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Democracy in Latin America: Between Backsliding and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is strongly threatened, but, even so, it still resists. Although comparative literature is divided between pessimists and optimists (Freidenberg and Saavedra Herrera, 2020), or between those who see its setbacks (Bermeo, 2016; Diamond, 2020; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021) and those who highlight its resilience (Freidenberg 2024; Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Boese et al. 2021; Lieberman et al., 2022; Freidenberg 2023; or Levitsky and Way 2023), this research critically assesses the health of democracy, especially in two dimensions: electoral and liberal for 18 Latin American countries since 1978. The main argument contends that there is no single trend indicating global backsliding or, on the contrary, a generalized advancement of democracy, but rather, in any case, there are changes in different directions within the two main dimensions. While the liberal dimension is receding, the electoral dimension is being resilient. Backsliding is identifiable in relation to loss of basic commitments and the elites' disloyalty to democracy; difficulties in maintaining the currency of the Rule of Law, pluralism, respectful coexistence, and the independence of institutions; strategic manipulation of the formal rules and difficulties of access to resources and welfare; while advancements are visible in stability and cleanliness of elections, autonomy and professionalism of electoral arbitrators; alternation of power and the fact that those who govern lose elections; active participation of pro-democracy citizens; efforts for the inclusion of underrepresented groups and the building of parity democracies, among others.

Keywords: evaluation of democracy, democratization, backsliding, resilience, Latin America

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1. Introduction

Many democracies in the world are being threatened, but, even so, they still resist. Although democratic regression has been clearly described in research from different regional contexts (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Diamond 2020; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, among others), in recent years it has become clear that some democracies have had a greater capacity than others to resist these setbacks without losing their democratic conditions, and still —some of them— have been able to return to being democracies after having gone through some kind of "grey area". This phenomenon shows that contemporary democracies can be resilient and much more solid than they seem (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Brownlee and Miao, 2022: 133; Levitsky and Way, 2023), thus substantially recovering some or several of the conditions allowing for them to continue being a democracy.

One way to observe this phenomenon is by assessing whether holding elections with integrity has remained the heart of representative democracy. People use elections as a mechanism to say, “enough is enough of the same representatives as always”, to choose “savior leaders”, and/or convinced that there is some room to go beyond stagnation, transform their realities, and even overcome the crises they face. If a society does not receive the benefits of living in democracy, what does it have to lose if it bets on change, even if this means moving towards something uncertain (as in Argentina with the election of Javier Milei in 2023), or does it mean rejecting elites who have lived off privileges and have made democracy backslide in recent years (as in the Guatemalan election of 2023)? As Przeworski (2019) argues, democratic elections are “those that maintain the [democratic] seduction and allow cultivating the hope that things can change”. Hence, having an instrument enabling citizens to participate, to be represented, and to generate the social change they intend to effect is fundamental for democracy.

The possibility of freely electing whomever we want should never be something contrary to democracy, even if the result displeases us or does not coincide ideologically with our world view. The problematic question does not lie there, but it lies in the fact that, when accessing power, these leaderships promote ideas or build narratives that delegitimize the institutions allowