the core principles for the development and deployment of ethical and trustworthy AI. Across global and regional debates, this principle has emerged as one of the most crucial for ensuring responsible AI governance. Its operationalization within the regulatory frameworks of digital platforms is not merely a technical necessity but

a democratic imperative. For MERCOSUR and other regional bodies, advancing concrete mechanisms to implement this principle will be key to protecting democratic institutions and public trust in the face of increasingly powerful algorithmic systems.

2. Algorithms as Institutions: Shaping Perceptions and Structuring Public Life

The rise of algorithmic governance has transformed not only how decisions are made but also who makes them, and with what degree of legitimacy. In this challenging context, Professors Ricardo F. Mendonça, Fernando Filgueiras, and Virgílio Almeida (2023) offer a fresh perspective by framing algorithms as emerging global institutions that shape interactions between humans and machines. They argue that algorithms create a new political order by establishing rules that carry rights and responsibilities but often bypass democratic processes of decision-making, participation, and control, raising fundamental concerns about accountability and governance in the digital age. In this context, algorithms, far from being mere tools, now function as institutional actors with material consequences for democracy.

This perspective is further developed in the theoretical framework of Algorithmic Institutionalism, which posits that algorithms behave like non-state institutions, subtly enforcing rules, priorities, and social hierarchies without public oversight. These systems guide behaviors, define what is visible or invisible in public debate, and shape perceptions of truth, fairness, and urgency.

As platforms curate reality for each user, the phenomenon of informational echo chambers and filter bubbles becomes central. Algorithms prioritize content that confirms existing beliefs and emotional biases, reducing the exposure to dissenting views and reinforcing polarization. This creates a fragmented public sphere where democratic dialogue becomes nearly impossible.

The current landscape is shaped by a volatile mix of factors, including misinformation, fake news, fraud, and the manipulation of electoral systems, which together undermine any genuine transparency. Despite record

voter turnout worldwide, many elections remain clouded by suspicion. For those seeking to undermine democracy, technology becomes a tool to seize power while maintaining a *façade of legitimacy* over deeply flawed social contracts.

At the heart of this issue are algorithms sets of instructions designed to achieve specific goals that increasingly influence daily life and decision-making, from simple tasks to complex policy implementation. Often touted as objective and neutral, these systems are used to optimize resource allocation in both public and private sectors. Yet, critical research reveals that algorithms frequently deepen social inequalities, reinforce biases related to race and gender, and perpetuate injustices, raising urgent questions about how to ensure technology truly advances social inclusion and equity rather than exploitation.

Former Uruguayan president José "Pepe" Mujica has repeatedly cautioned against the uncritical embrace of technological power. In various public addresses, Mujica has emphasized that democracy is not a consumer product nor a technical system, it is a cultural practice that requires ethical commitment, solidarity, and time. In his words:

> Technology should serve life, not enslave it. If algorithms are dictating how people think, feel, and vote, then democracy is being replaced by a machine. (Mujica 2016)

This humanistic warning resonates in an era where behavioural prediction and nudging techniques are integrated into digital architecture. Platform algorithms subtly shape not only attention but also emotional states, moral judgments, and political inclinations. This dynamic challenges the very conditions necessary for democratic freedom: informed choice, deliberation, and accountability.

3. Democratic Resilience in the Age of Neurotechnology and AI

Looking beyond recommendation systems, the convergence between neuroscience and AI is pushing the boundaries of digital influence. Neurotechnologies, such as brain-computer interfaces (BCIs), promise to decode and eventually manipulate cognitive states. Although these

technologies are still nascent, scholars and ethicists warn of scenarios where autonomy and mental privacy could be compromised.

Algorithmic systems are already designed to capture attention, trigger dopamine responses, and modulate behaviour in ways that border on neurological conditioning. The next phase of algorithmic governance could thus enter the neural realm, raising profound questions about freedom of thought, consent, and democratic agency. As Innerarity (2020) argues, contemporary democracy must confront not only traditional forms of political power but also the increasingly opaque technological mechanisms through which information and public attention are mediated.

Currently, one of the most significant advancements with potential dystopian effects is neurotechnology. By enabling the capture and analysis of brain data through sensors and the integration of disciplines such as neuropsychology and neurology with AI-driven algorithmic systems, neurotechnology presents significant individual and collective possibilities, opportunities, and risks.

Neurotechnology can identify neural patterns, emotions, and mental states, and even anticipate behaviours by monitoring brain activity. While it offers advancements in health, education, and the enhancement of intellectual, behavioural, and psychomotor capacities, it also presents complex ethical challenges, particularly concerning mental privacy and the potential for cognitive manipulation.

For instance, emotional reading functionalities are already being implemented to monitor and assess worker motivation through facial recognition technologies linked to applied neuropsychology algorithms. The potential use of these tools in educational settings raises numerous questions.

The protection of neural data is very important to prevent access to the human mind from leading to discrimination or manipulation. Mental data captured by these technologies are extremely sensitive and can reveal deeply personal aspects. The principle of mental privacy is a cornerstone of neurorights, associated with data protection and security.

Recent developments underscore the urgency of establishing ethical and responsible frameworks to safeguard mental integrity and the right

to privacy. For example, in Chile, a company was sanctioned for failing to protect an individual's neural monitoring data. The judicialization of neurorights violations is a trend likely to emerge in various parts of the world in the coming years.

In this context, UNESCO is spearheading the development of a Recommendation on the Ethics of Neurotechnology. An international group of 24 experts has been convened to construct a multilateral reference document addressing neurotechnology issues. Through regional consultations with experts from diverse disciplines, the Recommendation aims to consolidate a broad range of concerns regarding the use of neurotechnologies in areas such as neuromarketing, workplace surveillance, and human behaviour manipulation. The expert group has emphasized the urgency of establishing an ethical framework to address the dilemmas posed by this emerging technology.

An ethical aspect of neurotechnology use is informed consent, which, in this context, must go beyond mere formal agreement. The report from the Latin American expert consultation for UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Neurotechnology, conducted in the first half of 2024, highlights the need for genuine and effective informed consent, enabling individuals to clearly understand the implications of using their neural data. This is particularly relevant for vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, and individuals with disabilities, who require consent procedures tailored to their capacities and contexts.

Respect for mental self-determination is another fundamental pillar governing the ethical use of neurotechnology. Individuals should have the right to freely decide on the use of digital tools that affect their mental states, without pressure or coercion, which is especially pertinent in work or educational environments.

Neurotechnology also poses a risk of inequality, as access largely depends on economic and geographic factors. While these technologies can significantly advance disease treatment and cognitive capacity enhancement, there is a risk that such innovations will benefit only those who can afford them.

During UNESCO's consultation, experts emphasized the importance of implementing inclusive policies to ensure equitable access to neurotechnologies in both developed and developing countries. They also suggested creating international cooperation agreements to allow nations with lower technological development to benefit fairly and equitably from these tools. Inequality may once again manifest in the realm of international relations.

In the coming years, neurotechnology and its implications should gain prominence on the agendas of governments, international organizations, academia, and human rights movements, grounded in neurorights. Establishing international norms to protect mental privacy and cognitive integrity will be necessary in a world where technologies have the power to transform and influence behaviour and reality perception both individually and collectively.

Neurotechnology should be developed in alignment with principles of justice, dignity, and respect for human rights. It is and will be strategic not to rely solely on the goodwill of decision-makers in international forums, governments, and legislative bodies. An interdisciplinary and intersectional approach will also be essential to move beyond deterministic perspectives on neurotechnology's impacts. As a starting point, we must recognize that this issue pertains not only to the future but to the present.

4. Algorithmic Transparency and Democratic Accountability: Global Frameworks and Regional Perspectives

As artificial intelligence systems become more embedded in the infrastructures of modern societies, concerns about their influence on democratic institutions and processes have grown significantly. In particular, the increasing reliance on algorithmic systems by digital platforms, especially recommender algorithms, has reshaped how individuals access information, engage in public discourse, and form political opinions.

These systems, often opaque and designed to optimize engagement rather than truthfulness or diversity, contribute to the formation of so-called information bubbles and echo chambers, distorting perceptions of reality and weakening the foundations of democratic deliberation.

In response, several multilateral organizations have taken steps to establish ethical and regulatory frameworks aimed at ensuring that artificial intelligence serves democratic purposes rather than undermining them. One of the most prominent global instruments in this regard is the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, adopted in 2021 by 193 Member States.

This document articulates a set of principles designed to guide the development and deployment of AI in ways that promote human dignity, equity, and democratic accountability. The Recommendation is particularly notable for its comprehensive approach to AI ethics, moving beyond technical standards to address broader issues of governance and power.

At the core of the UNESCO Recommendation is the principle of transparency and explainability, which asserts that AI systems, especially those with significant impact on people's rights and freedoms, must be understandable to users and subject to scrutiny by independent actors. Transparency here is not merely a technical feature but a democratic imperative: without clarity about how decisions are made or how content is prioritized, citizens cannot meaningfully exercise oversight or challenge outcomes. This concern is echoed by scholars like Innerarity (2020) who argues that democratic institutions must evolve to regulate the "invisible architectures of power" that algorithms represent.

Another key principle is accountability and responsibility, which calls for clear attribution of responsibility in the development, deployment, and consequences of AI systems. In a democratic society, the ability to assign responsibility, whether to a government agency, private corporation, or software developer, is essential for maintaining trust and ensuring redress for harm. The UNESCO framework emphasizes the need for mechanisms of redress and legal liability in cases of algorithmic discrimination or manipulation.

The principle of inclusiveness and fairness is also central. Algorithmic systems must be designed and implemented in ways that avoid reinforcing existing social biases or excluding marginalized communities. In the context of democratic life, this means ensuring that digital platforms

do not silence dissenting voices or amplify dominant narratives at the expense of pluralism.

As Yuval Noah Harari (2018) has pointed out, AI systems have the capacity to "hack human beings" by analysing behavioural data to manipulate choices and preferences. If unchecked, this power can be used not only to shape consumption but also to skew political participation, thus threatening the integrity of democratic processes.

Closely linked to these concerns is the principle of non-maleficence, or the obligation to do no harm. When applied to algorithmic governance, this means preventing the use of AI to manipulate public opinion, disseminate disinformation, or unfairly influence electoral outcomes. The use of microtargeting in political advertising and the deployment of psychographic profiling to influence voters, infamously associated with the Cambridge Analytica scandal, illustrate how algorithmic systems can be weaponized to subvert democracy rather than strengthen it.

Beyond UNESCO, other international arenas have also developed normative frameworks to address these challenges. The G20 Digital Economy Working Group, for example, has endorsed a set of Principles for Trustworthy AI, grounded in the human-centric model developed by the OECD. In its 2024 Ministerial Declaration of Maceió, the G20 Digital Economy Working Group (2024) reaffirmed the importance of algorithmic transparency, the prevention of digital disinformation, and the protection of electoral integrity. While these principles are non-binding, they play an important role in establishing soft law norms that influence national regulation and transnational cooperation.

In parallel, the BRICS countries, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, have approached AI governance through a more sovereigntist lens, emphasizing digital self-determination and resistance to what they perceive as Western hegemony in technology governance. Declarations from recent BRICS summits, such as the Johannesburg Declaration of 2023, underline the right of states to regulate algorithmic systems in accordance with national interests, including cultural and political values. While less focused on individual rights, these initiatives contribute to a

multipolar debate on AI governance, highlighting the risks of technological dependency and digital colonialism.

Within Latin America, regional integration mechanisms like MERCOSUR have also begun to engage with issues of AI and democracy. Although still in early stages, MERCOSUR's Digital Agenda working groups have called for greater transparency in algorithmic content moderation, cooperation to combat electoral manipulation, and the development of regional ethical standards for digital platforms. These efforts align with broader calls from civil society organizations and scholars across the Global South for AI governance that reflects not only universal ethical standards but also local realities and democratic aspirations.

Together, these instruments reflect a growing consensus around the need for global frameworks that promote algorithmic transparency and democratic accountability. Yet, the translation of these ethical principles into effective governance remains an open challenge. As Innerarity (2020) remind us democracy is not simply about institutions but about the capacity of a society to govern the complexity of power, a capacity increasingly tested by the inscrutable operations of artificial intelligence.

Conclusions

The convergence of neurotechnologies and artificial intelligence marks a turning point in human development, where technological advances affect not only social structures but also the cognitive and biological dimensions of life. As the enhancement of mental capacities becomes possible, there are real risks of deepening global inequalities. Individuals with greater resources may gain exclusive access to cognitive augmentation tools, while more vulnerable populations are left behind, exacerbating social disparities and undermining the principle of distributive justice.

At the international level, instruments such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence provide relevant principles to guide the governance of both AI and neurotechnologies. Principles such as transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness are essential to protect cognitive integrity and prevent harm. In this context, the recognition of neurorights, including mental privacy and protection

from algorithmic manipulation, must play a central role in ensuring that technological advancements are grounded in human dignity and individual autonomy.

However, ethical principles alone are not sufficient. The effective implementation of these guidelines depends on strong democratic institutions, active civil society participation, and interdisciplinary collaboration capable of anticipating impacts and shaping solutions. In a world where algorithmic systems influence behaviours, political opinions, and perceptions of reality, the lack of transparency and oversight amplifies threats to democratic life. Without mechanisms of accountability and redress, these systems may be used to spread disinformation, erode institutional trust, and manipulate electoral processes.

This landscape calls for global cooperation, but also for attention to regional specificities. The emerging efforts in Latin America, through platforms such as MERCOSUR and the increasing involvement of civil society and academia, demonstrate the importance of adapting ethical principles to local realities. At the same time, the diversity of approaches between the Global North and South, or between multilateral and sovereigntist perspectives, highlights the need for inclusive dialogue on technology governance. Regulation of neurotechnology and AI must reflect both universal values and the multiple understandings of democracy across societies.

Ultimately, the governance of these technologies cannot be left solely to markets or closed decision-making bodies. It requires political imagination, citizen participation, and effective regulatory action. In a world where algorithms and neurotechnological devices influence decisions, social bonds, and ways of thinking, protecting human rights, cognitive autonomy, and democratic participation becomes a strategic urgency. This is not a challenge for the future, but a responsibility for the present that demands collective, bold, and justice-based responses.

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Freedom of Expression, Right to Information and Disinformation: Challenges of Democracy in the 21st Century

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Concepts have histories. They appear at specific times, change meanings at times, disappear sometimes. This has been true of the names of entities we classify as distinct political arrangements.
(Adam Przeworski)

A growing phenomenon has challenged democracies worldwide and threatened their most fundamental pillars. Disinformation, understood as the deliberate use of false information to influence the recipient(s) of messages, is a phenomenon that, while not new—the use of lies in politics is as old as politics itself—has found fertile ground in the digital age and the rise of technological platforms, which in many cases act as true amplifiers or meaning bubbles, rapidly spreading false or harmful messages or reinforcing negative beliefs. The consequence has been the degradation of public debate, the rise of hate speech, and a challenge to freedom of expression and the effective exercise of the right to access information. This, of course, has not only challenged debates at the national level but also has a global dimension, threatening the very foundations of multilateralism.

This chapter will examine the scope and limitations of disinformation concerning the rights to access information and freedom of expression for democracies. It will also review, from a comparative perspective, initiatives aimed at addressing this scourge, with an emphasis on Chile's experience.

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Ultimately, it seeks to foster a reflection on potential ways forward and the necessity of rethinking our democracies in light of new challenges.

Part 1: Lie, Lie… Disinformation and Freedom of Expression

The discussion around disinformation is now deeply embedded in our everyday conversations and is constantly present in the denunciations of public actors. It is no longer just about issues tied to electoral campaigns, but rather a phenomenon that permanently accompanies our public debates.

The first concrete global case of high-impact disinformation or *informational pollution* was the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, vividly portrayed in the documentary *The Great Hack* (2019). It showed how profiling on social networks, through unregulated use of personal data—at that time, Facebook—was used to create targeted campaigns based on lies, aimed at manipulating voter groups. This became a documented case, later sanctioned by the appropriate UK authority,[3] of political manipulation for electoral purposes, as seen in the Brexit campaign.[4] We later saw similar patterns replicated in electoral campaigns around the world, where the use of false information and voter segmentation became a standard practice. However, it was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that the phenomenon reached more alarming proportions. In the face of such an extreme and deep threat, the manipulation and use of lies worked against scientific evidence and the messages of public authorities who were trying to persuade the population while helping overcome the health crisis. From then on, this has become a constant part of our reality, no longer limited to exceptional moments like elections or pandemics.

In recent years, we have also witnessed the rise of specific groups who endorse these narratives under the guise of defending "freedom of expression." Of course, lying in politics is nothing new. The famous

3 In 2019, Facebook agreed to pay a £ 500,000 fine imposed by the Information Commissioner's Office, the UK's data protection watchdog, for its role in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. However, as part of the settlement, Facebook did not admit liability.

4 Brexit was the referendum to decide whether or not the United Kingdom should remain in the European Union. The campaign was rooted on the manipulation of information based on the use of Facebook account information, allowing the creation of segmented and false messages that targeted a group of the population using this platform.

phrase attributed to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels—"Lie, lie, something will stick"—remains notorious, as do the debates among Greek philosophers about political persuasion as manipulation. What makes today different is the accessibility and amplifying power of digital platforms. It is estimated that between 4.6 and 5.5 billion people[5] now have a cell phone with internet access.

It is also well known, according to a study by the MIT Media Lab (2018), "The Spread of True and False News Online," that false news has a greater capacity to be distributed than trustworthy news. At the same time, people are increasingly less able to distinguish between real and false news—a situation that is only worsened by the constant use of algorithms by platforms and the more recent use of Artificial Intelligence. This technology, often operating in an opaque manner, not only transforms our patterns of information consumption by generating echo chambers and reinforcing our beliefs, but also enables the creation of audiovisual content that, although false, appears so realistic as to deceive us. This phenomenon has undoubtedly altered public debate and the ability of democracy, in particular, to foster conditions for free, informed, and pluralistic dialogue.

While the twentieth century saw the expansion of democracy, with universal suffrage as one of its most significant achievements, the twenty-first century is marked by this phenomenon arising from within democracies, which threatens their future or forces their redefinition. In that sense, while technological determinism should not drive the debate about democracy's future, it is undeniable that technology has altered our lives and social relations, and with that, the forms and practices of democracy.

Indeed, less than 50% of the world's population currently lives under democratic regimes, according to *The Economist's Democracy Index 2024*.[6] Democracies today coexist with growing trends of degradation, tied to public dissatisfaction and the rise of populisms and autocracies that

5 This represents around 60–67% of the global population.

6 In fact, according to this study, only 45% of the world's population lives in a democracy, 39% under authoritarian rule, and 15% in "hybrid regimes" that combine electoral democracy with authoritarian tendencies.

weaken democratic systems, often using democracy's own tools.[7] Of course, dissatisfaction with democracy is not a new phenomenon. As early as the 1980s, Norberto Bobbio (1986) wrote about the "malaise in democracy," and in the 1970s, Robert Dahl (1974) introduced the concept of polyarchy to describe the range of real and potential democratic systems that fall short of the ideal. In response to this, the scholar Leonardo Morlino defined a "good democracy" as one that not only exists formally but also fulfils three essential dimensions—outcome, content, and procedure—which allow for an assessment of its real quality.

This reality, a form of governance that has always coexisted with some degree of dissatisfaction, now faces a new challenge in the age of disinformation. Indeed, as Robert Dahl (1974) emphasized, a core element of democracies is the existence of freedom of expression and public debate. Freedom of expression also includes, as a pillar of international law, the right to access public information. What is truly at stake when disinformation and informational pollution proliferate is not only the integrity of informed public discourse but also freedom of expression itself and the right to information, thus affecting one of the fundamental rights necessary for the exercise of democracy.

The right to freedom of expression and access to information is firmly grounded in international human rights law and constitutes a cornerstone of democratic societies, as these ensure transparency, accountability, and informed public debate. In this context, State institutions are not merely holders of public information; they are custodians of a public good. This framing underlines the duty of States to guarantee that individuals can access information without having to justify a personal interest, thereby reinforcing the principles of open government and democratic governance.

International legal instruments have robustly enshrined these principles. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), a foundational text for the modern human rights system, upholds that:

7 According to the 2024 Latinobarómetro Report, Resilient Democracy, 65% of those surveyed declare dissatisfaction with democracy. On the other hand, 25% of Latin Americans are indifferent to what type of regime exists in their country.

> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

This principle was reaffirmed and further detailed in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which guarantees the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of borders, through any medium of choice. It also establishes that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference or coercion regarding his or her opinions. At the regional level, Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights (1969) similarly recognizes that:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought and expression. This right includes freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, in print, in the form of art, or through any other medium of their choice.

Significantly, this right is not subject to prior censorship, but only to subsequent liabilities that must be explicitly established by law and justified by the protection of the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, or public health or morals.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in its Advisory Opinion OC-5/85 (1985), expanded on the implications of Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights, stating, "freedom of expression encompasses both an individual and collective dimension." The former ensures that individuals are not arbitrarily restricted from expressing their ideas, while the latter establishes a social right to receive information and access the thoughts expressed by others. This dual dimension reinforces freedom of expression as a cornerstone of a democratic society.

One of the most influential cases in the Latin American context is *Claude Reyes et al. v. Chile* (2006), where the Inter-American Court ruled against the Chilean State for denying access to public environmental information. The Court held that the State had a positive obligation to provide such information, even in the absence of a direct personal interest. It emphasized that its fulfilment is essential for public scrutiny

and democratic accountability. This landmark decision was instrumental not only in shaping Chilean legislation, including the development of the *Ley de Transparencia* (Transparency Law), but also in advancing the recognition of the right to access information throughout Latin America.

Further recognition of the right to information came in 2004, when the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted a resolution affirming that "access to public information is a requisite for the very exercise of democracy," and reiterating, "that states are obliged to respect and promote respect for everyone's access to public information."

These legal foundations have had profound policy implications. As a result of this evolving normative framework, numerous countries, including Chile, have not only enacted specific laws on transparency and access to information but have also recognized these rights in their constitutions. In Chile's case, this international momentum directly influenced its domestic legislative reforms, positioning the country as a normative actor advocating for access to information as a democratic imperative in international forums.

Chile's foreign policy has incorporated these commitments by championing the right to information in multilateral forums, emphasizing its role in promoting good governance, strengthening institutions, and facilitating civic participation. Through its engagement in the OAS and the United Nations, Chile has consistently supported resolutions and initiatives that promote media freedom, government transparency, and public access to official records. These efforts are not only reflective of Chile's internal democratic transformation but also an expression of its belief in the universality and indivisibility of human rights.

In an increasingly challenging international environment marked by authoritarianism, opacity, and disinformation, reaffirming and defending the principles of free speech and public access to information is both a moral obligation and a strategic imperative. The right to information is a foundational element for democratic resilience and a critical resource for international legitimacy in foreign policy practice. Indeed, this is precisely why it is not surprising to observe that a significant portion

of disinformation efforts are directed not only against democracy and its institutions but also against the multilateral system. The constant attacks, for example, on the 2030 Agenda or United Nations agencies, as observed on social media, are a clear expression of the threat posed to the very foundations of an international system based on rules and shared values. The promoters of these strategies operate based on anomie and the deliberate intention to undermine the laws of the game that underpin the system we have built.

Part 2: Chile's Foreign Policy, a Commitment to Democracy

Chile's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation over the past five decades. The country transitioned from a military dictatorship (1973–1990) to a democracy committed to human rights, the rule of law, and transparency. This shift not only reshaped Chile's domestic political landscape but also redefined its role in the international community. Today, Chile actively promotes democratic values through its participation in multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. The nation's foreign policy is guided by principles of international law and human rights, ensuring that its engagement with the world aligns with democratic ideals.

During Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, Chile's foreign policy was characterized mainly by international isolation. The regime faced widespread condemnation for human rights abuses, leading to sanctions and strained diplomatic relations with many democratic nations. However, Chile maintained strategic alliances with countries that overlooked its authoritarian rule for economic or geopolitical reasons.

With the return to democracy in 1990, Chile underwent a profound shift in its foreign policy. The newly elected government of President Patricio Aylwin sought to rebuild international trust by prioritizing human rights, transparency, and adherence to international law. The country re-engaged with global institutions, signed major human rights treaties, and adopted a diplomatic approach centred on democracy promotion. This new direction marked Chile as a reliable and committed partner

in the global community, reinforcing its identity as a nation that values multilateralism and cooperation.

Chile has become an active participant in key multilateral organizations, using these platforms to advocate for democratic values and human rights. For example, it has played an essential role in the UN, supporting resolutions that promote democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights. It has been a vocal advocate for strengthening global governance structures that uphold these principles. The country's participation in UN peacekeeping missions and its support for the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) doctrine highlight its commitment to preventing human rights violations worldwide.

As a member of the OAS, Chile has supported initiatives aimed at defending democracy in the Americas. It has actively contributed to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which establishes democracy as a fundamental right for all citizens. Chile has also been involved in diplomatic efforts to address regional political crises, advocating for peaceful solutions that respect democratic institutions and human rights. Within CELAC, Chile has worked to foster regional dialogue on democracy and human rights. It has promoted initiatives to enhance transparency, combat corruption, and ensure greater access to information. Chile's engagement in CELAC reflects its broader strategy of regional integration and cooperation, with a focus on democratic governance as a cornerstone of stability and development.

In that sense, Chile's foreign policy decisions are firmly rooted in international law and human rights norms. The country has ratified key international treaties, including the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights and the Convention Against Torture. This legal framework ensures that Chile's diplomatic actions align with global human rights standards. Additionally, Chile's commitment to gender equality in foreign policy is evident in its adoption of a Feminist Foreign Policy approach. This initiative aims to integrate gender perspectives into diplomatic efforts, thereby reinforcing the nation's commitment to inclusivity and equality in global affairs.

Chile's evolution from an authoritarian regime to a democratic state has significantly shaped its foreign policy. The country has emerged as a leader in promoting democracy, human rights, and international law within multilateral organizations. Through its active participation in the UN, OAS, and CELAC, Chile continues to advocate for democratic values, demonstrating that foreign policy can be a powerful tool for strengthening global governance and protecting human rights. As Chile navigates future challenges, its commitment to democracy will continue to be a defining feature of its engagement with the international community.

Part 3: The Right to Information in Chile's Diplomacy and Global Governance

The right to information is not only a democratic imperative within national borders but also a cornerstone of responsible and legitimate international governance. In the case of Chile, this principle has been strategically embedded into its foreign policy, influencing the country's diplomatic engagements and its participation in multilateral forums. The defence and promotion of transparency have become hallmarks of Chile's international identity, reflecting both its post-dictatorship commitment to democratic deepening and its evolving role as a normative actor on the global stage.

At the regional and international levels, Chile has persistently advocated for access to information as a critical enabler of democratic governance, institutional accountability, and citizen trust. This advocacy is evident in Chile's engagement with the Organization of American States (OAS), where the country has supported resolutions and initiatives aimed at strengthening transparency, the right to public information, and state responsiveness to citizen demands. Chile has also championed the inclusion of the right to information in regional dialogues on anti-corruption, electoral integrity, and digital governance—issues that are deeply intertwined with the health of democratic institutions.

One of the areas where Chile's transparency agenda has been obvious is in the negotiation and implementation of international trade agreements. Recognizing the need to counter perceptions of opacity

and exclusion in trade policymaking, Chile has pushed for the inclusion of transparency provisions in its bilateral and multilateral agreements. These provisions often require the publication of trade texts, stakeholder consultation processes, and mechanisms for monitoring compliance—all of which contribute to making trade policy more accountable to citizens. Chile's leadership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and its agreements with the European Union, among others, reflect its effort to institutionalize transparency as a standard in global economic governance.

Beyond trade, climate diplomacy has become a prominent arena for Chile's transparency-driven foreign policy. As the host of the COP25 climate summit and an early signatory of the Escazú Agreement, Chile has emphasized the importance of public access to environmental information, particularly for vulnerable communities that are disproportionately affected by climate change. The Escazú Agreement is particularly significant as it is the first international treaty to explicitly link environmental protection with human rights and access to information. The country's support for this agreement underscores its understanding that environmental justice cannot be achieved without complete transparency, inclusive participation, and the ability of civil society to hold both public and private actors accountable.

Chile's work in peacebuilding and international security frameworks also reflects its commitment to transparency. Through its participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions and post-conflict stabilization efforts, Chile has advocated for the use of open information systems to monitor human rights conditions, document transitional justice processes, and ensure the inclusion of affected communities in peace processes. These efforts are informed by Chile's own experience with transitional justice and underscore its belief in the value of public truth-telling as a foundation for reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Central to the credibility of Chile's international leadership on transparency is its domestic framework, particularly the aforementioned *Ley de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública*, Law No. 20.285, enacted and adopted in 2008. This law established a legal and institutional

foundation for open government in Chile, including the creation of the *Consejo para la Transparencia*.[8] The law embodies the principle that public information belongs to the people and must be accessible unless its restriction is legally justified and proportionate.

The law was not merely a response to internal democratic demands. Still, it was also shaped by international norms and jurisprudence, including the landmark ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of *Claude Reyes et al. v. Chile*. In that case, the Court found the Chilean State in violation of Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights for denying access to environmental information. This ruling catalysed Chile's legislative efforts and affirmed the international legal obligation of States to guarantee public access to information proactively.

The *Ley de Transparencia* introduced a robust framework that requires all public bodies—ministries, regional governments, municipalities, and publicly funded institutions—to publish key information online proactively. This includes budgetary data, contracts, organizational structures, and decision-making processes. It also established a formal procedure for individuals to request specific information and receive timely responses, with a presumption in favour of disclosure unless a constitutionally or legally grounded exception applies. The *Consejo para la Transparencia* has played a crucial role in professionalizing public sector transparency practices, training civil servants, issuing binding rulings in cases of non-disclosure, and fostering awareness of access to information as a democratic right.

The impact of the law has been fundamental. It has contributed to reducing information asymmetries between the State and citizens, facilitated investigative journalism, and enhanced public participation in policymaking. Importantly, it has also positioned Chile as a regional reference point for institutional transparency. In international forums, Chile has frequently displayed its legal and institutional model as an example of how post-authoritarian societies can institutionalize openness and rebuild trust in public institutions. Moreover, the law has informed

8 Translated as the "Transparency Council," created in 2008, whose mission is to contribute to strengthening democracy in Chile through accountability and social control, by guaranteeing its exercise, overseeing its compliance and promoting the content of the right of access to public information and transparency in public service.

Chile's positions in global governance debates, including its contributions to the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 16 (which emphasizes access to justice and accountable institutions) and its role in the Open Government Partnership. By aligning domestic reforms with international norms, Chile has effectively bridged internal democratic development with its external credibility and influence.

In this way, the *Ley de Transparencia* has not only reshaped the internal functioning of the Chilean State but also reinforced its foreign policy posture. It exemplifies how democratic governance and the right to information can be institutionalized, defended, and exported as part of a coherent and principled international engagement strategy.

This is why Chile has consistently promoted its transparency law as a model in regional and international forums, contributing to knowledge-sharing and peer-learning initiatives that aim to strengthen democratic governance. Through platforms such as the Open Government Partnership and various UN-led development initiatives, Chile has shared best practices on proactive disclosure, citizen participation in policy design, and digital platforms for government accountability. These contributions have positioned Chile as a regional leader in developing more transparent and responsive governance models.

Moreover, Chile's emphasis on transparency is not merely a technical or procedural priority—it is a political and ethical commitment tied to the defence of human dignity, civic empowerment, and the legitimacy of public institutions. By promoting access to information in global governance processes, Chile advocates for a vision of diplomacy that is participatory, accountable, and rooted in the principles of human rights and democratic inclusion.

As the global order confronts complex challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and technological disruption, Chile's approach underscores the importance of information rights in fostering trust and legitimacy. Whether negotiating trade, shaping environmental commitments, or contributing to peace and security, Chile demonstrates that access to information is not a peripheral issue—it is a precondition for effective, democratic, and sustainable international cooperation.

Part 4: Disinformation and the Digital Age

In the contemporary international landscape, disinformation and misinformation have emerged as pervasive threats to democratic institutions, civic trust, and the stability of multilateral cooperation. The exponential growth of digital technologies and social media platforms has enabled the rapid dissemination of false or misleading information across borders, eroding the quality of public discourse and weakening the foundations of informed citizenship. Addressing the spread of disinformation is not only a domestic priority but also a growing concern in the realm of foreign policy and international diplomacy. At the domestic level, Chile has experienced the impact of coordinated misinformation campaigns, particularly during electoral cycles, episodes of social unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These campaigns have tested the resilience of public institutions and raised urgent questions about how to preserve democratic deliberation in an increasingly digitalized information ecosystem. In response, Chile has strengthened its institutional capacities to detect and respond to digital disinformation, while reinforcing legal safeguards for freedom of expression and the right to access trustworthy information.

In the field of foreign policy, disinformation poses distinct challenges. State and non-state actors can weaponize it to manipulate narratives, undermine multilateral institutions, or discredit democratic processes in rival countries. Recognizing this, Chile has integrated the defence of information integrity into its diplomatic strategies. This includes advocating for international cooperation to promote transparency in digital communications and accountability for actors who intentionally spread false content that harms democratic processes or human rights.

A key dimension of this challenge is the role of digital platforms and technologies in amplifying disinformation. The algorithms of major social media companies often prioritize engagement over accuracy, allowing harmful content to circulate widely and rapidly. Chile has voiced concern over this phenomenon in international forums, calling for stronger regulation of platform accountability, while simultaneously defending the principles of Internet freedom and the right to information. The country's

approach seeks a balance between protecting democratic deliberation and avoiding overreach that could constrain legitimate expression.

Chile's engagement in multilateral initiatives to combat disinformation has been evident within the Organization of American States. Through its participation in working groups and regional declarations, Chile has supported the development of collaborative frameworks that enhance digital literacy, promote fact-based journalism, and equip democratic institutions with tools to identify and respond to coordinated manipulation efforts. These efforts aim to create a shared regional understanding of the risks associated with disinformation and to develop cooperative mechanisms to mitigate its effects. Furthermore, Chile has supported international standards for ensuring access to reliable information, emphasizing that countering disinformation must not compromise human rights. In alignment with the recommendations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, Chile has emphasized that the most effective antidote to disinformation is more information, grounded in transparency, pluralism, and public accountability.

As part of its broader international engagement on information integrity, Chile has also deepened its cooperation with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the area of disinformation and media trust. Recognizing the OECD's role as a key platform for policy dialogue, data-driven analysis, and best practice exchange among democratic nations, Chile has actively participated in initiatives that address the societal and democratic risks posed by disinformation in the digital age. In particular, Chile has contributed to the OECD's program, which seeks to promote evidence-based policy responses to the erosion of trust in media and institutions. Through this engagement, Chile has shared its national experiences in regulating transparency of public communication, supporting independent journalism, and fostering digital literacy among its population. These contributions are part of a collective OECD effort to uphold democratic values and reinforce public trust amid growing digital manipulation.

This collaboration has also fed into Chile's domestic policy development, inspiring initiatives such as the Advisory Commission against Disinformation (2023), that aimed to advise the Ministry of Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation, and the Ministry Secretary General of Government on aspects that allow analysing the global phenomenon of disinformation and its development at a local level in Chile. Its objective was also to improve public sector communication, strengthen safeguards against information manipulation, and promote inclusive public dialogue. Moreover, Chile's participation in OECD-led benchmarking and peer learning processes has enabled it to refine its approach to combating disinformation, in line with comparative insights and best practices from other member states.

In 2024, the country hosted the global commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, underscoring its commitment to defending free expression and confronting the challenges posed by disinformation and misinformation. This event served as a platform to highlight the critical role of independent journalism in democratic societies and to promote initiatives aimed at countering false narratives without compromising media freedom. Through a series of panels, declarations, and multi-stakeholder dialogues, Chile emphasized the importance of safeguarding press freedom as a frontline defence against information manipulation. The occasion also allowed the country to reaffirm its alignment with international human rights standards and its support for journalistic integrity in the digital age, framing disinformation as a threat not only to democracy but also to citizens' right to receive accurate and pluralistic information.

Chile has also promoted media literacy and civic education initiatives in collaboration with civil society and international partners, recognizing that strengthening public capacity to evaluate information critically is essential for democratic resilience. These initiatives are increasingly relevant as electoral interference, conspiracy theories, and digital polarization challenge the cohesion and trust that underpin democratic governance.

Several countries and international bodies have launched initiatives to counteract the spread of disinformation and promote digital integrity. Brazil has implemented progressive regulatory frameworks aimed at increasing transparency and accountability on social media platforms,

particularly through its proposed "Fake News Bill" (2020), which targets the dissemination of false content without infringing on free expression. Spain, meanwhile, has enacted national protocols to combat disinformation campaigns, especially in electoral contexts, focusing on coordinated responses between government bodies and digital platforms. At the regional level, the European Union has advanced a comprehensive Digital Services Act (2022) as part of its Digital Agenda, which imposes new obligations on major technology companies to mitigate the spread of illegal and harmful content online. These initiatives reflect a growing international consensus that disinformation must be addressed not only through media literacy and civil society engagement but also through targeted regulation and multilateral cooperation.

In summary, the disinformation crisis is a multifaceted challenge that transcends borders and requires coordinated international responses. Chile's experience demonstrates the value of combining domestic vigilance with proactive multilateral engagement. By positioning the right to access reliable information at the centre of its diplomatic strategy, Chile reaffirms its commitment to defending democracy not only through words but through practical, principled action in the digital age.

Part 5: Conclusion

Chile's steadfast commitment to freedom of expression and the right to access public information remains a defining feature of its foreign policy in the 21st century. These democratic principles, rooted in the country's own transition from authoritarianism to democracy, have informed its diplomatic posture, legislative frameworks, and multilateral engagements. By integrating transparency and information access into its international strategies, Chile has established a model of democratic resilience grounded in rights, accountability, and citizen participation.

However, these principles are increasingly tested in a global context marked by rising authoritarianism, the spread of populist narratives that erode institutional legitimacy, and the weaponization of information to manipulate public opinion and destabilize democracies. Disinformation, digital manipulation, and declining trust in institutions pose complex

challenges that transcend national borders, demanding collective responses rooted in the very values that are under threat.

In the face of these challenges, Chile has positioned itself as an active and principled actor within the international community. Through its work with organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the OECD, Chile has contributed to the development of global norms and initiatives that promote transparency, safeguard democratic processes, and defend the integrity of public discourse. Its experience in implementing domestic reforms, such as the *Ley de Transparencia*, has further enhanced its credibility and leadership in these arenas.

Looking ahead, the defence of democracy will require more than rhetorical commitments. It will demand a renewed investment in multilateral diplomacy—one that is capable of upholding human rights, resisting authoritarian regression, and addressing the structural vulnerabilities exposed by the digital information age. In this context, Chile has both the legitimacy and the responsibility to lead by example.

Chile's voice, shaped by its democratic journey and consistent human rights advocacy, is needed more than ever in the construction of a rules-based international order where free expression, access to information, and informed citizen engagement are safeguarded. The path forward requires coalitions of like-minded states, robust multilateral institutions, and a collective willingness to defend truth, transparency, and democratic values on the global stage.

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Energy, Democracy and the Sustainable Development Goals: Pathways to Inclusion

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Introduction

The shift from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) marks a significant transformation in the global development agenda. This evolution replaced a North–South cooperation logic with a universal, integrated framework where progress in one area depends on advances in others. Within this context, energy emerges as a strategic enabler—not only of development but also of rights and meaningful citizen engagement.

Energy democracy, which promotes participatory governance, social justice, and equitable access, has gained relevance as a key approach to achieving inclusive energy transitions. By linking energy policy to democratic values and community empowerment, it supports the SDGs' call for integrated and people-centred solutions.

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However, implementing energy democracy is challenging. It confronts entrenched political and economic interests, particularly the historical dominance of centralized structures and large corporations reluctant to decentralize energy decision-making. Addressing these barriers requires institutional, cultural, and political innovation to promote transparency, social participation, and sensitivity to local realities.

Additionally, energy democracy may unintentionally perpetuate injustices if applied uncritically. To ensure global relevance and fairness, it must be complemented by energy sovereignty and energy justice. These frameworks emphasize the need to transcend purely local approaches, ensuring that energy transitions do not displace burdens onto other communities or future generations.

This chapter explores how energy democracy aligns with and supports the 2030 Agenda, advancing sustainable development through participatory and equitable energy governance. It also examines concrete experiences that illustrate the transformative potential of energy democracy in diverse global contexts, where community-led initiatives expand energy access, create jobs, foster local development, and strengthen social bonds.

From the MDGS to the SDGS: Building the 2030 Agenda

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), launched by the United Nations in 2000, represented the first globally coordinated effort to address major social, economic, and public health challenges, especially in developing countries. These goals focused on eradicating extreme poverty, promoting universal basic education, and reducing infant mortality. The MDGs were grounded in a North–South cooperation logic, in which developed countries assumed the role of financiers and technology providers, while developing countries were the primary recipients of assistance.

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, expanding the scope and ambition of the MDGs. Structured around 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets, the Agenda proposes a comprehensive action plan aimed at fostering a development model that integrates economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Unlike the MDGs, the

SDGs are universal in nature, calling on all countries, regardless of their level of development, to implement concrete measures domestically and to cooperate internationally. The 2030 Agenda deliberately moves beyond the traditional North–South divide that shaped earlier development negotiations (United Nations 2015).

Table 1 – Comparison between MDGs and SDGs

Characteristic	MDGs (2000-2015)	SDGs (2015-2030)
Number of objectives	8 objectives	17 objectives
Number of targets	21 targets	169 targets
Scope	Focused on developing countries	Universally applicable to all countries
Logic of Cooperation	North–South: wealthy countries support poorer nations	Global cooperation: shared responsibility among all
Integration between Themes	More fragmented treatment of issues	Integrated and indivisible perspective
Focus Examples	Extreme poverty, basic education, maternal and child health	Clean energy, reduction of inequalities, responsible consumption and production

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

A key innovation of the 2030 Agenda is its integrated and indivisible approach to the SDGs. This structure emerged in response to the fragmented implementation of the MDGs, which often treated goals in isolation and focused predominantly on developing countries. The SDGs require countries to recognize the interconnectedness of their objectives. Progress in one area can either enhance or hinder outcomes in others, depending on how well policies are aligned. To avoid fragmentation and unintended consequences, the SDGs call for collaborative, systemic and coordinated responses to global challenges, such as energy access, inequality, peace, and partnership. In this framework, sustainable development must

simultaneously address social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Le Blanc 2015).

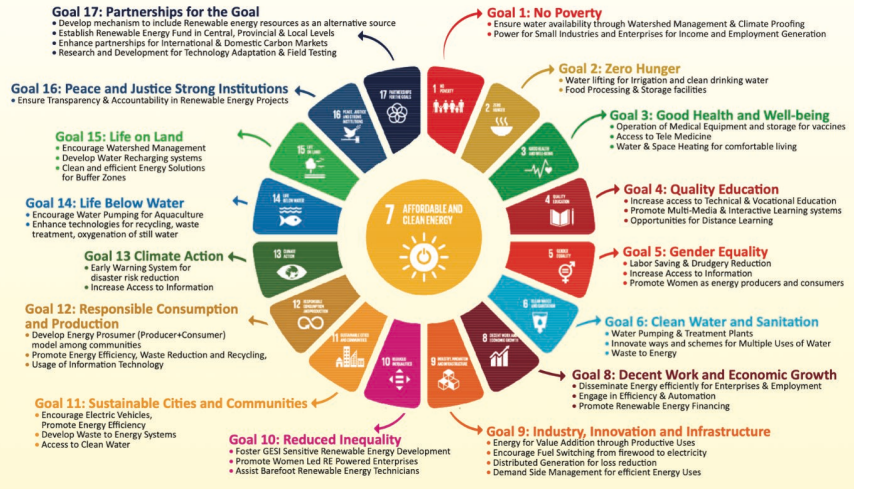
This integrated logic lays the foundation for addressing crosscutting challenges such as inequality, participation, and governance—issues central to the broader discussion of energy democracy in the sections that follow.

Energy Democracy and its Role in Sustainable Development

Democracy plays a pivotal role in advancing the 2030 Agenda, as it provides the foundation for the development and execution of integrated and socially inclusive public policies. Strengthening democratic, transparent, and participatory institutions—as emphasized in SDG 16—is a fundamental condition for progressing in other areas, such as access to clean energy (SDG 7), the reduction of inequalities (SDG 10), and the promotion of global partnerships (SDG 17). These institutions are essential for enabling collective deliberation, ensuring social accountability, and facilitating coordination across sectors enabling more effective responses to contemporary global challenges. In the context of energy transitions, democracy not only enables the coordinated implementation of the goals but also ensures that the processes are conducted in a fair, inclusive and equitable manner (Nilsson, Griggs and Visbeck 2016; Sachs et al. 2019).

Access to clean and affordable energy is a precondition for achieving many development goals, including poverty reduction (SDG 1), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reducing social inequalities (SDG 10). As such, it plays a foundational role in realizing fundamental rights and supporting the broader SDG agenda.

Figure 1 – The interlinkages between SDG7 and other SDGs. The UN Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 highlights that SDG7 (affordable and clean energy) has a greater influence on other Sustainable Development Goals than it is influenced by them



Source: United Nations. 2019. *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now—Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*.

There are relevant links between the concepts of energy and democracy. A just energy transition, for example, requires democratic participation, transparency, and social inclusion. Also, international cooperation to promote renewable energy requires inclusive partnerships, supported by SDG 7 and SDG 17 (partnerships and means of implementation).

The concept of energy democracy emerges then transcending the technical dimension of energy by incorporating democratic and social principles into the formulation, implementation and monitoring of public policies in the sector. By recognizing energy as a fundamental right and not just a commodity, energy democracy strengthens the links between sustainable development, citizenship and socio-environmental justice.

The concept of Energy Democracy has gained prominence in debates on fair and sustainable energy transitions. The definition of energy democracy varies considerably, and remains widely contested. Scholars and

advocates use the term to describe a diverse range of proposals, practices, and ideals, with no single, universally accepted definition. Nonetheless, energy democracy is often defined as an approach that aims to reconfigure energy systems, shifting control from large corporations and centralized state agents to forms of participatory governance, community control, and transition to renewable sources (Burke and Stephens 2017).

In contrast to technocratic visions of energy planning, democratic energy proposes that civil society should not only be a beneficiary, but also a protagonist in decisions about energy production, consumption, and distribution. This involves mechanisms for public deliberation, equitable access to energy resources, and the inclusion of historically marginalized populations in decision-making processes (Szulecki 2018).

This movement is closely linked to the socio-environmental transformations demanded by climate change, as well as the struggles for social justice and territorial rights. Democratic energy has emerged as a critical response to the structural inequalities of current energy systems, which are marked by privatizing profits and socializing risk that disproportionately affect low-income communities, indigenous peoples and peripheral populations. Thus, the proposal to democratize energy is not limited to the adoption of clean technologies, but involves a reconfiguration of power relations, putting energy as a common good at the service of collective needs and common well-being.

From a practical perspective, energy democracy takes shape through renewable energy cooperatives, community-based solar and wind projects, and local energy networks that foster decentralization and social ownership. These initiatives also seek to integrate environmental and social justice, linking energy transitions to broader goals such as climate action, gender equality, and racial equity (Stephens 2019).

Nevertheless, the concept is not exempt from criticism. Scholars highlight that, despite its normative appeal, energy democracy often lacks clarity, particularly regarding its implementation in non-Western contexts or under authoritarian regimes (Droubi, Heffron, and McCauley 2021). Others warn that it risks becoming an overused buzzword, losing

its transformative potential and detaching from concrete practices (Szulecki 2018).

Debates about both the limitations and transformative promise of energy democracy are especially relevant to SDGs 7, 10, and 16. SDG 7, which seeks universal access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy, directly echoes the principles of energy democracy by advocating not only for expanded access but also for inclusive participation in energy decision-making. SDG 10, focused on reducing inequalities within and among countries, underscores the urgency of addressing persistent disparities in energy access that reinforce poverty and exclusion. According to the UNDP Human Development Report (2020), millions still lack electricity or depend on unsafe and inefficient sources. Energy democracy offers a pathway to counter these inequities by advancing fairer distribution of energy resources and decision-making power. Finally, SDG 16, centred on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective institutions, resonates with the governance reforms proposed by energy democracy, including greater transparency, participatory processes, and institutional strengthening.

Despite these promising alignments, the realization of energy democracy remains constrained by the deeply rooted political and economic structures that have long shaped the global energy system (Fache, Chirol and Legras 2023). For decades, energy production has been decoupled from its consumption, allowing wealthier regions to enjoy cheap energy while externalizing its environmental and social costs to often marginalized communities, especially in the Global South. These systems have been deliberately designed to prioritize centralized control—frequently under the pretext of efficiency or national security. In practice, however, they have served to concentrate power in the hands of a few multinational corporations, reinforcing systemic inequalities and limiting democratic agency in energy governance.

Whether through coal, nuclear power, or even large-scale wind and solar installations, centralized models perpetuate exclusion by leaving citizens with little say in how energy is produced, distributed, and consumed. Energy democracy, in this context, is not just an aspirational

ideal—it is a necessary political response to decades of structural injustice embedded in the very architecture of our energy systems.

To understand both its transformative promise and its urgent relevance, it is essential to explore the historical foundations of energy democracy, the conditions that gave rise to it, and the systemic inequities it seeks to dismantle.

Historical Context: The Roots of Energy Democracy and the Birth of Natural Monopolies

The roots of energy democracy can be traced back to the early 20th century when electricity was initially a private enterprise, exemplified by Thomas Edison's Pearl Street Station in 1882. This station was the first commercial power plant in the United States, delivering electricity to customers in lower Manhattan (ETHW n.d.). As electricity became essential to modern life, municipal utilities and rural electric cooperatives started to rise in remote, underserved areas, providing affordable electricity and embodying early forms of energy democracy by placing control in local hands.

As electricity generation became profitable, multiple private power companies entered the market, often competing with municipal utilities and stringing their own wires across cities, which led to hazardous and unsightly infrastructure. This chaos prompted the concept of a *natural monopoly* for energy utilities, where it was more efficient for a single entity to control all aspects of electricity service—building power plants, generating electricity, and delivering it to customers within a given geographic area—due to the high fixed costs and economies of scale involved. Therefore, it was agreed that a single company should serve each area or region, eliminating redundant infrastructure and ensuring more reliable service.

To counter the growing push for public ownership, investor-owned utilities lobbied for the status of regulated monopolies, accepting government oversight in exchange for exclusive rights to serve specific areas. This allowed them to maintain private control while limiting competition. As a result, Public Utilities Commissions (PUCs) or Public

Service Commissions (PSCs) were created (United States 2010). These state-level regulatory bodies, usually appointed by governors but sometimes elected, are responsible for setting rates, approving infrastructure projects, and ensuring reliable service. All PUCs coordinate through the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC).

By the beginning of the 1930s, thirteen large *utility holding companies*—largely controlled by JP Morgan or Samuel Insull—owned 75% of U.S. energy utilities (United States 2001). These holding companies engaged in documented abuses, including complex financial manipulations, cross-subsidization of risky non-utility ventures with regulated utility revenues, and opaque corporate structures that obscured true ownership and risk. These practices contributed to financial instability and were implicated in the 1929 stock market crash, resulting in significant losses for investors and widespread public distrust.

In response, Congress passed the Public Utility Holding Company Act of 1935 (United States 2004), which aimed to break up these large holding companies, restrict their operations, and enhance regulatory oversight. However, while these reforms increased access and promoted some degree of local ownership, they were only partially successful in curbing market concentration. Investor-owned utilities continued to dominate much of the sector

The Start of a New Energy Era

While earlier developments such as municipal utilities and rural cooperatives laid foundational principles, the actual energy democracy movement—explicitly tied to renewable energy—began in Denmark and Germany in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Catalysed by the anti-nuclear movement and oil crises, Danish and German communities and cooperatives led the shift to wind power, prioritizing local ownership, democratic participation, and community benefit.

In the 1970s, the government of Baden-Württemberg announced plans to build a nuclear power plant near Breisach to promote industrial development and create jobs. However, the local farming community strongly opposed the plant due to concerns about damage to their harvest

(At that time, the impact of nuclear power was not widely understood). The mayor of Wyhl, without consulting the local citizens, requested that the nuclear power plant be relocated to his own community. When it became known that the electricity from the plant would supply a new lead production facility across the border in France, French citizens joined German protesters in opposing both projects.

Cross-border protests blocked the lead plant and intensified efforts against the nuclear plant. The movement gathered 90,000 signatures, held a referendum, and organized public meetings, but these efforts initially failed. Protests escalated and became violent, gaining international attention and drawing condemnation of police brutality from the Protestant church and local Christian Democrat politicians, which increased public support. The governor eventually agreed to negotiate, and a lower court ruled in favor of the protesters, though this decision was later overturned. After six years of delays and with energy demand remaining flat, the nuclear plant project was officially canceled in 1994. This marked the first time citizen protests successfully stopped a nuclear power plant in Germany and worldwide, and it is widely regarded as the starting point of the Energiewende—Germany's transition to renewable energy, phasing out fossil fuels and nuclear power to create a sustainable, low-carbon energy system (Morris and Jungjohann 2016). Then, energy democracy did not start as a movement looking for decarbonization but as one looking for public participation in planning, a movement against the traditional model where profits are privatized, but environmental and social costs are borne by society.

The protests against nuclear power continued, successfully halting the construction of several planned plants. This simultaneously spurred the development of citizen-led renewable energy initiatives. In Denmark, the protests against nuclear energy went hand in hand with positive initiatives stimulating the development of renewable energy. The Danish government actively facilitated wind energy development, offering incentives such as tax exemptions for families generating their own electricity. This was supported by citizens' investment through renewable energy cooperatives, with widespread public participation. Denmark's cooperative model became a blueprint for other countries, and its wind industry grew, becoming the

largest in the world, supplying over 40% of national electricity, capturing more than a third of the global market, and creating over 20,000 jobs.

The United States also enacted a landmark federal law in response to the 1970s energy crisis: the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act (PURPA) of 1978. Its main goals were to promote energy conservation, improve energy efficiency, encourage the development of renewable energy and cogeneration, and foster competition in electricity generation. PURPA played a pivotal role in the growth of renewable energy and cogeneration in the U.S., particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, and is credited with the increment of the renewables share in the energy mix to about 5% of U.S. electric generating capacity.

Germany did not take a similar approach to the USA and Denmark in the immediate aftermath of the 1970s energy crisis, as it did not prioritize direct support for renewable energy at that time. Instead, Germany's early response focused on energy security, coal, nuclear, and efficiency measures. Substantial and systematic support for renewables came at a later stage.

From Nuclear Protests to Wind Turbines: The People's Energy Uprising of 1970s Germany

In 1975, Dietrich Koch moved to a house on the outskirts of Mettingen, a small German town. The home had a rudimentary grid connection and limited power access. When Koch asked the local utility, RWE, to modernize his electrical supply to fully wire the house, they demanded an exorbitant sum he could not afford. During a summer trip to Denmark, he encountered the Tvind wind turbine project, where teachers, students, and volunteer engineers built what became the world's largest operational wind turbine at the time.

In 1982, Koch discovered Dutch student Henk Lagerwey's experimental turbine near the German border and became an early client, purchasing a 20 kW unit before Lagerwey's company existed. Facing permit hurdles, Koch bypassed restrictions through legal creativity, enabling Germany's first private wind turbine connection to the grid. These success cases contrasted sharply with corporate projects like RWE's Growian, an

extremely expensive state-funded 3 MW turbine deliberately designed to discredit wind energy.

At the time, RWE refused to buy Koch's excess electricity at fair rates, instead offering notoriously low payments. For early wind pioneers, connecting to the grid was often prohibitively difficult or financially unviable. Utilities frequently blocked private producers from selling electricity at fair rates. This frustration galvanized advocates to push for policy reforms, recognizing that to truly challenge fossil fuels, they needed to gain back the grid.

Grid Liberation

After Chernobyl (1986), parents in Schönau, Germany, formed an anti-nuclear group led by Walter Bolz and others. When their local utility obstructed clean energy efforts, they launched a decade-long campaign to buy the town's power grid. After two referendums (1991, 1996) and a national fundraising effort, they acquired the grid in 1997 for 8.7 million DM, forming Elektrizitätswerke Schönau (EWS). Dubbed the "electricity rebels" by media, EWS became Germany's first citizen-owned green utility, supplying renewable power nationwide. By 2024, EWS had over 6,000 cooperative members and 170,000 customers, pioneering decentralized energy democracy.

From Resistance to Alliance: German Government Backs Citizen-Driven Energy Initiatives

In the fall of 1990, Bavarian politician Matthias Engelsberger, a small hydropower owner, spearheaded efforts to break incumbents from blocking independent renewable producers. Teaming with cross-party allies, he co-designed the 1990 Stromeinspeisungsgesetz, establishing the world's first feed-in tariff system (fixed, above-market rates for renewables). The law exploited post-reunification political chaos to bypass RWE's lobbying.

This grassroots policy became the blueprint for Germany's 2000 Renewable Energy Act (EEG), which turbocharged wind and solar

adoption, creating tens of thousands of new jobs. By 2020, renewables surged from near-zero to over 50% of Germany's grid capacity, driven largely by citizen-owned projects (e.g., cooperatives like Bürgerenergie Rhein-Sieg). RWE, initially hostile to renewables, pivoted to clean energy only after these decentralized efforts proved viable, investing billions to expand its solar and wind portfolio by 90% by 2024. The Energiewende ("energy transition") became a living experiment in democracy, proving that energy systems could be decentralized, participatory, and profitable for communities.

The Energy Revolution

The global repercussions were immediate. As German demand for solar panels and wind turbines skyrocketed, manufacturing costs plummeted due to economies of scale. Solar photovoltaic (PV) modules, which cost $ 2 per watt in 2010, fell to $ 0.2 per watt by 2020. This price collapse, driven largely by Germany's early adoption of FITs , turned renewables from a niche technology into the world's cheapest energy source. Nations from Spain to South Africa took notice. Spain's initial FIT rollout in the 2000s helped it become a wind power leader (Gallego-Castillo and Victoria 2015), while China's 2011 FIT policy catalysed its rise as the world's top solar manufacturer. By 2022, China accounted for more than 80% of global solar panel production, a direct consequence of policy frameworks inspired by Germany's EEG.

For developing economies, the FIT model offered a lifeline for renewable development. In Kenya, a FITs for geothermal, small hydro, biomass, biogas, solar, and wind projects was introduced in 2008 enabled the country to leapfrog traditional fossil fuel infrastructure. Electricity access went from 30% by the time of implementation to 76% by 2022 when the FIT was almost completely stopped with some exceptions. During that period, electricity consumption doubled while renewables share of Kenya's electricity growth from 65% to 88%.

Yet the Energiewende's legacy is not without contradictions. In 2013, corporate lobbying at the EU level succeeded in replacing FITs with competitive auctions—a system favouring utility-scale projects

over community ones. In Germany, the citizen-share of new renewable installations plummeted from 50% in 2012 to 10% by 2018. This regression underscores a central tension: energy democracy thrives when policies intentionally redistribute power, but falters when market fundamentalism dominates.

In the case of Kenya, the FIT policy's primary focus was on grid-connected renewable generation and investment security. While this boosted national access and renewable shares, the policy documents and summaries do not provide evidence of systematic integration of broader SDG concerns—such as local economic development, community participation, or environmental and social safeguards for marginalized groups. It is known that local actors (from small to large enterprises) are not playing an important role; the majority of the most successful companies are run partially or fully by foreigners.

The Ingredients of Energy Democracy and Its Necessary Complements

The successful execution of democratic energy transitions relies on several key factors. First, political culture plays a crucial role: a system that values consensus-building and coalition governance helps prevent policy gridlock and ensures that minority voices are heard and respected, rather than allowing a "winner takes all" mentality. Second, strong institutions are essential, particularly those that provide robust infrastructure for public participation—Germany, for example, actively encourages dialogue and civic engagement, while also striving to keep money out of politics to avoid undue influence. Finally, transparency is vital; the history of the Energiewende shows that when fundamental transitions are controlled by groups with vested interests—such as large power companies focused on protecting their existing assets—the process can become skewed and less effective. Ensuring openness prevent these interests from dominating the transition and leads to better outcomes for society as a whole.

The concept of energy democracy is largely rooted in North American and European understandings of democracy. This concept focuses on local communities. To expand its application globally and to include the global

south context, it needs to be complemented with the ideas of energy sovereignty and energy justice.

Energy Sovereignty: The right of conscious individuals, communities and peoples to make their own decisions on energy generation, distribution and consumption in a way that is appropriate within their ecological, social, economic and cultural circumstances, provided that these do not affect others negatively.

Energy Justice: A framework that seeks to ensure everyone has fair access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy, while also guaranteeing that the benefits and burdens of energy systems are distributed equitably and that all communities have a meaningful voice in energy.

To guide the integration of these concepts and ensure that energy transitions are truly fair and inclusive, the JUST Framework provides a valuable lens. Developed from the principles of justice, the framework emphasizes universality (applying to all people), spatial equity (across different regions), and temporal equity (across generations). This holistic approach helps avoid policies that inadvertently undermine justice in other regions or for future generations, ensuring that progress toward the SDGs in one area does not come at the expense of another.

Table 2 – The JUST Framework

Principle	Description
Justice	Ensuring fairness in both the process and outcomes of energy transitions.
Universal	Policies and practices must apply to all people, without discrimination or exclusion.
Space	Recognizing and addressing differences and inequalities between regions and communities.
Time	Considering both present and future generations to ensure long-term sustainability and equity.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Energy democracy is not a standalone concept, but rather a tool or pathway for achieving the broader justice goals outlined in the framework.

Case Studies

Community-led projects are driving progress across numerous Sustainable Development Goals with impressive social returns. By involving local people in decision-making, these initiatives foster a strong sense of ownership, strengthen community bonds, and enhance civic participation, demonstrating how local action can deliver broad, lasting benefits. Below, some examples are briefly described:

Brazil's RevoluSolar Project (SDG1, SDG4, SDG8). A community-led renewable energy initiative founded in 2015 in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. It goes beyond providing clean energy to directly alleviate poverty by training local residents as solar installers and electricians, creating new job opportunities and professional skills. The project powers local businesses and schools, reducing operational costs and supporting economic growth within the community.

Sierra Leone Healthcare Electrification Project (SDG3, SDG6, SDG5). Launched by SEforALL in October 2022, it is a three-phase program to install solar PV and battery storage systems. Phase 1 equipped 6 major hospitals with over 0.6 MWp of solar capacity; Phase 2 powered one hospital and 25 community health centers with standardized solar systems totaling 0.3 MWp; and Phase 3 is electrifying 11 more hospitals with an additional 2.9 MWp. These solar microgrids now provide 24/7 clean, reliable power to 43 health facilities, enabling uninterrupted medical care, reducing reliance on diesel, and improving health outcomes for millions. The project also emphasizes commercial sustainability through renewable energy certificates, rapid and scalable installation, and local capacity building, including female STEM training.

Malawi´s Renewable Energy for Agriculture Project Run by Practical Action (SDG1, SDG2, SDG5). Malawi, where only about 10% of people have electricity and most rely on agriculture, faces major challenges from climate change and limited resources, especially for rural women farmers. To address this, the Renewable Energy for Agriculture project

was launched in Chintheche in 2021 by Practical Action, Modern Farming Technologies, and African Mini Grids. The project began with 18 women and, just 15 months later, had expanded to 45 greenhouses with 135 women engaged in income-generating activities. Through a rent-to-own model, these cooperatives have increased crop yields, reduced post-harvest losses, improved access to markets, and boosted women's incomes by 38%

The link between energy democracy and basic needs is no accident. When communities control energy resources, they prioritize projects with the highest social returns.

Conclusion

Energy democracy represents a crucial pathway for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in an inclusive, participatory, and socially just manner. As this chapter has highlighted, access to affordable, reliable, and clean energy is not only a technical requirement but a foundational element for advancing poverty reduction, health, education, gender equality, decent work, and the reduction of inequalities. By decentralizing control over energy systems and promoting participatory governance, energy democracy empowers communities to make decisions that reflect local needs, values, and priorities, creating broad social, economic, and environmental benefits.

Historical and contemporary case studies—from Germany's citizen-owned renewable energy cooperatives to community-led projects in Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Malawi—demonstrate the transformative potential of energy democracy. These initiatives illustrate how local action can drive sustainable development, foster social cohesion, create jobs, and strengthen civic participation. At the same time, they reveal the challenges inherent in confronting entrenched political and economic interests, as well as the need to avoid superficial or technocratic implementations that fail to address broader social inequities.

To ensure that energy democracy achieves its full potential, it must be complemented by energy sovereignty and energy justice. These frameworks safeguard communities' rights to self-determination in energy decision-making, ensure equitable distribution of benefits and burdens,

and protect future generations. Tools like the JUST Framework provide a practical approach to integrating principles of universality, spatial equity, and intergenerational responsibility, helping align energy transitions with the broader objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

Ultimately, energy democracy is more than a policy choice or technical strategy—it is a transformative vision for restructuring power relations in energy systems, making them more transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all. By centering democratic participation, social justice, and community empowerment, energy democracy offers a concrete pathway toward sustainable, equitable, and resilient energy systems worldwide, advancing the global mission of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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The Grey Zone between Compliance and Subversion: An Exploratory Framework to Identify Semi-Loyal Political Behaviour in Democracies

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Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, various international indices and comparative studies have highlighted a global democratic crisis, one that affects not only fragile democracies but also those previously considered consolidated. This trend has become a central concern in contemporary political and academic discourse. Echoing Huntington's (1991) metaphor of "waves of democratization," Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) contend that the world has been undergoing a "third wave of autocratization" for several years. In its 2025 *Democracy Report*, the V-Dem Institute underlined that autocratization "is deepening and spreading," adding that "the level of democracy for the average world citizen is back to 1985; by country averages, it is back to 1996" (V-Dem Institute 2025, 9–10).

Although political science literature offers a wide array of concepts to capture this phenomenon (Tomini 2024, 44), autocratization is generally understood as the reverse process of democratization, namely a transition

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towards autocracy and away from democracy (Cassani and Tomini 2018, 273–275; 2019, 17–19; Tomini 2024, 41). This transformation entails structural changes in political regimes that, in Easton's (1979, 190–211) conceptualization of regime, affect their foundational values, norms (both formal and informal), and institutional structures. As a broad concept, autocratization encompasses all transitions towards autocracy, irrespective of the initial regime type (Cassani and Tomini 2019, 15–16). These processes typically involve the progressive concentration of power and the intensification of its arbitrary and repressive character (Cassani and Tomini 2019, 21–22), leading to a shrinking space for public contestation and political participation in governmental selection (Tomini 2021, 1194).

Recent literature emphasizes that, within the context of the third wave of autocratization, this process tends to unfold gradually, through legalistic and multifaceted strategies, and is often driven by democratically elected actors who, once in office, erode democratic institutions from within (Bermeo 2016; Cassani and Tomini 2019; Gerschewski 2020; Laebens and Lührmann 2021; Lührmann 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Sato et al. 2022; Schedler 2024). Accordingly, analytical focus has shifted towards political actors and their specific behaviours, normative preferences, discourses, strategies, and institutional practices (Balderacchi 2024; Gamboa 2022; Guriev and Treisman 2022; Kneuer 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Linz 1978), as these actors ultimately shape the trajectories of democratic regimes.

In this context, the early identification of authoritarian actors, ideally before their accession to power or their institutional consolidation, has been recognized as a crucial factor for enhancing the survival prospects of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2024). Such identification is vital for enabling authoritarian forces' political and social isolation, thereby preventing them from acquiring institutional relevance and political weight. Indeed, while the strengthening of democratic institutions capable of resisting authoritarian subversion (Przeworski 2019, 176) and the strategic coordination of pro-democratic alliances (Boese et al. 2021; Gamboa 2017; 2022; Laebens and Lührmann 2021; Lührmann 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021) are essential strategies for safeguarding democracy, Linz (1978, 85–86) rightly cautions that under

no circumstances should the survival of a democratic regime depend solely on the spontaneous mobilization of its supporters. In such scenarios, extremist forces are often better prepared, better resourced, and more willing to "fight" in the public arena.

Linz's (1978) contribution to the objective identification of anti-democratic actors remains foundational. He proposed a typology of political opposition in democratic regimes: loyal, disloyal, and semi-loyal. Loyal opposition embraces democratic principles unequivocally, upholding constitutional rules and recognizing the regime's legitimacy. Disloyal opposition, by contrast, openly rejects democracy, often resorting to extra-constitutional means to attain power, including violence or alliances with the military. Semi-loyal opposition occupies a grey zone: it formally participates in democratic institutions but engages in ambiguous behaviors, tolerates regime-eroding actions, and maintains discourses or alliances that undermine the integrity of democratic institutions (Linz 1978, 27–38).

To distinguish these categories, Linz (1978, 29, 36–37) devised a "litmus test" for democratic loyalty, based on ten normative criteria that define genuine democratic commitment. Actors failing to meet these standards are categorized as either semi-loyal or disloyal. Yet while Linz offers theoretical reflections on these categories, he does not provide a concrete diagnostic framework for distinguishing between them. More recently, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have proposed a simplified test for identifying disloyal (or "authoritarian") actors, centred on four warning signs: rejection of democratic rules, denial of opponents' legitimacy, tolerance or encouragement of violence, and willingness to curtail civil liberties. The presence of any of these signs, they argue, indicates a threat to democracy.

Nevertheless, even with Levitsky and Ziblatt's criteria, identifying anti-democratic actors in contemporary politics remains challenging. This is particularly true because, despite displaying anti-democratic behaviours and rhetoric, many such actors simultaneously adopt discursive strategies that present them as democratic defenders, especially when still seeking electoral legitimacy. As several authors have noted (Hobson and Kurki 2012, 220; Przeworski 2024, 3; Sartori 1987, 3–4), democratic

rhetoric has become nearly universal, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between genuine democratic commitment and merely performative loyalty to democratic norms.

Many actors who ultimately weaken democracy once in office do not fully satisfy Levitsky and Ziblatt's thresholds for authoritarian disloyalty before gaining power. These actors operate within democratic institutions and frequently present themselves rhetorically as democracy's defenders or saviours. At the same time, they engage in ambiguous practices and strategically manipulate democratic rules, signalling a lack of substantive normative commitment. Such actors, who have played leading roles in recent autocratization processes, exhibit a hybrid character that aligns more closely with Linz's (1978) notion of semi-loyalty than the explicitly authoritarian actors described by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

This article argues that semi-loyal behaviour has become the contemporary guise of many authoritarian actors. Though formally engaged in the democratic process, such actors adopt ambiguous stances regarding democratic values and norms, especially before attaining power, thereby complicating early identification. Once in power, their authoritarian proclivities manifest more overtly, accelerating democratic erosion. As such, semi-loyal actors, particularly in their pre-consolidation phase, threaten democratic regimes today. This raises a central problem: how can we identify, at an early stage, political actors who, although not overtly violating democratic rules, exhibit ambiguous, strategic, and instrumental attachments to democracy?

In an exploratory manner, this article seeks to contribute to developing an analytical framework for identifying and characterizing semi-loyal behaviours commonly observed in contemporary autocratization processes. It aims to move beyond the binary loyal/disloyal distinction by acknowledging the political and analytical relevance of the "grey zone" inhabited by ambiguous actors who strategically exploit democratic institutions, not out of principled commitment but as a vehicle for eventual subversion. Conceptually, the absence of a systematic framework for identifying such actors impairs our capacity for early diagnosis of autocratization, given that its first symptoms often manifest through semi-loyal practices.

Normatively, this lacuna weakens democracy's defences by allowing actors with questionable democratic credentials to gain institutional legitimacy and gradually erode the regime from within.

The article is structured into four main sections. The first defines the concept of autocratization, outlines the key features of contemporary autocratization processes, and highlights the role of political actors. The second revisits classical typologies of democratic loyalty, underscoring the limitations of existing approaches in detecting ambiguous actors. The third proposes an exploratory behavioural framework, composed of four diagnostic indicators designed to identify early signs of semi-loyal democratic behaviour. Finally, the framework's applicability is briefly illustrated through reference to the cases of Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Autocratization Processes and the Role of Authoritarian Actors

An autocratization wave refers to "a period of time during which the number of countries undergoing democratization declines while autocratization affects an increasing number of countries" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1102). The so-called "third wave of autocratization" has been developing and deepening for at least the past twenty-five years, with no signs of abatement (V-Dem Institute 2025).

Considering that political participation, public contestation, and constraints on executive power are the institutional variables that define political regimes, autocratization can be understood as "a process of regime change towards autocracy, making the exercise of power more arbitrary and repressive" (Cassani And Tomini 2019, 21–22), and as one that "restricts the space for public contestation and political participation in government selection processes" (Tomini 2021, 1194). It is characterized by a substantial decline in the core institutional requisites of democracy, affecting both democratic and autocratic regimes alike (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1096, 1098–1099).

Autocratization manifests itself in three key dimensions. First, concerning political participation, which encompasses citizens' ability to elect their leaders and engage in political processes (at minimum,

through universal suffrage and competitive elections), autocratization often entails restricting or eliminating effective participatory channels. Second, about public contestation, defined as the ability of citizens to criticize and oppose government conduct, autocratization is marked by the suppression or dismantling of the pluralism that enables genuine dissent. Third, regarding constraints on executive power, referring to the limitations placed on incumbents, their decision-making discretion, and the protection of citizens from governmental abuse, autocratization proceeds through the weakening or removal of checks and balances, thereby eroding mechanisms of executive limitation (Cassani and Tomini 2019, 21–22).

Thus characterized, autocratization is not merely a regression from the democratic ideal; it also entails the *construction* of a new political regime with distinct authoritarian features (Tomini 2021, 1194). The specific form autocratization takes depends on the type of regime it originates from, the institutional dimensions it affects (political participation, contestation, executive constraints), and the type it ultimately produces (Cassani and Tomini 2019, 22).

Between 1900 and 1993, democratic breakdowns were typically abrupt and easily identifiable events, dominated by "classical" autocratization strategies such as military coups, foreign invasions, or self-coups (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1095, 1104–1105). In contrast, in the current wave, democratic subversion is more "informal and clandestine," often designed to elude detection (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1108). Democratic erosion has thus become the predominant mode of autocratization. While abrupt collapses via traditional military interventions remain possible, most contemporary democracies are subjected to gradual, legally cloaked processes that weaken institutions from within, frequently without abolishing formal rules or institutions (Bermeo 2016; Coppedge 2017, 3; Huq and Ginsburg 2017, 123–142; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1104–1105; Przeworski 2019, 173–174; Tomini 2021, 1196–1197; Waldner and Lust 2018, 95). Typically, actors disloyal to democratic norms come to power through legal elections and then proceed incrementally to dismantle the regime from within.

Focusing on those autocratization processes that unfold through a "long sequence of events" following the electoral rise of anti-democratic and anti-pluralist actors, Lührmann (2021, 1017–1020) outlines an ideal-typical three-phase model. In the first phase, popular discontent grows, fuelled by dissatisfaction with mainstream democratic parties and generally democratic governance. In the second phase, anti-pluralist actors exploit this discontent to gain public visibility and electoral support. In the third, they begin to erode democracy to the extent permitted by their relative power and the constraints they face.

In the initial phase, structural and contextual challenges, such as economic crises, rising inequality, large-scale migration, intensifying polarization, widespread corruption, and profound socio-cultural and technological shifts, heighten the risk of autocratization. Given that dissatisfaction with democratic regimes' performance is the primary source of democratic discontent, inadequate or insufficient responses to such challenges exacerbate citizens' frustration with democratic institutions and actors (Lührmann 2021, 1018–1024).

Reflecting on when and why democracies collapse, Linz (1978, 3) argued that breakdown is the "culmination of a long process" of incremental changes unfolding over time, during which the regime experiences a legitimacy crisis. This crisis becomes the breeding ground for autocratization. Since democratic legitimacy rests on a shared "belief" that "no other type of regime is capable of achieving greater success in advancing collective goals" (Linz 1978, 18), moments of economic and social crisis, or policies that negatively affect large segments of the population, can undermine that belief (Linz 1978, 16; Lipset 1960, 82). When regime performance declines, whether in terms of output (effectiveness) or outcome (efficiency), the system becomes incapable of managing urgent problems and fulfilling collective aspirations (Linz 1978, 18–23). Ultimately, a regime crisis results from the "ineffectiveness or inefficiency of successive governments" in addressing pressing issues (Linz 1978, 50).

Legitimacy crises, triggered by structural challenges and the democratic regime's inability to respond adequately, fuel widespread dissatisfaction and erode public support for democratic norms and values. This creates

a "window of opportunity" for anti-pluralist mobilization and the rise of parties and actors hostile to democratic pluralism, who gain traction by appealing to disaffected citizens. In the second phase of autocratization, such forces attract support by presenting themselves as solutions to societal problems. Their rhetoric, often populist, masks their anti-democratic aspirations while amplifying citizens' grievances (Linz 1978, 50; Lührmann 2021, 1021).

Widespread discontent alone, however, does not topple a democracy. Anti-democratic leaders and anti-pluralist forces must achieve electoral success and gain sufficient political leverage, either by winning power directly or by integrating into governing coalitions (Linz 1978, 69–71;75–86; Lührmann 2021, 1018–1020, 1024–1029). To do so, they exploit the growing disconnect between citizens and political elites, often mobilizing populist discourses that intensify polarization, while democratic alternatives remain passive or ineffective (Levitsky and Way 2020, 59; Lührmann 2021, 1018–1020, 1024–1029; Somer et al. 2021).

Once in office, non-pluralist and anti-democratic actors pose an elevated risk to democracy. In the third phase of the autocratization sequence, these actors begin to erode democracy to the extent permitted by the political space and constraints they face (Lührmann 2021, 1018–1020, 1029–1030). Governing parties attack the media, seeking control over public discourse, and target civil society and academia. They deepen polarization by delegitimizing political opponents and spreading disinformation. As these tactics succeed, formal democratic institutions and electoral processes are directly attacked (V-Dem Institute 2021, 7, 9, 22). In this context, democratic erosion unfolds gradually over several years, weakening horizontal, vertical, and diagonal accountability (Sato et al. 2022, 3–4, 16–17). Anti-democratic actors progressively challenge the rules, institutions, and principles of democracy, sometimes culminating in regime collapse.

Therefore, the early identification of such actors, ideally before their accession to power, has been regarded as vital to improving the prospects of democratic survival (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2024). It is critical to ensure their political and social isolation before they gain

legitimacy or institutional footholds. Yet, as explored in the following section, the early detection of anti-democratic actors remains a complex and formidable task in contemporary politics.

Loyal, Disloyal, and Semi-Loyal Actors in Democratic Regimes

In the effort to identify anti-democratic actors, Juan Linz's typology of loyal, semi-loyal, and disloyal opposition to democratic regimes remains highly influential. Of particular relevance is Linz's characterization of loyal actors (Linz 1978, 27–38), which he systematizes through ten fundamental normative criteria (see Table 1). These standards go beyond tactical or context-specific adherence to democratic rules; they presuppose a deep and enduring commitment to democracy as an intrinsic value, an end in itself, not merely as a means to attain power.

Among the most central requirements is an unequivocal commitment to gaining and relinquishing power solely through electoral means, alongside a total rejection of violence, both in practice and rhetoric, as a tool of political action. Linz also stresses the rejection of any appeal to military or extra-constitutional intervention, even in times of crisis, underscoring that the defence of democracy must be conducted strictly within legal and institutional frameworks. Popular mobilization, often better orchestrated by extremist forces, cannot be regarded as a legitimate safeguard of democratic order.

Furthermore, genuinely loyal actors must demonstrate sustained institutional engagement, respect the legitimacy of the opposition, accept the principle of majority rule, and recognize power alternation as a foundational feature of democracy. They must also be willing to assume governing responsibilities when necessary, including in difficult or adverse contexts. Democratic loyalty requires a readiness to forge alliances with ideologically distant actors committed to preserving the democratic order. Conversely, it demands a clear and public rejection of anti-system forces, both symbolically and practically, even at the expense of short-term political advantage.

Linz also emphasizes the importance of actively denouncing coup attempts and limiting the political role of ostensibly "neutral" institutions,

such as the armed forces, heads of state, or the judiciary, to safeguard democratic authenticity and prevent the erosion of popular sovereignty. Collectively, these criteria express a principled and ethically grounded conception of democracy, demanding that political actors adhere to its rules and values even when such commitment entails electoral or strategic costs. It is a demanding and idealistic vision in which regime integrity takes precedence over expediency.

Table 1 – Linz's Ten Criteria for Loyal Democratic Actors

1—An unambiguous public commitment to achievement of power only by electoral means and a readiness to surrender it unconditionally to other participants with the same commitment.
2—A clear and uncompromising rejection of the use of violent means to achieve or maintain power except by constitutionally legitimate means when faced with an illegal attempt to take power.
3—A rejection of any nonconstitutional appeal to the armed forces to gain power or to retain it against a loyal democratic opposition.
4—An unambiguous rejection of the rhetoric of violence to mobilize supporters in order to achieve power, to retain it beyond the constitutional mandate, or to destroy opponents, including even a democratic or antidemocratic opponents. The defense of democracy must be carried out within a legal framework, more or less narrowly construed, without arousing popular passions and political vigilantism.
5—A commitment to participate in the political process, elections, and parliamentary activity without setting up conditions beyond the guarantee of the necessary civil liberties for reasonably fair democratic political processes. Requiring an agreement on substantive rather than procedural policies is in principle incompatible with the assumptions that the minority must respect pro tempore the decisions of the majority and that the majority in turn must respect the right of the minority to reverse its policies, except in the realm of requirements for competitive politics, should it become the majority.
6—A willingness in principle to assume the responsibility to govern or be part of the majority when no alternative government by system parties is possible. An even more stringent but not unreasonable requirement would be the willingness to participate in government when it might otherwise be weakened in face of crisis.

7—The willingness to join with opponents ideologically distant but committed to the survival of the democratic political order. (This requirement is more stringent and perhaps unreasonable.) It might apply even against parties that are closer ideologically but are committed to helping to undermine the democratic political process by the use or the rhetoric of violence and an effort to curtail the civil liberties of a legitimate opposition.
8—A rejection of secret contacts with the disloyal opposition and a rejection of its support when offered in exchange for tolerance of its antidemocratic activities. In principle, an effort to make the boundary between the system party, broadly defined, and antisystem parties as clear as possible both publicly and privately is a major characteristic of system-loyal parties or political forces.
9—The readiness to denounce to a legitimate democratic government the activities of opposition forces or the armed forces aiming at the overthrow of that government. This criterion is certainly stringent, and is more difficult to apply, since it goes beyond the unwillingness to participate in such conspiratorial activities to requiring support for political opponents facing a threat.
10—A commitment in principle to reduce the political role of neutral powers, like presidents and kings, the judiciary, and the armed forces, to narrow limits to assure the authenticity of the democratic political process.

Source: Linz, JJ. 1978. *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes; Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Building on Linz's foundational work, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) developed a simplified behavioural *litmus test* to identify disloyal, or authoritarian, actors. This framework rests on four behavioural indicators, the presence of any of which, they argue, should raise serious concerns regarding a political actor's democratic credentials (see Table 2).

The first indicator concerns rejection of, or weak commitment to, the democratic rules of the game. This may manifest in overt disregard for constitutional limits, proposals to cancel elections, or attempts to undermine the legitimacy of electoral processes. The second involves the denial of political opponents' legitimacy, often through baseless accusations portraying rivals as existential threats, criminals, or foreign agents. The third relates to the tolerance or encouragement of violence, whether through associations with armed groups, incitement of attacks, or failure to condemn political violence. The fourth indicator refers to a readiness

to restrict civil liberties through repressive legislation, intimidation of critics, or the public endorsement of authoritarian regimes.

By focusing on concrete political behaviour rather than stated ideology, this model offers a pragmatic tool for early identification of authoritarian threats. It flags warning signs based on observable conduct, thus making the behavioural test proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt a valuable diagnostic resource for contemporary democracies.

Table 2 – Levitsky and Ziblatt's Four Warning Indicators of Authoritarian Behaviour

1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game	Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it? Do they suggest a need for antidemocratic measures, such as cancelling elections, violating or suspending the Constitution, banning certain organizations, or restricting basic civil or political rights? Do they seek to use (or endorse the use of) extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass protests aimed at forcing a change in the government? Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?
2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents	Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order? Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life? Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena? Do they baselessly suggest that their rivals are foreign agents, in that they are secretly working in alliance with (or the employ of) a foreign government—usually an enemy one?

3. Toleration or encouragement of violence	Do they have any ties to armed gangs, paramilitary forces, militias, guerrillas, or other organizations that engage in illicit violence? Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents? Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it? Have they praised (or refused to condemn) other significant acts of political violence, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?
4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media	Have they supported laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as expanded libel or defamation laws, or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations? Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media? Have they praised repressive measures taken by other governments, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?

Source: Levitsky S and Ziblatt D. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown Publishing.

The contributions of Linz, Levitsky, and Ziblatt offer robust theoretical tools for identifying actors genuinely committed to democracy and those with explicit authoritarian tendencies. However, a significant analytical gap persists: the absence of systematic and positive criteria for early identification, preferably before their rise to power, of hybrid actors who engage in semi-loyal behaviour. These actors exhibit an ambiguous, conditional, strategically instrumental, or performative relationship with democracy.

Nevertheless, such identification is crucial for anticipating potential autocratization. Contemporary autocratization processes increasingly reveal the presence of actors who, while formally participating in democratic systems and rhetorically presenting themselves as democracy's defenders, do not fully satisfy Linz's criteria for loyal democratic actors. Yet, they do not breach Levitsky and Ziblatt's thresholds for authoritarian disloyalty. Their hybrid nature allows them to operate within democratic systems

without immediately triggering alarm, only revealing their authoritarian disposition once power is achieved or consolidated. These are the actors who weaken contemporary democracies and drive autocratization processes forward.

This raises an urgent and unresolved question: how can we identify such actors in advance? The following section offers an exploratory attempt to address this analytical challenge.

An Exploratory Framework to Identify Ambiguous Actors vis-à-vis Democracy

In our view, addressing the question posed above requires developing a behavioural test specifically designed to facilitate the early identification of hybrid political actors who are neither clearly loyal nor clearly disloyal to democratic norms. These actors exhibit semi-loyal behaviours, defined by an ambiguous, conditional, strategically instrumental, or even performative relationship with democracy. This proposal targets the analytical "grey zone" that characterizes the positionality of such actors within the democratic regime: a space of strategic ambiguity and normative duplicity in which political actors formally uphold democratic commitments, especially before attaining or consolidating power, but subsequently erode institutional and normative pillars from within, thereby driving processes of autocratization.

The exploratory behavioural test comprises four analytical indicators to capture the distinctive features of ambiguous and instrumental attitudes toward democracy (see Table 3). Each indicator is designed to detect early warning signs of the semi-loyal conduct typical of many actors involved in contemporary autocratization trajectories. The presence of *any* of these indicators should raise concerns regarding a potential threat to democratic stability.

Table 3 – Proposed Behavioural Indicators of Ambiguous Actors vis-à-vis Democracy

Indicator	Key Analytical Questions
1. Ambiguity toward democratic rules of the game	Do actors respect democratic rules only when they are favorable to their interests? Do they attempt to circumvent rules in adverse contexts? Do they condition institutional compliance on policy outcomes?
2. Normalization of illiberal rhetoric	Do they avoid condemning anti-democratic or violent discourse by allies? Do they use delegitimizing language, branding opponents as traitors or enemies of democracy?
3. Tactical tolerance of alliances with disloyal actors	Do they form electoral coalitions with overtly anti-democratic forces for strategic gain? Are such alliances justified as "necessary" or "temporary"?
4. Instrumental and selective support for democratic institutions	Do they defend judicial independence or press freedom only when aligned with their interests? Do they attack or delegitimize institutions when unfavourable outcomes arise?

Source: The authors.

The first indicator assesses whether political actors treat democratic rules as fixed principles or flexible tools. When actors comply with democratic institutions and norms only when these serve their strategic aims, and challenge or disregard them when outcomes prove unfavourable, they demonstrate a merely instrumental adherence to democratic order. This conditionality reflects a problematic conception of democracy, where compliance depends not on normative conviction but on expedience. Linz (1978) highlighted this issue in his discussion of semi-loyal opposition.

The second indicator centres on political language and discursive strategies. When leaders avoid condemning violent or anti-democratic rhetoric from allies or adopt a polarizing style that delegitimizes political opponents as "enemies of the people" or "traitors to democracy," they erode democratic culture. The normalization of illiberal discourse undermines pluralism and fosters a toxic political environment corrosive to democracy (Maerz and Schneider 2021; Schedler 2023; Somer et al. 2021; Svolik 2019).

The third indicator focuses on actors' willingness to form alliances with anti-democratic forces for electoral gain. Even when framed as tactical or temporary, such partnerships reflect a permissive stance towards political actors threatening democratic integrity. They reveal a willingness to sacrifice democratic principles for power consolidation (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Linz 1978).

The fourth indicator evaluates opportunistic attitudes toward democratic institutions such as the judiciary or the media. When actors defend institutional autonomy only when outcomes serve their agenda, but attack, delegitimize, or seek to undermine them when confronted with adverse decisions, they exhibit a selective and self-serving conception of institutional accountability. Such behaviour undermines public trust and erodes the function of democratic checks and balances (Guriev and Treisman 2022; Huq, and Ginsburg 2017; Huq 2024).

Notably, this analytical proposal should be distinguished from the four-criterion behavioural test developed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) to identify authoritarian actors. While both models assess similar types of behaviour, they serve different purposes and are grounded in distinct analytical assumptions. The framework proposed here aims to detect subtle and early signals of democratic erosion among actors who still formally operate within the democratic system and have not yet exhibited a clear or sustained rupture with democratic norms. It is intended as a sensitive and exploratory diagnostic tool, an early warning mechanism for detecting *incipient* autocratization, often expressed through gradual and ambiguous practices.

By contrast, Levitsky and Ziblatt's test is more oriented toward diagnosing consolidated and overtly disloyal behaviour, behaviours that already exhibit explicit authoritarian traits. While both frameworks may sometimes identify similar conduct, they interpret it through different lenses: one as potentially reversible ambiguity, the other as manifest authoritarianism. They are complementary tools useful at various stages in the autocratization continuum.

Exploratory Application of the Framework: The Cases of Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

In an exploratory manner, this section briefly employs the proposed behavioural framework to assess the cases of Donald Trump (United States) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey), two political leaders whose electoral rise and subsequent consolidation of power have been associated with significant autocratization processes in the last decade. It must be emphasized at the outset that the primary aim of this article is not to conduct a systematic empirical validation but to develop a theoretical and conceptual framework. These cases are mobilized for illustrative purposes only, to exemplify the analytical utility of the proposed model, rather than serving as methodologically rigorous case studies or hypothesis-testing exercises.

Before he was elected President of the United States in 2016, Donald Trump participated in the American democratic process, first through the Republican primaries and then the general election. Despite repeated public criticisms of U.S. democratic institutions, Trump had long expressed interest in presidential candidacy within the constitutional framework of American democracy, through interviews dating back to the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Gonyea and Montanaro 2017). In his inaugural address in January 2017, he even praised the peaceful power transfer as a hallmark of democracy and popular sovereignty (Trump 2017). However, signs of his ambiguous commitment to liberal democratic values were already visible during the 2016 presidential campaign.

During the campaign, Trump asserted that he would accept the election results "if I win," thereby calling into question the legitimacy of the democratic process if unfavourable (Lewis et al. 2016). Although he occasionally claimed he would support Hillary Clinton in the event of her victory (Lewis et al. 2016), this rhetorical inconsistency reveals a pattern of conditional respect for democratic institutions. After losing the 2020 election, Trump repeatedly attacked the integrity of the electoral system (Clayton et al. 2021). Yet in his 2025 inaugural speech, following his re-election under the same system he had previously maligned, he declared it "the greatest and most consequential election in our country's history"

(Trump 2025). This inconsistency reflects a broader pattern of ambiguity toward democratic rules and suggests a strategically instrumental relationship with democracy, conditioned by electoral outcomes.

Trump frequently resorted to unfounded claims of electoral fraud, such as alleging that deceased voters were casting ballots for his opponent (The Guardian 2016). Simultaneously, he delegitimized the press, accusing the media of "poisoning the minds" of the electorate and describing journalists as "dishonest" and "evil" (Diamond 2016; Kalb 2018). These statements reflect an illiberal rhetorical style aimed at undermining trust in democratic institutions and discrediting political opponents. Even while out of office, in 2023, Trump claimed to believe in democracy but qualified this belief by insisting that democracy must be "fair," repeatedly alleging systemic flaws in the U.S. system (King 2023). Such discourse reinforces the ambiguous nature of his democratic commitment.

Trump's appointment of Steve Bannon, former editor of the far-right platform *Breitbart News*, as his 2016 campaign director illustrates his tactical willingness to forge alliances with anti-democratic actors (Alexander 2019). This decision underscores a strategic logic prioritizing electoral gain over fidelity to democratic norms.

Perhaps one of the most revealing episodes of Trump's semi-loyal stance was his attack on the impartiality of federal judge Gonzalo Curiel, who presided over the Trump University case. Trump questioned the judge's capacity for neutrality due to his Mexican heritage (Bixby 2016). By casting doubt on judicial independence based on ethnicity, Trump revealed an instrumental approach to the rule of law and a disregard for core principles such as judicial neutrality and separation of powers.

These episodes form a consistent pattern in which formal participation in democratic processes coexists from initial stages with ambiguous rhetoric and destabilizing actions. While Trump could not be readily classified as an openly authoritarian actor before assuming office, according to the criteria proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt, his ambivalent relationship with liberal democratic norms was already evident during the 2016 campaign. Likewise, that made easier for allies to declare Trump respected democracy (McCaskill 2016). Back then Trump exemplified the profile of

a semi-loyal actor, the very type that the analytical test we propose seeks to identify: one who, even before coming to power, outwardly adhered to democratic procedures while simultaneously engaging in selective, strategic, and corrosive behaviours that were fundamentally at odds with democratic principles.

Although he leveraged democratic institutions to obtain power, his political trajectory shows early signs of conditional and instrumental commitment to democratic principles, complicating early identification as a threat to the regime. According to multiple V-Dem Institute reports, both his first and second terms in office exhibit clear signs of democratic backsliding (Pelke and Croissant 2021; V-Dem Institute 2025), reinforcing the importance of detecting semi-loyal behaviour as a preventive mechanism against institutional erosion.

Other examples mirror Trump's trajectory, wherein political leaders initially profess support for democratic values but display ambiguous attitudes towards core democratic norms even before consolidating power. A paradigmatic case is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose early ambiguity significantly hindered his identification as a clear democratic threat.

As mayor of Istanbul (1994–1998), Erdoğan infamously declared that "democracy can't be an objective but only an instrument… democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off" (Yilmaz 2021, 8). This widely cited metaphor encapsulates a purely instrumental understanding of democracy, as a temporary vehicle for political gain rather than a normative commitment. Nevertheless, following the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) electoral victory in 2002, Erdoğan's early premiership included key reforms aligned with EU accession criteria. These involved strengthening the rule of law, expanding civil liberties, improving minority inclusion, and subordinating military power to civilian control. For example, between 2011 and 2014, his government returned confiscated properties to non-Muslim religious communities and initiated peace talks with the PKK. It permitted the pro-Kurdish HDP's parliamentary entry in 2015, reforms that initially suggested movement toward greater pluralism.

In parallel, however, persistent signs of democratic ambiguity remained. From 2011 onward, Erdoğan advocated reducing parliamentary powers in favour of a strong presidency, ostensibly to enhance governmental efficiency (Taspinar 2014; Yilmaz 2021, 9–10). This proposal paved the way for the 2017 constitutional reform, transforming Turkey into a presidential system under Erdoğan's leadership.

The violent repression of the 2013 Gezi Park protests and Erdoğan's justification that democratic will is expressed solely at the ballot box, not in the streets, reveal a majoritarian and reductionist vision of democracy that downplays dissent and civil protest. This rhetorical stance delegitimizes opposition and fosters an illiberal political climate, undermining pluralist democratic values. Moreover, despite his initial EU-aligned reforms, Erdoğan displayed a pattern of selective support for democratic institutions. In response to anti-corruption investigations in 2013, he dismissed prosecutors and judges involved and modified legislation to strengthen executive control over the judiciary (Esen and Gumuscu 2016, 1584–1585; Taspinar 2014, 50–56; Yilmaz 2021, 12–14). Such interference undermines the separation of powers and reflects a fundamentally instrumental attitude toward the rule of law.

In summary, Erdoğan's trajectory reveals a persistent pattern of democratic ambiguity. While early years featured liberalizing reforms, they coexisted with institutional erosion and the concentration of executive power. His leadership embodied a semi-loyal dynamic: democratic institutions are used to legitimize authority, but their principles are relativized whenever they obstruct political objectives. Although the 2016 coup attempt marks a turning point, the autocratization of Turkey had already been foreshadowed by years of institutional manipulation and illiberal drift. This ultimately led to widespread repression of the opposition, purges in the judiciary, civil service and university, and growing constraints on press freedom and civil society (Sözen 2020; V-Dem Institute 2025).

In both cases of Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, there came a moment when their behaviour became more openly disloyal to democratic principles or overtly authoritarian. However, it is precisely their initial ambiguity—whereby statements and actions allowed multiple interpretations and imprecision in assessing how far they might go in

using such rhetoric and actions to subvert democracy —that facilitated their entry into the electoral and institutional arenas. This strategic ambiguity not only impeded early identification of these actors as real threats to democratic norms but also enabled them to forge alliances and garner support, including from other semi-loyal political actors similarly willing to compromise democratic principles for electoral gain or political expediency. By cloaking anti-democratic intentions in the language and procedures of democratic participation, such ambiguity serves as a critical stage in the gradual erosion of liberal democratic institutions, paving the way for more explicit authoritarian practices to emerge over time.

Conclusion

This article has sought to address the complex and challenging task of identifying, at an early stage, political actors whose ambiguous behaviour towards democracy renders them difficult to classify as either fully loyal or overtly authoritarian. Grounded in a critical literature review and constructing an exploratory behavioural framework, the analysis aims to fill a notable gap by capturing the distinctive features of "semi-loyal" democratic conduct, a condition that, although often underestimated, has proven instrumental in recent autocratization processes.

By acknowledging the existence of a grey zone between genuine democratic commitment and open authoritarian subversion, this work offers an exploratory contribution to enhancing democratic vigilance and anticipating threats that, while formally lawful and marked by ambiguity, undermine democracy from within. Future research should empirically and comparatively assess the applicability of the proposed framework, testing its diagnostic capacity and analytical utility across diverse democratic settings.

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Ideological Aspects of the Resurgence of Fascism: A Risk to the International System?

Luis Antonio de Araújo Costa[1]

Introduction

There are several possibilities for reflection regarding the necessary intersection between the democratic agenda and International Relations; from the way in which relations between States are established, to the expansion of the international agenda to democratic issues addressed domestically in various countries, to the way international organisations function, among others.

We begin by recognizing the rise of politicians and parties influenced by fascist ideologies in recent years. This process represents a true challenge to democracy, regardless of its degree of effectiveness and substance, and to the social agents who value and fight for democratic values and practices.

The objective of this text is to reflect on the ideological dimension of this ongoing process and contribute to the perception of possible developments.

Hibernation and Resurgence: The Second Fascist Wave

In his work "The Anatomy of Fascism," Robert Paxton presents the following definition of historical fascism in the first half of the 20th century:

> Fascism must be defined as a form of political behavior marked by an obsessive preoccupation with the decay and humiliation of the community, seen as victim, and by

1 Sociologist whose work has been published in the field of international politics. His research addresses themes such as hegemony and counter-hegemony. His doctoral thesis focused on international politics in South America during the implementation of the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America. He is a professor at the Federal Institute of Bahia.

> compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a popularly based party of committed nationalist militants, operating in uneasy cooperation with traditional elites, repudiates democratic freedoms and begins to pursue goals of ethnic cleansing and external expansion through redemptive violence and without being subject to ethical or legal constraints of any kind. (Paxton 2007, 359).

Despite the immense tragedy and destruction generated by the development of the first fascist wave, its defeat did not represent the disappearance of its ideology. During the Cold War, various political factors contributed to the hibernation of fascist ideology[2] through the gaps opened to the survival and reuse of Nazi-fascist elements under the protective mantle of the anti-communist struggle.

From the guaranteed survival at the end of World War II to the two fascist regimes in Europe, Salazar's Portugal (included in NATO on July 28, 1949) and Franco's Spain, to the great commitment of part of the national elites in the occupied territories, especially in France; to the change in perspective in the Nuremberg trials after the Marshall Plan, in which "a new trend is perceived in the trials of war criminals, acquitting people, especially big businessmen who had been extremely active in maintaining these regimes" (Vizentini 2000, 21) such as the case of the Krupp family. The creation of international escape routes to the USA, Latin America, and South Africa, enabled the reuse of personalities not only of a technical and scientific nature, such as Von Braun, but also war criminals such as Klaus Barbie and Josef Menguele, among others.

Also important is its historical rescue of the structures of surveillance and combat against left-wing parties and social organizations, the most notorious being the Gládio Organization, which acted as a paramilitary formation.[3]

2 Conference held by Paulo Vizentini on 08/08/2000 at the International Seminar "Neo-Nazism, Denialism and Political Extremism" in the city of Porto Alegre/RS, birthplace of the World Social Forum.

3 "[...] as a virtual second line of defense for NATO in the event of a war and a Soviet invasion. But until that Soviet invasion occurred, as it never did, they were used to attack social organizations, left-wing civil organizations, trade unions, and political parties. Among other things, they were allegedly responsible for the Bologna attack in 1980 and the assassination, for example, of Italian Christian Democrat politician

What is revealed is that the survival of semi-clandestine individuals and organizations of a fascist nature with marginal activity, but integrated into the service of espionage and security agencies such as the CIA, had the secondary effect of facilitating the permanence of components with fascist ideological identification.

Contemporary Fascist Resurgence

From a perspective focused on long-term processes and a focus on the world-system, Carlos Eduardo Martins adds important elements for understanding the brief historical account presented above. By situating the reflection on contemporary fascism within the temporality of the capitalist system, he revisits Immanuel Wallerstein's characterization of fascism as the most advanced strand of the great radical conservative ideology, in contrast to liberalism and socialism.

Given the expansive and hegemonic force of liberalism,[4] especially from the 1970s onward, it consolidated itself as a hegemonic matrix, to which other ideological alternatives began to submit, negotiating spaces of survival and reframing themselves programmatically in hyphenated ideologies: such as liberal socialism and liberal conservatism. However, "this subordination is not definitive, and in situations of weakness in the secular tendencies of capitalism, liberalism weakens, and conservatism and socialism tend to seek autonomy, regain their radicalism, and break with their liberal forms" (Martins 2022, 11).

The deepening crisis of neoliberal globalization is causing liberalism to lose its hegemonic capacity, allowing hyphenated ideological forms to resume their dynamics of autonomous affirmation in order to respond to the countless national and international economic challenges. This is the process in which, in various countries, parties and candidates clearly inspired by ideological elements of the fascist experience emerge as leading protagonists—and no longer restrained by the previous "cordons

Aldo Moro, a murder that was camouflaged as if it had been committed by a far-left organization (the Red Brigades)" (Vizentini 2000, 23).

4 We will develop the concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony from a Gramscian perspective later.

sanitaires"[5]—in both parliamentary races and executive elections. This would allow us to characterize this historical moment as a resurgence of fascism. Adaptively and contradictorily, its contingent forms of expression develop, varying from country to country, without, however, losing the fundamental strategic components that operate at the political, but primarily ideological, level, as we will see below.

Ideology and Hegemony Dispute

Gramsci's thought understands ideology as a worldview in all areas of life: art, literature, economics, etc., encompassing everything that is organized on the plane of ideas and not merely meaning mistakenly internalized conceptions. In his work, ideology acquires the "[...] highest meaning of a worldview, which manifests itself implicitly in art, law, economic activity, in all individual and collective manifestations" (Gramsci 1978,16).

Ideology as a complex material structure is not seen only as a type of collective subjectivity (Eagleton 1997, 113) and, therefore, does not reflect only the worldview of the dominant sectors, but also the relations between the competing blocs in society as a whole. "Its task is to recreate, on an 'imaginary' level, the unity of the entire social formation, not just to lend coherence to the consciousness of its rulers" (Eagleton 1997, 113).

In this way, the dominant ideology must be broad and flexible enough to reach and permeate diverse social groups, favouring the links between their specific subjective aspirations, their objective realities and the objective and subjective needs for the reproduction of the interests of the dominant classes, contributing to the constitution of social interests considered valid.

> [...] must appear as an organizing social force that actively constitutes human subjects at the roots of their lived experience and seeks to equip them with forms of value and belief relevant to their specific social tasks and to the general reproduction of the social order (Eagleton 1997, 194).

5 Parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms, agreed upon by liberals, social democrats and conservatives, of isolating far-right movements and parties identified with fascist ideology in European countries.

Likewise, for Lukács, ideology is also something that constitutes reality, in such a way that "ideological moments do not just 'cover up' economic interests, they are not just banners and slogans of struggle. They are an integral part and elements of the real struggle itself" (Lukács 1974, 73).

In this sense, Mészáros's fundamental contribution is situated, defining that:

> [...] ideology is not an illusion or religious superstition of misguided individuals, but a specific form of social consciousness, materially anchored and sustained. As such, it cannot be overcome in class societies. Its persistence is due to the fact that it is objectively constituted (and constantly reconstituted) as an inevitable practical consciousness of class societies, related to the set of rival values and strategies that attempt to control the social metabolism in all its aspects (Mészáros 2004, 65).

Thus, competing interests throughout history manifest themselves in various ways in the realm of social consciousness, exerting an objective influence on the material processes of societies. In the course of class struggle, the most established ideologies compete with each other as strategic alternatives, presenting ways of understanding social reality and the objective and subjective problems that arise in a given context, from perspectives that seek to be all-encompassing; "thus, conflicts between classes find in ideologies their necessary manifestations, through which people become aware of this conflict and resolve it through struggle, not through the legislative domination of theoretical reason" (Mészáros 2004, 65).

Therefore, what "determines the nature of ideology," first of all, is the imperative to become practically conscious of the fundamental social conflict—from the mutually exclusive points of view of the hegemonic alternatives that confront each other in a given social order—with the purpose of resolving it through struggle (Mészáros 2004,66).

Having its specific rationality oriented by, and for, social and political practice, the interests of ideological discourses are focused on the perception

of effective indicators of reality and mobilizing stimuli[6] directed towards social actions and concrete social subjects.

In our view, there is a theoretical correspondence between the way ideologies are framed as forms of consciousness, which, to a more elaborate degree, propose strategic perspectives for political action, as understood by Mészáros, and Gramsci's way of understanding ideology, which conceives of ideology as an essential element in the construction of hegemony, as well as in the dispute for hegemony by other ideologies that aspire to the condition of hegemony.

For the philosophy of praxis, ideologies are by no means arbitrary; they are real historical facts that must be combated and revealed in their nature as instruments of domination, not for reasons of morality, but precisely for reasons of political struggle. From the point of view of building a counter-hegemony to make the governed intellectually independent of those who govern, to destroy one hegemony and create another, as a necessary moment in the struggle for emancipation, it is essential to recognize that "men become aware of their social position (and, consequently, of their tasks) in the realm of ideologies" (Gramsci quoted in Coutinho 2011, 188).

According to Gramsci's understanding, hegemony assumes a connotation of political, ideological, moral, and cultural direction, also operating prominently in civil society, which interacts dialectically with the control of the functions of political domination—that is, of coercion itself. In this sense, hegemony is not the homogeneity, much less the exclusivity of a social actor, or bloc of actors, in the political arena. Rather, it is the concrete, everyday, multidimensional exercise of the prevalence of the interests, values, and worldview of a dominant social group over the remaining groups, whether actively or passively subordinate.

The loss of cultural, ideological, or moral hegemony of a class or power bloc, causing them to cease to be leaders and begin to exercise only domination, is destined to trigger a crisis, which can lead to the decline and collapse of this class or bloc's power, its replacement by another

6 It is not without reason that the identification of the centrality of the "mobilizing passions" driven by historical fascism gains such centrality in the definition of Fascism for Robert Paxton, as we will see later.

form of domination, or the resumption of a new hegemonic balance recomposed with new actors, agendas, or institutions. However, in the absence of a sufficiently developed counter-hegemonic structure capable of generating a real alternative power, this loss of hegemony of the ruling classes may not go beyond the limits of a momentary crisis, returning to the stabilization of the former ruling classes.

The possibility of loss of hegemony stems from the understanding that this, By combining the dynamics of coercion and consensus over a more or less broad historical period, it must necessarily be effective in producing a social order that voluntarily generates adherence and social cohesion. It is not absolute, therefore, but rather capable of prevailing or being supplanted by another set of forces, values, symbols, and ideas originating from the formerly subordinate classes. This presupposes the existence of critical and, to some extent, counter-hegemonic ideological forces and constructions, distinct and in constant, more or less intense dispute. The construction of a counter-hegemony would therefore require a complex practice that articulates discourses, sensibilities, struggles, diverse programs, and concrete political force, connected in its particular utopia, whether emancipatory or reactionary.

It is this ongoing crisis of liberalism's hegemony and the affirmation of fascist ideology as an autonomous counter-hegemonic alternative, no longer hyphenated or under ideological tutelage, but increasingly explicit, active, and mobilizing the passions of our time, that Martins situates as organically linked to the political resurgence of fascism. One hundred years later, we are doomed to fight the same enemy as our ancestors, and if the first time humanity experienced one of its greatest tragedies, there is no indication that this time we are facing a farce.

Fascist Ideology

In view of the above, we adopt the perspective developed by Álvaro Bianchi on the importance and relevance of the study of fascist ideology, as this would be the starting point that makes it possible to interpret and understand its attempts to update "whether in contemporary neo-fascist movements or in those of a post-fascist type" (Bianchi 2024, 46).

As a preliminary question, his study clearly positions itself on the possibility of affirming the existence of a fascist ideology:

> If we take seriously what the fascists wrote and said, it is undeniable that fascism had an ideology and even a doctrine. It is not a simple reproduction of the ideas of pre-war conservative nationalists. It is an original synthesis of different intellectual currents, albeit full of contradictions. One can question its logical consistency and its adherence to reality, but not its existence (Bianchi 2024, 49).

The fact that some of its forms of manifestation, such as colourful shirts or banners with fanfares in front of folk costumes, have not survived should not divert our attention from identifying that various fascist ideological forms operate effectively in our current world, not only in digital forms of sociability.

> The ideas, however, are there for anyone to see and study. The ideology of fascism is ultranationalist, statist, antidemocratic, and anticommunist, and attributes to violence the redemptive capacity to create a new political order to promote national rebirth. It is this ideology that connects interwar fascism to the new neofascist movements (Bianchi 2024, 60).

In our view, fundamental elements of fascist ideology have survived, in an explicit or adapted form, allowing the updating of its fundamental strategic components, acting creatively in different ways, in the process of becoming aware of the conflicts existing in this moment of economic, environmental, civilizational crisis and in the hegemonic capacity of the USA in the International System.

To reflect on these ideological elements, we will draw on the article published by Umberto Eco in the *New York Review of Books* on June 22, 1995, exactly 44 years after the first day of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. In *Eternal Fascism*, the author draws on his memories of the fascist period in Italy and its subsequent downfall to reflect on the characteristics of fascism as an Italian phenomenon, but also, and fundamentally, an international one.

Its ambiguities and contradictions as an ideology, movement and political regime, the lack of commitment to its own program, the lack of political coherence in its alliances in the period prior to coming to power, in the face of the period of its consolidation and the absence of a philosophical system to guide it, such as liberalism and socialism, did not go unnoticed.[7]

At that time, already motivated by the perception of the rise of fascist and/or neo-fascist politicians and organizations, he proposed an interpretative key, which allowed for a comparative analysis between different fascist groups and experiences, both from the 1930s among themselves, and from the movements that emerged in the 1990s, given their main mobilizing ideas articulated on strong emotional and archetypal coherence.

The structured confusion typical of fascist identity could be identified, have political functionality and allow recognition and solidarity among its members, based on the idea of family similarities: *1–2–3–4/abc bcd cde def:*

> Suppose there is a series of political groups. Group 1 is characterized by aspects abc, group 2 by aspects bcd, and so on. 2 is similar to 1 insofar as they have two aspects in common. 3 is similar to 2 and 4, and is similar to 1 (they have aspect c in common). The most curious case is given by 4, obviously similar to 3 and 2, but with no characteristic in common with 1. However, due to the uninterrupted series of decreasing similarities between 1 and 4, there remains, by a kind of illusory transience, a family atmosphere between 4 and 1. [...]
>
> The term 'fascism' applies to everything because it is possible to eliminate one or more aspects of a fascist regime, and it will always remain recognized as fascist. Take away imperialism

7 "The fascist party was born proclaiming its new revolutionary order, but it was financed by the most conservative landowners, who expected a counterrevolution. Early fascism was republican and survived for twenty years by proclaiming its loyalty to the royal family, allowing a '*duce*' to pull the strings of a 'king,' to whom it even offered the title of 'emperor.' But when, in 1943, the king dismissed Mussolini, the party reappeared two months later, with German help, under the banner of a 'social' republic, recycling its old revolutionary score, enriched with almost Jacobin accents." (Eco 2019, 4)

> from fascism, and we have Franco or Salazar; take away colonialism, and we have Balkan fascism. [...]
>
> Despite this confusion, I consider it possible to indicate a list of typical characteristics of what I would like to call 'Ur-Fascism,' or 'eternal fascism.' These characteristics cannot be brought together in a system; many contradict each other and are typical of other forms of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough for one of them to appear for a fascist nebula to form. (Eco 2019, 6)

In summary, the 14 highlighted points that would mark the fascist ideological identity would be:

1—The cult of tradition. "One must look at the programs of all fascist movements to find the main traditionalist thinkers. Nazi gnosis was fueled by traditionalist, syncretist, and occult elements."

2—The rejection of modernism. "The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense, Ur-Fascism can be defined as irrationalism."

3—The cult of action for action's sake. "Action, being beautiful in itself, should be taken first, or without any prior reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation."

4—Disagreement is treason. "The critical mind makes distinctions, and distinctions are a sign of modernism. In modern culture, the scientific community praises disagreement as a means of improving knowledge."

5—Fear of difference. "The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is to turn against intruders. Thus, their fascism is racist by definition."

6—Appeal to social frustration. "One of the most typical characteristics of historical fascism was its appeal to a frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by pressure from lower social groups."

7—The obsession with a plot. "Followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to resolve the plot is by appealing to xenophobia."

8—The enemy is both strong and weak. "By a continuous shift in rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time very strong and very weak."

9—Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy. "For fascism, there is no struggle for life, but rather, life is lived for the struggle."

10—Contempt for the weak. "Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology."

11—Everyone is educated to become a hero. "In ur-fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is closely linked to the cult of death."

12—Machismo and weaponry. "Machismo implies disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of non-standard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality."

13—Selective populism. "There is a TV or Internet populism in our future, in which the emotional response of a select group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People."

14—Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak. "All Nazi or fascist textbooks used impoverished vocabulary and elementary syntax to limit the tools for complex and critical reasoning."

In our view, the corollary of fascist ideas described above helps us understand how fascist ideology operates, each of its 14 expressions in isolation, and how it can articulate itself contingently, depending on each political situation, historical social formation, and national context. However, we would like to highlight two aspects: racial[8] and military.

From a racial perspective, we believe that much is lost in the debate and characterization of fascism's ideological expressions when the depth of its racist understanding of humanity is overlooked. The fact that the Nazi project represented the greatest historical radicalization possible to date of the development of racial theories, social Darwinism, and eugenics does not exempt historical first-wave fascist regimes, nor first- and second-wave

8 It is important to understand that we speak of racism when the idea of race guides and structures social action, which can be presented explicitly or implicitly, attributing hierarchical constructions about human beings. The idea of race can be used to construct subordination or as a way to direct political actions of resistance to racism; "there is no racism without anti-racism" (Guimarães 2024, 50).

ideological expressions and movements, from their profound denial of the humanity shared by all human beings.[9]

Although the paramilitary, military, heroic, hierarchical, and heteronormative components, all of which are deeply disseminated within military organizations, are correctly identified as strategic ideological components of fascist ideology, in our view the military component tends to be neglected in a fundamental and dynamic aspect: the construction of synthesis.

Undoubtedly, each contingent historical form that the fascist movement assumes, according to the perceived needs of each moment in its historical trajectory, is made possible by the existence of high doses of political opportunism and a lack of programmatic commitment. However, the component of the military combat ethos is fundamental to the legitimization of the fascist synthesis specifically constituted in each national situation.

It is through the military ideological component, with its call for submission to authority and respect for hierarchy, that the sense of historical mission in the interests of the people, mediated by the leader, is legitimized for the movement as a whole. The denial of intellectualism, in addition to the philosophical components of irrationalism and anti-Enlightenment, is compounded by the military ideological element of the

9 "So-called social Darwinism became an instrument in the fight against liberal democracy. As in the jungle, they believed, human destinies were determined by biological factors. For them, democracy, by equating the wolf and the lamb through voting, committed a contradiction. Furthermore, as the philosopher Nietzsche complained, they were essentially committing an injustice by harming those who were naturally superior, the strongest, the fittest. Furthermore, they recommended a rigorous selection process to prevent the procreation of certain harmful elements, as well as to encourage the multiplication of others, seen as biologically superior. To achieve this, it was necessary to adopt a centralized policy of technical control, which would gradually achieve the purification of the race, improving the general well-being of humanity [...]
The Christian morality of tolerance and charity toward the weak was rejected. Christian ethics prevented the imposition of a policy of natural selection and ended up prolonging humanity's general suffering by refusing to accept the extirpation of its rotten branches or deformed roots. Liberalism, democracy, and socialism—with their discourses in favor of equality, whether economic or socio-political—were different ways of violating natural law, which always acted, whether we like it or not, in favor of the fittest and strongest. Social injustice was the attempt to equate the strong with the weak, or as the poet William Blacke put it in other circumstances, 'the same law for the Lion and the Ox is oppression'" (Schiling in Vizentini 2000, 172).

rejection of rational consideration, since orders must be obeyed, never questioned.[10]

Second Trump Administration: New Fascist Synthesis?

If on the one hand it is true to state that the process of construction and political viability of a given national fascist synthesis is not written in the stars, nor in national culture or in any kind of essentialism, on the other hand it is also true to identify that the current crises,[11] listed above, favour these syntheses and one of the fundamental meeting points of these crises is the United States.[12]

Originating from the "reaction of the nationally based bourgeoisie and middle sectors to the concentration and centralization of capital, associated with neoliberal globalization," American fascism has a strong white supremacist racial appeal, as can be seen in the persecution of immigrants, preferably Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians, and in the attempt to criminalize the Black Lives Matter movement; "it chooses socialist China, revolutionary nationalism, and multiculturalism as its main enemies" and "establishes a strong irrationalist ideological offensive using mainly digital networks, some media segments, and Pentecostal Christian fundamentalism" (Martins 2022, 19, 20).

It is disruptive of the liberal constitutional order at home and abroad, as can be seen in the attack on the Capitol, in the establishment of trade tariffs in defiance of the WTO and the bilateral and regional treaties to which it is a party, and, most seriously, in the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities on June 21, 2025, (without a declaration of war and in defiance of the country's Congress), an action prohibited by the international legal framework.

10 Part of military training is the stigmatization of free reflection, in the figure of the "ponderer," the one who counters the given order with rational and/or moral arguments, negatively impacting the obedience of the troops and the achievement of the mission's objective.

11 From the neoliberal accumulation pattern, from capitalist civilization, from the environment and from US hegemony in the International System.

12 "The United States tends to become the epicenter of global fascism, driven by an extreme right that is increasingly taking over the Republican Party and organizing itself in civil society, establishing leadership, penetrating large segments of white workers, unorganized and linked to economically decadent spaces" (Martins 2022, 19).

In our view, it is no coincidence that some of the mobilizing passions (Paxton 2007, 359) that inspired the first fascist wave are easily identifiable in the policy implemented by the White House:

1. The belief that one's own group is a victim, which justifies any action against its internal and external enemies, regardless of legal or moral limits. (Paxton 2007, 359).
2. The fear of the group's decline, given individualistic liberalism, foreign influence and class conflicts. (Paxton 2007, 359).
3. The search for the integration of a purer community, generally through violence. (Paxton 2007, 359).
4. The search for and legitimization of natural leaders, generally male, culminating in a leader capable of leading the group to its victorious destiny.[13] (Paxton 2007, 359).
5. The superiority of the leader's instincts over reason or what was previously considered reasonable.[14] (Paxton 2007, 359).
6. The praise of violence and will when directed towards the interests of the group.[15] (Paxton 2007, 359)

The convergence and harmony between the mobilizing passions present in the first wave of fascism and some of Trump's practices and speeches in this second term indicate that the synthesis of the Americans' fascist apparatus is underway. This process can still be reversed in various ways, but it should serve as a warning, because if economic and fiscal difficulties intensify, as several economists are assessing is possible,[16] the ideal scenario for a fascist synthesis could materialize, which would pose a risk not only to our closest neighbours but to all of humanity.

13 The military parade in Washington on Trump's birthday, something unprecedented in US history.

14 Trump's disregard for US intelligence reports that Iran is not developing nuclear weapons

15 Trump's description of the bombings reveals not only demagoguery, but also the aestheticization and legitimization of absolute violence to achieve the national interest.

16 The US would be today in the classic situation of decline of Empires, given the extent of its spending, only balanced by constant financialization, since the break of the gold standard in the 1970s. Recent difficulty in managing the North American public debt has manifested itself in the difficulty of selling treasury bonds with longer terms in addition to Japan"s move to get rid of part of these bonds: (Sean Foo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n-uA7eQriY, Michael Hudson https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnUepFO7ryU, and Richard Wolff https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMAQpbBLHzw).

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When the Crisis of Democracy and the Climate Crisis Collide: Intersections and Overlaps

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1. Introduction

Summary of Argument

Wildfires of catastrophic proportions in California, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the trade war between China and the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic, unprecedented floods in southern Brazil, the storming of the U.S. Capitol, the war between Iran and Israel, and the increase in migratory flows in Eastern Africa. In a world of "polycrises" (Tooze 2022)—in which political, economic, climate, and social crises are deeply entangled—it becomes extremely complex, if not impossible, to identify single causes for globally impactful events. The whole proves more overwhelming than the sum of its parts. Similarly, due to the interconnected nature of these problems, no single solution is sufficient anymore.

Within the context of polycrises, two have become particularly acute over the past decade. The climate crisis, reflected in the rapid acceleration of global temperature rise—faster than initially predicted—has led to an increase in both the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. In parallel, the democracy crisis has weakened the quality of consolidated democratic regimes, pushing them closer to autocracy or even totalitarianism.

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Although it cannot be claimed that one is a direct cause or consequence of the other (Lacava, Barreto, and Sodré 2024), it is undeniable that there are several points of intersection between political regimes and the climate crisis that can mutually amplify or mitigate their respective impacts. Among the most evident are: the environmental consequences and greenhouse gas emissions directly triggered by armed conflicts; the pressure exerted on governments by the growing number of climate refugees and forced displacements;[3] and the instrumentalization of climate-related discourse in political rhetoric—such as the "ESG agenda" during U.S. elections.[4] Beyond these impacts, however, it is also possible to identify deeper transformations within the institutional landscape.

To fully grasp the interconnectedness of these phenomena, it is essential to analyse the institutions involved: entities responsible for implementing climate action, normative frameworks, multilateral organizations that affect or are affected by the climate agenda, development banks, and climate finance mechanisms. These institutions determine, among other things, who gets a seat at the decision-making table, which decisions are made, how much funding is allocated to specific actions, and the degree of priority these issues receive (Dubash et al. 2021). At the same time, the strength and quality of institutions will directly shape the success or failure of those actions.

This chapter aims to provide a non-exhaustive contribution to the political science literature exploring the interconnection between the climate crisis and the crisis of democracy, from an institutionalist perspective—that is, one that takes institutions as central explanatory variables in the analysis of social and political phenomena (Hall and Taylor 2003). For the purposes of this analysis, institutions are understood as sets of formal and informal rules, norms, procedures, and conventions that shape both individual and collective behaviour, influencing the social structure and decision-making processes.

3 For more information: https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/climate-change-and-displacement. Accessed June 22, 2025.

4 For more information: https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2025/01/10/the-future-of-esg-under-the-trump-administration/. Accessed: June 22, 2025.

The chapter is organized as follows. Following this introduction, the authors provide a brief overview of the concepts of democracy crisis and climate crisis, in sections 2 and 3. Next, section 4.a) explores the current state of political science debates on the interconnection between these phenomena. Sections 4.b) to 4.e) delve into specific dimensions of this relationship, namely: (i) the tendency of autocratic leaders to erode climate institutions; (ii) agenda disputes and the difficulty of prioritizing climate actions in the context of democratic crisis; (iii) the reduction in available investment for climate initiatives due to political instability; and (iv) the weakening of global climate cooperation organizations under the rise of authoritarian regimes. The chapter concludes with final reflections presented in section XX.

2. Crisis of Democracy

The phenomenon known as the "crisis of democracy" has gained traction over the first decades of the 21st century. Within academic circles, a substantial body of research has sought to address, among others, the following questions: (i) are liberal democracies, in fact, in crisis? (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018); (ii) if so, what are the objective indicators of this phenomenon, and are they the same across all countries? (Przeworski 2019); (iii) what are its underlying causes? (Carothers and Hartnett 2014); and most importantly: (iv) is it possible to reverse them? (Núñez, Close, and Bedok, 2016). While consensus remains elusive—as might be expected in the analysis of a phenomenon still unfolding—it is nonetheless true that substantial progress has been made in developing hypotheses to address these questions.

One of the most striking developments is the growing number of countries that, in recent decades, have undergone processes of autocratization or experienced some degree of democratic backsliding (V-Dem 2025). Among the most emblematic cases discussed in the literature are Viktor Orbán's Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, Narendra Modi's India, Javier Milei's Argentina, Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey, and, as of 2024, Donald Trump's United States during his second term (Carothers and Hartnett 2014). Currently, it is estimated that more

than 70% of the global population lives under regimes considered either not free or only partially free, and the average global level of democracy has regressed to that of 1989 (Lacava, Barreto, and Sodré 2024).

Although the very definition of democracy remains contested, several factors are widely identified as indicators of democratic erosion—albeit with contextual variations. These include the weakening of traditional political parties, particularly those aligned with the progressive center; the emergence of new far-right parties or those identifying as anti-system and anti-politics (e.g., Alternative for Germany [AfD] in Germany; the Liberal Party [PL] in Brazil); declining electoral turnout; plummeting levels of trust in political parties, elected officials, and institutions; decreasing public support for democracy as a system; reduced alternation of power; censorship of media outlets; and a rise in political violence (Przeworski 2019).

Finally, attention is drawn to the unique nature of this democratic backsliding, which, unlike earlier instances marked by civil revolutions or military coups, is characterized by an incremental process of institutional erosion. Press outlets, the judiciary, oversight bodies, and at times civil associations are among the democratic institutions that have been gradually weakened—often through the use of sub-legal mechanisms or even democratic tools to produce long-term anti-democratic outcomes. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as autocratic legalism (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). Some of the mechanisms involved include budget cuts, reductions in human resources, the creation of barriers to public participation, and the removal or reassignment of institutional responsibilities.

3. Climate Crisis

The latest synthesis report on the scientific evidence related to climate change, published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), paints a dire picture.

When assessing the present and future impacts of the continuing accumulation of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere, it affirms that widespread adverse impacts from climate events to people and nature are already a reality, that climate risks are expected to increasingly

interact with non-climate risks and become harder to manage over time and that the policies already in place worldwide to mitigate the increase of GHG emissions in the atmosphere and adapt to its impacts are currently insufficient (IPCC 2023).

At the same time, when the report explores the actions necessary to adjust course and avert the worst impacts of climate change, it highlights the need for increased political commitment to advance climate policies at the national level and of international cooperation to coordinate efforts in an efficient and fair manner (IPCC 2023). In the context of democratic crises, both of these key enablers for an acceleration of climate action face severe challenges.

Climate action can be seen, in a simplified manner, as taking place through two different dimensions: national and international. The national dimension is where a lot of the substantive efforts are carried out, as governments have the capacity to regulate activities generating GHG emissions, invest in critical infrastructure that can curb emissions and protect citizens from the impacts of extreme events and, overall, provide a guiding framework for how intra-national institutions can act in synchrony and on an adequate pace to reach major climate goals. The importance of the role of national states is recognized even at the international dimension, as seen in the cornerstone of international action to manage climate change, the Paris Agreement. In it, states are expected to design and communicate to the world regularly their level of ambition and plans to deal with the climate crisis in the form of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (Coglianese 2019). This means that, although states may be pushed to take more ambitious actions by the international community or internal actors, it ultimately falls upon them to decide their portfolio of climate policies and level of ambition (Coglianese 2019).

Concurrently, the international dimension is an essential part of efforts towards limiting the extent of climate change, as it can, for instance, provide coordination venues for states, create common climate standards and help manage activities that emit GHGs but escape the control of any single state. In the international dimension, climate policies are discussed,

designed and enacted through an intricate web of institutions, with no single comprehensive regulatory system in place. Rather than a unified Regime, a "Regime Complex for Climate Change" (Keohane and Victor 2011).

In it, the Paris Agreement serves as a key institution for international collaboration, as it establishes, beyond the commitment to submit NDCs, a quantitative goal to limit global warming, regular rounds of review of international climate action (named the Global Stocktake) and a cooperation framework in which developed nations are expected to provide finance for the costs developing nations will incur on transitioning their economies. Beyond the Paris Agreement, a number of other institutions form the Regime Complex, including financial markets rules, bilateral climate action initiatives, multilateral development funds, etc (Keohane and Victor 2011).

In the following sessions we will explore the interaction between the institutions responsible for tackling climate change described above and the phenomenon of the "crisis of democracy."

4. The Intersection

Both crises amplify each other in a myriad of ways:

Since the mid-2010s, political science has increasingly turned its attention to the possible intersections between the crisis of democracy and the climate crisis (Shen 2024). At least two analytical vectors can be identified here: one may examine the issue from the perspective of political institutions and their capacity to respond to the climate crisis; alternatively, one can analyse how the climate crisis affects political institutions themselves. A substantial body of literature has focused on identifying patterns between regime types and climate responses: what tools do democracies and autocracies possess to address this crisis? Are any of these regimes better prepared than others?

To date, the literature does not present a consensus regarding the existence of a correlation between the two phenomena (Lacava, Barreto, and Sodré 2024). Democratic regimes have shown non-linear behaviour,

with leadership alternating between actors committed to climate agendas and others openly sceptical or denialist—such as seen in Brazil and the United States, with the respective alternations between Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Jair Bolsonaro, and Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

While some scholars argue that authoritarian regimes may, in theory, have fewer veto points and greater enforcement capacity to implement long-term policies—as exemplified by China's climate policy over the past decade—there is also evidence suggesting that the broader public participation found in democratic regimes may constitute an advantage in addressing the climate crisis (Shen 2024). At the same time, as will be discussed in the following section, there is no guarantee that authoritarian regimes are more inclined to support pro-climate actions.

Regardless, authoritarian regimes currently account for approximately 45% of global carbon emissions and are also home to large portions of the world's most vulnerable populations—those most exposed to the severe consequences of extreme climate events. For these reasons, further investigation into the relationship between regime type and climate outcomes remains essential.

The absence of consensus on this matter does not, however, preclude the exploration of other potential correlations between political and climate crises. Perhaps the most direct of these is the environmental impact of armed conflicts, which proliferated over the course of the second decade of the 21st century. In a report published in 2023, one year after the onset of the war in Ukraine, Klerk et al. estimate that a single year of conflict would result in the emission of 120 million tons of CO_2—more than the annual emissions of 175 countries worldwide. These emissions are attributed to direct military operations, the raw materials required for reconstruction of civil infrastructure, and fires triggered by combat. In addition, such conflicts result in biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, and soil contamination.

In the following section, we delve deeper into additional correlations.

Leaders Putting Democracy under Pressure Have a Tendency of Dismantling Climate Institutions

Although this assertion cannot be generalized to all countries that have faced democratic threats over the past decade, it is possible to affirm that a significant portion of populist and autocratic-leaning leaders have positioned themselves in opposition to environmental efforts—or have outright denied the existence of climate change. This claim applies, among others, to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Casarões and Flemes 2019); Donald Trump in the United States (De Pryck and Gemenne 2019); Javier Milei in Argentina (Merke and Doval 2024); and Viktor Orbán in Hungary (Moore and Roberts 2022).

"Socialist lie," according to Brazilian congressman and son of Jair Bolsonaro, Eduardo Bolsonaro (Silva 2023); "trade game," in the words of Jair Bolsonaro himself (Amorim 2019); "hoax," according to Donald Trump (Worland 2019); and "cultural Marxism," as stated by Javier Milei (Garcia 2025). Beyond this rhetorical confrontation and public denial of global warming—which has significant effects on public opinion—one must also analyze the concrete actions taken by these leaders, which have direct consequences for climate policy. Many of these actions are sub-legal in nature and contribute to the gradual, rather than abrupt, erosion of institutions (Brito, Mendes, Sales, Amaral, and Barreto 2022).

The complete dismantling of an environmental protection agency would impose considerable political costs and likely face strong resistance, with reputational damage on the international stage. However, such dismantling is often unnecessary. It is frequently sufficient to preserve the appearance of institutional functionality—a "shell"—while, in practice, implementing measures that hinder or outright prevent the agency from fulfilling its intended role. This "shell" helps maintain a positive image before the international community, avoids sanctions from multilateral bodies, and distracts from the real democratic erosion taking place (Levitsky and Murillo 2013).

In this regard, the process of institutional corrosion under Jair Bolsonaro's administration in Brazil is particularly illustrative. Among other measures, the former president's government cut 93% of the budget

for climate change research during his first three years in office (Prazeres 2021), implemented administrative reforms that paralyzed internal operations, and staffed key agencies with unqualified personnel, many of whom came from military backgrounds (Silva and Silva 2023). Bolsonaro also restricted civil society access to advisory councils and decision-making bodies on climate policy and delayed public selection processes to fill vacant positions, leaving the institutions critically understaffed (Lacava 2022).

A similar process is currently underway in the United States during Donald Trump's second term. Environmental watchdog organizations have raised concerns about the potentially harmful effects of spending cuts implemented by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led until June 2025 by billionaire Elon Musk, on climate-related initiatives. These include the dismissal of staff from agencies conducting scientific climate research and the defunding of operational budgets for those very agencies (Schuster 2025). Simultaneously, Trump's public support for oil exploration over renewable energy sources places further pressure on investments in the research and development of alternative energy options.

Democratic Governments Defending Against Threats May Have a Reduced Policy Space, in Which Climate Policy Gets Side-Stepped

Even leaders not aligned with democratic backsliding may face direct pressures from it that end up weakening climate action. The first mechanism through which this may happen may be described as a "silent" one (Wajner, Destradi, and Zürn 2024): in the face of an opposition that attacks the validity of climate science, paints climate action as an "elite hobby" and are seen as successfully reaping some electoral gains with this discourse, incumbents that originally favoured climate action may decide to reduce it, silencing their own discourse or limiting action with a goal of preventing the further rise of challengers.

A second mechanism through which climate committed incumbents may reduce their actions is through active legislative opposition from autocratic-leaning political forces. Opposition may not only put in peril discourse around climate action, but actively work in the legislative to block or weaken legislation. In fact, some evidence suggests this has

been the case in OECD countries, with research identifying a correlation between the presence of "Right-Wing Populist Parties" in the legislative power and weakened climate policy (Lockwood and Lockwood 2022).

In this sense, climate action may be constrained not only in countries where autocratic-leaning forces are in control, but also where they aren't. Climate committed incumbents may reduce climate action for fear of political backlash in the public sphere or by the direct opposition in parliaments.

Collateral Damages of Democratic Backsliding May Hit Climate Investment Capacity

Additionally, recent events highlight how actions from governments from autocratic-leaning forces, even when not directly aimed at dismantling climate policy, may significantly harm it. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia, combined with the second Trump administration security response to it, have raised alarms throughout the European continent. As European countries strive to re-manage their budget to allow for increased security spending, one of the policy areas that may be severely affected is climate.

In a recent plea for European nations to sustain climate investment amid budget reshuffles aimed at scaling up defence spending, Simon Stiell, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), said "The climate crisis is an urgent national security crisis that should be at the top of every cabinet agenda" (Hancock and Mooney 2025). It is still early to assess if this plea will be effective, but initial signals show that even countries that have tried to position themselves as leaders in the climate agenda, as the United Kingdom under Keir Starmer's administration, are already rolling back budgets for foreign aid, a critical policy tool to accelerate the climate transition in developing countries, to finance increased defence spending (Mathiesen and Wallace 2025).

Democratic Backsliding May Also Undermine Multilateral Coordination Instances, Essential for Climate Action

Trump's second term started with the announcement that, for the second time, he would pull the United States out of the Paris Agreement

(Noor 2025). Bolsonaro, right after winning his bid for presidency, reneged on hosting the Conference of Parties (COP) climate conference of 2019 in Brazil (Watts 2018). Milei, during the first COP of his presidency, in Baku, abruptly withdrew Argentina's delegation from the negotiations (Greenfield 2024). All these actions, though different in practical policy implications and symbolism, reveal a common thread in the posture of autocratic-leaning leaders: the will of undermining the international institutions designed to coordinate climate action.

As previously explored, the "Regime Complex for Climate Change" contains a multitude of institutions (Keohane and Victor 2011), and the ability of autocratic-leaning leaders to influence them differs according to their structure and procedures. When it comes to the Paris Agreement, this ability may be significant: as COPs linked to the Paris Agreement operate through consensus decision-making (Depledge 2024), a single recalcitrant country may prevent advancements in negotiations, either by direct obstruction through voting or, even before that, by the expectation that ambitious new measures will be subject to resistance (Wajner, Destradi, and Zürn 2024). Additionally, as the material contributions to climate change mitigation under the Paris Agreement, namely NDCs, are voluntary in nature, administrations seeking to undermine climate efforts may not even need to obstruct actions during COPs, but simply water down or renege on previous nationally determined contributions.

Conversely, in international institutions where majority voting is a part of procedure, progress on climate action may occur even when headwinds caused by climate-sceptic governments are strong. While the international community still waits to see the effects of the United States' second withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, a recent decision in the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) approved a new scheme of payment for emissions in the shipping industry (Harvey 2025), a concrete and climate progressive outcome that may have been unachievable with the current political climate in organizations with consensus based decision procedures.

Autocratic-leaning leaders have shown in multiple instances their willingness to weaken climate action not only at home but also at the

international stage. Given the centrality of international institutions for effective climate action, it will be important, going forward, to see how resilient they can be to threats from these actors, either by relying on decision procedures that limit their influence, or by their ability to reform and adapt to the new crop of political actors combining threats to democracy and to climate action.

Conclusion

Disentangling the dynamics of interacting forces in a context of polycrises (Tooze 2022) is an inherently difficult task, and identifying clear causal relationships between them is often not possible. Nevertheless, recognizing that these interactions may affect important political outcomes, analysing them, even them within these limitations, represents a relevant undertaking.

In this vein, this article presented a non-exhaustive examination of how the crisis in democracy and climate crisis have been interacting through the lens of institutionalism, starting by an exploration of these two concepts. A review of political science literature on the interaction of democracy and climate policy followed, highlighting that to date there's no established consensus around the direct correlation of the two phenomena.

In the sequence, we sought to contribute to this growing body of literature and discussion by exploring some mechanisms that can be observed between the crisis in democracy and climate, namely, i) how autocratic-leaning leaders often seek to undermine climate institutions; ii) how even leaders of different political strains face pressure on the climate agenda by the pressure exerted by threats to democracy; iii) how even actions arising from democratic backsliding not intended to limit climate action may still harm it and; iv) how international institutions, an essential component of the efforts to limit climate change, are often undermined by autocratic-leaning leaders.

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Paradiplomacy as a Tool for Democracy: Returning to the City

Regina Claudia Laisner[1]

Introduction

When Aristotle, at the beginning of Politics, defines the city in contrast to the family and the village, he lays the foundations of classical Greek political thought, stating that only within the city can man realize the virtue inherent to their nature as a political animal, naturally capable of association and dependent on it for his survival and perpetuation. For the Greek philosopher, the city is precisely the political form that allows the community to establish a just order and the individual to live in such a way as to achieve moral development and legitimate satisfaction under the rule of law. This order, originally established in Athens, was democracy defined as the government of the people, of all citizens, that is, of all those who enjoy the rights of citizenship, which is distinct from monarchy, as the government of one, and aristocracy, as the government of the few (Aristotle 1997).

Modern democracy developed and consolidated in the 20th century as the predominant system of government throughout the world, with the

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transposition of the ideals of the city-state to the nation-state, following a series of institutional "adjustments" that could address the issues of such a system of government on a much broader level, with representation as its central mechanism, since the size and complexity of industrialized societies and the emergence of bureaucratic forms of organization raised serious doubts about the possibilities of putting the ideals of democracy into practice as they were originally formulated, especially concerning maximizing popular participation. Since then, democracy has traditionally been understood as a national issue, with the state as its main agent and reference point.

In the 21st century, the need to revise this perspective has become increasingly urgent, requiring a new framework that reconsiders the Westphalian international order of "nationalization of democracy" and the possibilities for recognizing its "globalization." The defence of the need for the globalization of democracy is linked to the very phenomenon of globalization itself—a process that has intensified commercial, social, cultural, and political relations around the globe, bringing distant locations together and stimulating a new form of spatial organization of the exercise of power, expanded by transformations in technical and informational technology that have increased the diversification and decentralization of the state apparatus.

Thus, this new context was characterized by an increase in international actors, such as international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, multinationals, etc., which began to form a list of "new actors" in the struggle for recognition and decision-making power, beyond the states. In this context, although states were still the exclusive participants in military alliances and multilateral diplomacy for peace and war (Lecours 2002), there was a notable growth in non-state actors, including subnational actors, with cities becoming increasingly relevant in international politics.

The growing involvement of cities in the international arena is a relatively new phenomenon in the field of international relations, which has traditionally been confined to the sphere of central government. This involvement is part of a reconfiguration of the hierarchy of international

actors, as subnational actors have increasingly become important objects of analysis, forging a new theoretical framework in the field, referred to in the literature as paradiplomacy.

Paradiplomacy has brought new visibility to actors that once relied solely on central governments to achieve their objectives, which represented a process of democratization of international relations, as well as a process of democratization of the very field of study of this theme. As Nye states, quoted by Di Sena Júnior (2003, 185), "Os Estados são os atores principais da política internacional contemporânea, mas eles já não mais possuem o palco apenas para si."[2] However, beyond the theory and practice of international relations, paradiplomacy, related to the field of debates about democracy, raises the possibility that the growing involvement of local governments in the international arena may also represent the construction of new mechanisms for coordination between communities, the strengthening of ties of cooperation and dialogue, as well as the joint overcoming of problems arising from regional asymmetries, in a process of democratization of democracy itself.

This chapter's theme is paradiplomacy as a tool for building democracy, with an emphasis on cities resuming power as vectors of this process. In it, we first describe the theoretical recognition of paradiplomacy and its potential, and then demonstrate, pragmatically, how this phenomenon has been occurring around the world. Having resumed the theoretical and practical strength of cities as political actors on the international stage and in the democratization of international relations, as a set of practices and knowledge, we then seek to reflect on their potential in terms of the very construction of democracy, based on their empowerment and return to the recognition of their political strength, in the Aristotelian sense.

Beyond Diplomacy—Theoretical Recognition of Paradiplomacy and the Potential of Cities

Until the mid-1950s, theoretical discussions about international relations, marked by the preponderance of the classical realist perspective,

2 "States are the main actors in contemporary international politics, but they no longer have the stage solely to themselves," in a free translation.

focused on analysing interactions between sovereign states, considered the only actors with defined and, in a sense, constant interests in the international arena, with other actors and interests in this field taking a back seat.

This perspective, whose main features were formulated by Hans Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations*, 1948, also known as the state-centric paradigm, places states as central actors in world politics, presenting a division between high politics and low politics, considering the former as linked to the discussion of the most important issues in international relations, namely defence, security, foreign policy, etc., and the latter as linked to less decisive issues such as economic, social, and cultural aspects, etc. In this paradigm, nation states are seen as rational actors operating in an anarchic international environment characterized by disputes over power, in a terrain of conflict, which is a central feature of this paradigm.

At the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, realism faced several challenges as the dominant theory of international relations. According to Nogueira and Messari (2005), these challenges had two origins: the evolution of international politics on the one hand and the evolution of discipline itself on the other.

On the side of the evolution of world politics, we can mention the confirmation of the Soviet Union as a superpower competing with the United States on the international stage, as well as the emergence of new states after the decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s. These newly independent states brought political agendas that diverged from those of the superpowers: they demanded access to development as a priority in world politics, rather than the political-military issues that dominated at the time. In the academic field, the emergence of new non-state actors in international politics, such as multinational companies and international governmental and non-governmental organizations, led to the questioning of the basic premises of realism (Nogueira and Messari 2005, 5).

Thus, criticism arose regarding the division between high and low politics and the primacy of the former over the latter in emphasizing strategic and military issues in dealing with international affairs, as well as the centrality of state actors and the separation between domestic and

international politics. These attacks plunged realism into an acute crisis, prompting efforts to address its theoretical limitations.

The responses to these challenges came from two fundamental camps: on the one hand, from realism itself, based on the work of Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*, with a view to formulating what he himself called neo-realism or structural realism; and on the other hand, from liberalism, which sought to position itself as an alternative perspective to realism in the field of international relations, mainly based on the works of Joseph Nye and Robert O. Keohane, which became a reference in this discussion, especially since the publication of their 1977 work, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*.

The approach of neo-realism or structural realism, developed by Waltz, took on the assumptions of classical realism, reviving it and reinforcing its explanatory capacity for the main phenomena of the international arena and, at the same time, presenting as its main difference from classical realism the fact that it consists of a rigorously constructed theoretical framework based on a structural analysis of international politics, so as to enable neo-realism to avoid the criticisms commonly made of realism regarding the lack of an analytical tool capable of supporting its assumptions (Keohane 1986). This approach represented a major advance in the analysis of international relations without, however, failing to recognize that if states were not the only actors in the international system, they were the most relevant, as they constituted the main part of the international structure, giving minimal importance to the weight that other non-state actors would have in international relations. Furthermore, "for the neo-realist, the specific internal structure of states is largely irrelevant to their international behaviour" (Burchill and Linklater 1996, 87).

The liberal perspective, on the other hand, by addressing the most recent aspects of the international scenario more carefully and considering cooperation between states as a possibility and a mitigating factor for the risk of international conflicts, opens up space to think of this process as likely to result in new political units or entities, which in turn could create a transfer of decision-making power from states to these new units. "Regional integration, therefore, is not restricted to the governmental

sphere [...] it affects society as a whole, generating interactions that escape state control between interest groups and representatives of society" (Mariano and Mariano 1998). In this regard, the works of Keohane and Nye (1999) were more expressive than those of Waltz in accounting for these new aspects that were emerging on the international scene, above all, seeking to develop a theoretical approach that highlighted the growing influence of transnational actors, challenging the core assumptions of realism and neo-realism.

In *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (1989), these authors defend the thesis that transnational processes were changing the character of the international system: advances in communications, the intensification of financial transactions, the volume of trade, the activities of multinational companies, the reciprocal influence of cultural and religious movements, etc., were increasingly forging a complex interdependence between countries and new "non-state" actors playing roles that were sometimes more relevant than those of states on the world stage. "[...] in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries. Where there are reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) costly effects of transactions, there is interdependence" (Keohane and Nye 1999, 307).

Thus, the authors emphasize that it was no longer possible to study international relations by looking only at state actors: it was essential to incorporate new actors into the models of analysis, while continuing to consider the dimension of power in international politics and its processes of interdependence.

Interdependence is a "typical ideal" concept for explaining relations between states as something that goes beyond disputes based on issues of force and security. Power remains an important and even central element in this analysis, but it incorporates other spheres—economic, social, environmental, etc.—beyond the merely "military" (Keohane and Nye 2000).

The theory of complex interdependence does not imply that military power becomes obsolete. Its authors understand, however, that the dynamics of international relations can include other resources of power

and that the possibilities for communication and negotiation between the various actors alter the rules and outcomes of the international game. Thus, an approach that focuses solely on the distribution of capabilities among similar units would not be sufficient to explain these relations.

The authors recognize that societies connect through multiple channels, identified as inter-state, trans-governmental, and transnational. The channels between states, still considered key actors in the analysis, are the traditional ones, personified in the images of the diplomat and the soldier, who, in the exercise of their functions, represent the country to which they belong. The new trans-governmental channels, no less important in many situations, link actors from different national government structures who establish direct relations with representatives of similar structures in other countries, with international organizations, and with non-governmental actors. Transnational channels, in turn, facilitate interactions between non-governmental actors, either to develop their own agendas or to influence world politics.

The line of reasoning regarding the emergence of new actors on the international stage, pioneered by these authors within the field of international relations, opened an important avenue of analysis in this area of knowledge. However, it was only in the late 1980s that the issues raised by Keohane and Nye began to be refined, with the emergence of the first studies on the subject within the discipline itself. Until the mid-1980s, most of these studies were carried out by those who dealt with the relations of these actors in the external sphere. Their analyses focused on the possibilities of signing treaties with international validity and on the agreements signed by sovereign states and their consequences for the distribution of power between the different internal levels of government.

From this period onwards, and with greater momentum from the 1990s onwards, new works began to discuss issues related to the growing participation of subnational actors in this scenario, specifically within the field of International Relations. Thus, reflections began to develop on federalism and international relations, interdependence and globalization, international engagement as a means of strengthening identities in multinational states, the rise of regions as centers of competitive advantage,

the role of non-central governments in areas linked by regional integration agreements, as well as decentralized international cooperation actions. (Nunes 2005)

It is in this environment that the study of paradiplomacy emerges, a term coined to describe the external actions of federal entities. The expression first appeared in literature in Michelman and Panayotis's 1990 work, *Federalism and International Relations: The Role of Subnational Units*, without a significant definition, but with a very clear objective of referring to the activity carried out by sub-state governments. In 1994, in the book *Paradiplomacy in Action: The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments*, Noé Cornago Prieto, in his article, "Diplomacy and Paradiplomacy in the Redefinition of International Security: Dimensions of Conflict and Co-operation," formulates a more elaborate definition for paradiplomacy that is generally well accepted in literature (Vigevani 2004, as cited in Prieto 2004, 252)

> A paradiplomacia pode ser definida como o envolvimento de governos subnacionais nas relações internacionais, por meio do estabelecimento de contatos, formais e informais, permanentes ou provisórios (ad hoc), com entidades estrangeiras públicas ou privadas, objetivando promover resultados socioeconômicos ou políticos, bem como qualquer outra dimensão externa da sua própria competência constitucional.[3]

As this is a relatively new phenomenon, the study of the participation of non-central entities in international relations is still in its infancy, both nationally and internationally. However, there is a growing body of literature that has sought to study various cases, better understanding their manifestations, especially in relation to the emergence and potential of cities.

The difficulties faced by cities around the world, given the ineffectiveness of states and even the lack of state investment, have encouraged these

3 "Paradiplomacy can be defined as the involvement of sub-national governments in international relations, through the establishment of contacts, formal and informal, permanent or provisional (ad hoc), with foreign public or private entities, with the aim of promoting socio-economic or political results, as well as any other external dimension of their own constitutional competence," in a free translation.

actors to develop their role in forms of international coordination with the aim of overcoming the weaknesses and limitations of nation states. In practice, however, there are still several obstacles to the autonomous exercise of cities, because although paradiplomacy is a diplomatic activity parallel to that undertaken by the central government, there are still limitations, from legal recognition to political recognition. However, its manifestation and visibility are becoming increasingly widespread and intense in many parts of the world.

Cities in the Doing of Paradiplomacy at a Global Level[4]

The inclusion of cities in the international arena is not a recent phenomenon, as it may seem when mentioning the recent theoretical recognition of these new actors in International Relations as a field.

Michael Bloomberg (2015), former mayor of New York, argues that one way of looking at world history is through cities, which, in his view, were more important in creating contemporary society than empires, since they have the potential to promote interactions that give rise to creativity and technological advances. They are, therefore, undoubtedly relevant actors in dealing with the challenges of the 21st century.

According to surveys by the United Nations (UN), 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, and this number is expected to increase to 70% by 2050, which helps explain why cities are increasingly becoming relevant actors in the implementation of international agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2019).

In this regard, Fernando Santomauro (2015) points out that urban issues, previously seen as local issues, such as transportation, housing, waste, and the environment, are now taking on a relevant role in the international agenda due to the increase in the population living in urban areas.

> As próprias organizações internacionais tradicionais – como diversas agências da ONU, União Europeia e até Mercosul –

4 This topic presents an adapted version of part of the content originally published in chapter 2 of "Secretarias municipais de relações internacionais no Brasil: um mapeamento nacional" (Laisner 2025), authored by the writer of this chapter.

> começaram a incluir as cidades como atores relevantes para o cumprimento das metas globais e regionais e, aos poucos, colocam em seus novos objetivos a resolução de problemas urbanos, a sustentabilidade e a maior qualidade de vida nas grandes metrópoles mundiais (Santomauro 2015, s.n).[5]

In addition to the greater inclusion of these issues on the international agenda, the strengthening of cities and metropolitan regions also influences the values that are being promoted.

According to Bloomberg (2015), ideals such as creativity, entrepreneurship, freedom, and diversity are gaining strength among new metropolitan generations, representing a counterpoint to extremist tendencies.

> As those in the Metropolitan Generation assume leadership positions, cities will become not just more culturally significant but also more politically powerful. Influence will shift gradually away from national governments and toward cities, especially in countries that suffer from bureaucratic paralysis and political gridlock (Bloomberg 2015, s.n).

In this sense, Pont (2019) argues that the 20th century was a favourable period for the expansion of cities and cooperation at the local level. The Industrial Revolution brought about major social, political, and cultural changes, creating new patterns of behaviour, housing, and migration toward urban centres. These movements also brought complex problems, the search for solutions to which led to the emergence of international municipalism, which brought together various actors, including technicians, politicians, activists, planners, among others (Pont 2019).

However, until 1910, these contacts between localities were not institutionalized, taking place through meetings and congresses. From that decade onwards, however, organizations began to be created that had a major international impact over the years. For instance:

5 "Even traditional international organizations—such as various UN agencies, the European Union and even MERCOSUR—have begun to include cities as relevant actors in the achievement of global and regional goals and are gradually putting the resolution of urban problems, sustainability and a better quality of life in the world's major metropolises among their new objectives," in a free translation.

> L'Union Internationale des Villes, UIV (International Union of Local Authorities –IULA– a partir de 1928) creada en 1913; la International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, creada ese mismo año (y más tarde redenominada International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation y finalmente International Federation for Housing and Town Planning o IFHTP, como se la conoce hoy) y el International Institute of Administrative Sciences, IIAS, creado en 1910 como Congrès International des Sciences Administratives, focalizado en la difusión del conocimiento de las teorías, los métodos y las técnicas administrativas (Pont 2019, 59).[6]

The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), created in 1913, brought together several of the objectives that are now promoted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), such as the defence of democracy and local autonomy; the production of scientific knowledge about the local area; the recognition of the political and institutional role of municipalities on the international stage; and becoming the largest forum for linking and coordinating local governments (Pont 2019).

The International Federation for Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP) became the main urban planning organization of the period, emerging from the British garden city movement. With a multidisciplinary approach focused on the dissemination of planning, it was one of the topics of discussion on the modern city (Pont 2019).

These movements were interrupted by World War I, although efforts for peace strengthened the integration movements between municipalities and countries. In the period after World War I, agreements and proximity between localities in Europe and the United States began to increase, resulting in the colonization of these movements by the modernizing model of the United States (Pont 2019).

6 The Union Internationale des Villes (UIV, International Union of Local Authorities or IULA from 1928 onward), founded in 1913; the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, established in the same year (later renamed the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation and eventually the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning, or IFHTP, as it is known today); and the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS), founded in 1910 as the Congrès International des Sciences Administratives, focused on the dissemination of knowledge regarding administrative theories, methods, and techniques

> Las nuevas orientaciones priorizaban y promovían la racionalización de la administración pública local, la administración basada en burocracias locales estables, acciones políticas racionales –entendidas como no partidarias–, la preeminencia de la pericia y de las competencias técnicas, el bienestar público a través del incremento de la eficiencia, la planificación urbana a largo plazo y la actuación de las asociaciones como proveedoras de información y de conocimiento técnico a organizaciones internacionales (Pont, 2019, p. 63).[7]

In addition, a joint headquarters was created for the three organizations, known as the Brussels Center, whose members played an important role in the emergence of other organizations after the end of World War II. Also, thanks to the work of this Center, IULA and IFHTP gained consultative status within the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the United Nations body for economics and society (Pont 2019).

This vision of rationalization, which had gained ground with the inclusion of organizations from the United States, was weakened with the advent of World War II, as it returned to the idea of peaceful coexistence between neighbours. This new orientation gave rise to new arrangements, such as the Council of European Municipalities (CEM), created in 1951 (Pont 2019).

Also, during these years, France was responsible for the creation of Le Monde Bilingue, an entity that helped promote the idea of languages for international communication. In 1957, this organization expanded, giving rise to the World Federation of Cities (FMCU, or UTO in English), whose objectives were to encourage peaceful coexistence, fraternal and mutual assistance, and the deepening of peace (Pont 2019).

Another form of international integration that gained prominence after World War II was city twinning. According to Langenohl (2015),

7 "The new orientations prioritized and promoted the rationalization of local public administration, administration based on stable local bureaucracies, rational political actions—understood as non-partisan—, the preeminence of expertise and technical skills, public welfare through increased efficiency, long-term urban planning, and the performance of associations as providers of information and technical knowledge to international organizations," in a free translation.

the first twinning agreements took place at the end of the war, with the aim of creating a bond between former enemies. The first efforts in this direction took place between British and German localities as a sign of goodwill, followed by cooperation efforts between French and German localities, which have been widely covered in the literature (Langenohl 2015). These Franco-German relations, according to the author, are deeply linked to the idea of European integration.

In this regard, the author presents an important meeting between French and German mayors that the International Union of Mayors facilitated:

> In this way, the historiography capitalizes on two major impacts in particular that this meeting (and accompanying events to be introduced below) has had in regard to the start up of town twinning as a project aimed at politically structuring and integrating Europe. Its first impact is to highlight how the intellectual tenets, undergirding the initiative, foregrounded the paramount importance of Franco-German relations for the future of Europe (Langenohl 2015, 21).

These roots led to the emergence of a second phase of international integration between 1950 and 1975, which saw a deepening of the sense of Europe and the creation of various bodies for relations between cities, such as

> [...] the Council of European Municipalities (CEM), the Fédération Mondiale des Villes Jumelées (FMVJ), the Deutsch–Französisches Institut (DFI), the Office Franco-Allemand pour la Jeunesse/Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk (OFAJ/DFJW), the EuropaUnion (the German section of the Union of European Federalists) and the Mouvement Fédéraliste Européen (Langenohl 2015, 21).

With the emergence of these bodies, the movement took on a role linked to the concepts of reconciliation and mutual understanding, especially among the younger population.

According to Soldatos (1990), it was during this period, especially in the 1960s, that paradiplomacy began to develop more intensely and with two different characteristics, briefly analysed by Froio (2015): qualitatively, they differed in that they were direct and autonomous, with their resources and pursuing their objectives; quantitatively, they differed in the greater volume and diversity of partnerships.

In this direction, during the Cold War, German municipalities sought to maintain relations with localities in the Soviet bloc, in addition to being a time when some twinning agreements led these localities to declare their positions on human rights and world peace, which created embarrassment for the main lines of foreign policy (Langenohl 2015).

In 1989, the European Parliament created a town twinning program so that these agreements could contribute to the deepening of European integration. In this direction, several programs were created to strengthen twinning initiatives, such as the Europe for Citizens program, which had two lines of funding, the "Town Twinning Citizens" Meeting and the "Network of Twinned Towns."

> The political significance of the municipal level and of twinning is, therefore, increasingly seen in the larger context of EU policies and located in their capacity for self-activation, self-government, articulation of municipal interests, and transnational cooperation and networking at a level that one might call inter-local (see also Joenniemi 1998; Johansson and Stålvant 1998; Leitner 2004; Joenniemi and Sergunin 2011) (Langenohl 2015, 30).

The inclusion of what was then called the Third World began to gain ground following debates on development and the realization that it was impossible to achieve through existing forms of official cooperation. In this sense, the Council of European Municipalities (CEM) and the World Federation of Cities (FMCU) played important roles in expanding the modes of action and geographical representation of their members (Pont 2019).

This change in focus was influenced by several conferences that took place during this period, including the Florence Conference on Cooperation between NGOs and Municipalities in 1983, co-organized by IULA and

the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In addition to this initiative, IULA and four other organizations organized the First European Conference on Cities and Development in Cologne in 1985, which gave rise to the Cologne Appeal, from Charity to Justice, signed by "[...] representantes de más de 130 ONG y autoridades locales de 12 países europeos." (Pont 2019, 74).

> IULA y UTO profundizaron sus actividades de solidaridad con municipios de países del Tercer Mundo a través de intercambios, apoyos, campañas de sensibilización y promoción de nuevos métodos de trabajo. La segunda de las mencionadas sostenía que si bien era indispensable una aproximación cultural, humanitaria y solidaria a la cooperación internacional, ello no era suficiente en tanto no contribuyera al desarrollo de los pueblos (Pont 2019, 75).[8]

Finally, the post-Cold War era brought new challenges and new social and economic arrangements associated with the advance of the globalization process and improvements in Information and Communication Technologies, which allowed for greater contact between locations in different countries. At the same time, regional integration and multilateralism gained increasing importance and strength.

In this context, an understanding emerged that the local is an engine for development and that the territory has great importance for the international political economy (Pont 2019). However, until the 1990s, localities had little ability to influence these international agendas.

It was only in the 1990s, specifically Rio 92—the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development—that local governments came to be seen as allies in promoting sustainable development, with a chapter dedicated to them in Agenda 21 (Pont 2019).

> Hábitat II es habitualmente reconocida como un punto de inflexión en la historia del municipalismo internacional.

8 "IULA and UTO deepened their solidarity activities with municipalities in Third World countries through exchanges, support, awareness campaigns and the promotion of new working methods. The second of the aforementioned argued that although a cultural, humanitarian and solidarity-based approach to international cooperation was indispensable, it was not sufficient as long as it did not contribute to the development of the peoples," in a free translation.

> Allí se avanzó en el reconocimiento de los entes locales y el rol que desempeñan en la mejora de las condiciones de los asentamientos humanos. La Declaración de Estambul destaca la importancia del papel de las autoridades locales y la necesidad de su fortalecimiento, así como de la cooperación descentralizada, particularmente en la difusión de las "buenas prácticas". A partir de este momento se hizo evidente la necesidad de profundizar la colaboración conjunta de las Naciones Unidas con los poderes locales y de avanzar en la creación de "una voz" local. (Pont 2019, 81)[9]

Also in 1996, the G4+ met in Paris, and the World Association of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination (WACLAC) was born from this meeting, as another step in the search for a unified voice (Pont 2019). The final step towards this unification was the creation of United Cities and Local Governments—UCLG—in May 2004, with the aim of promoting cooperation and integration between local governments, increasing their influence, and ensuring a democratic and efficient organization (Pont 2019).

These movements to bring cities into the international environment continue, increasingly linked to new international agendas. In addition, other regions have become part of these processes, gaining ground in the international environment and in specialized literature. The impact of this on democracy building remains to be seen.

The Possibilities of Empowering Cities in Building Democracy

The perspective of the paradiplomatic action of cities establishes the possibility of empowering these actors on the international stage, in the sense of the condition of agents, in the terms of Sen (2005) who emphasizes the importance of freedom and the ability of actors to make decisions about their own lives, as an essential component of development

9 "The Habitat II Summit is usually recognized as a turning point in the history of international municipalism. There, progress was made in the recognition of local authorities and the role they play in improving the conditions of human settlements. The Istanbul Declaration highlights the importance of the role of local authorities and the need to strengthen them, as well as decentralized cooperation, particularly in the dissemination of "good practices". From this moment on, the need to deepen the joint collaboration of the United Nations with local authorities and to advance in the creation of a local 'voice' became evident" in a free translation.

and social justice. In the case of cities, we are referring to the possibility for these actors, who previously depended exclusively on central power, to achieve their own goals.

However, in addition to the concept of empowerment being used in these terms as a reference for thinking about the possibilities of local governments democratically being recognized as relevant actors from a political point of view on the international stage, this concept is also a reference for analysing the effective capacity of cities to act in the planning and implementation of public policies. From this perspective, we can recall the vision of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (2001), who argues that federalism should be based on the principle of the social organization of the various communities, since, for this author, it is from the localities that it becomes possible to achieve the (re)taking of public spaces, so that all pluralities are taken into account through political actions. Here, federalism, in addition to legal, bureaucratic, fiscal, and economic decentralization, must encompass the political-social bias, making political participation and attention to local demands dynamic, in full exercise of democracy.

It is from this perspective that we need to look not only at the effective capacity of cities to act in the planning and implementation of public policies, but also at the direction in which these policies are taken. In other words, the question to be answered is: to what extent do these cities adopt a stance of "social federalism," in Saraiva's (2006) terms, in the face of the absence of the state, in order to solve certain social demands that marginalize considerable portions of local communities, through their active participation.

The aim is therefore to investigate, from the perspective of democracy building, the possibilities for expanding rights and empowering the population involved, now in Friedmann's terms (1992), observing the extent to which paradiplomatic initiatives are established whether they are merely technically effective in attracting resources and implementing policies for municipal economic growth, or if they also foster democratic innovation.

In this way, the concept of city empowerment, based on paradiplomacy, takes on a double meaning: it is used to think about the possibilities for local

governments to have decision-making capacity on the international stage, but also to think about their relationship with the population involved. Applied in this second sense, we can say that the concept of empowerment foresees the need for greater popular participation in decisions that affect them, offering them the possibility of deciding their future. The question to be answered from this perspective then becomes not only the level of autonomy of localities and their role on the international stage, but also to what extent they promote public policies with a bias towards the political participation of the population in meeting their needs.

The term, used as a reference for this reflection, is based on John Friedmann's book, *Empowerment—The Politics of Alternative Development* (1992). According to this author, empowerment is the main means of pursuing alternative development, which departs from the traditional view of development,

> [...] centered on people and their environment rather than production and profits [...] based as it must be on the life spaces of civil society, approaches the question of an improvement in the conditions of life and livelihood from a perspective of the household. (Friedmann 1992, 31)

The moral justification for alternative, people-centred development is based on three arguments: human rights, citizenship, and "human flourishing." The first argument is based on the affirmations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially on certain points such as freedom and basic needs. The second argument, linked to the logic of citizenship, is based on recognizing the importance of citizens in a state as essential members of a political community, who must be held accountable for their activities and treated equally. The third argument is about recognizing the capacities of human beings and, through alternative development, offering basic conditions such as food, water, and housing so that they can exploit them.

In this way, alternative development aims to humanize the system in which we live, based on the recognition of the forms of daily resistance and political struggle of the excluded population, who are clamouring for their right to be seen as human beings and citizens, in the full exercise

of their capacities. And it is with this type of development in mind that the possibilities for empowering cities in the construction of democracy must be established.

Final Remarks

In the search for a more democratic world order, paradiplomacy ends up combining two vectors that are relevant to this process: on the one hand, the possibility of greater recognition of the multiple actors that make up the international scene, democratizing international relations as a practice and International Relations as a field; and on the other, the potential to democratize democracy itself, increasing the number of protagonists in this process, with the potential to articulate specific demands, strengthen communities, and shape public policies to overcome problems.

In the preceding pages, we have tried to demonstrate the extent to which the potential of paradiplomacy can effectively realize these two vectors, both theoretically and pragmatically, as well as offering great potential in terms of the fate of democracy itself, particularly through the actions of cities.

It can be seen that local governments are part of the decision-making dynamics in the international system, as co-responsible for economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues, and that, in practice, they are the ones who implement the decisions taken in international forums (Duchacek 1990). It is also undeniable to recognize that there has been an increase in the space occupied by cities, which have gained strength, control of power, practices, values, and actions, in short, empowerment, within the international scene and its geopolitics, previously linked to a few central players. What remains to be investigated is the extent to which cities have become vectors for implementing programs and policies, strictly speaking, in the direction of building democracy.

Considering that cities make up the spaces closest to the population, we can consider their capacity to embody progress and setbacks in territorial development, as well as to develop the potential for their transformation toward a more just and democratic society. In this process, it is essential that the voice of the citizens who live in these cities, in addition to their

leaders, be incorporated not only into the spaces where programs and policies are implemented, but also into decision-making spaces.

Returning to the great Greek philosopher, the city is the political form that allows the community to establish a just order and the individual to live in such a way as to achieve moral development and legitimate satisfaction. To what extent are our cities composing around the effective construction of democracy, from this perspective, in this environment of "multiple levels" (Hocking 2004), in which different spheres of power have come to complement each other for this construction?

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Democracy is under pressure, and the warning signs are everywhere. From rising political polarisation and waves of disinformation to mounting distrust in institutions, different nations seem to be drifting away from fundamental civil rights and political freedoms. This is pushing democratic systems to their limits.

Yet, in the very midst of these challenges, democratic ideals continue to mobilise citizens, inspire social movements, and shape demands for justice, inclusion, and accountability. It is at this critical juncture that this book, thoughtfully edited by Maria Cândida Mousinho, Saulo Moraes de Assis and Daniel Pitangueira de Avelino, makes its timely and necessary contribution.

The articles gathered here share a fundamental premise: democracy is not a finished project. Rather, it is a dynamic, contested, and historically situated process. By bringing together theoretical reflections, empirical analyses, regional case studies, and interdisciplinary approaches, the book offers not a single, definitive answer, but a rich plurality of perspectives through which to understand democracy in the 21st century.

Gustavo Westmann

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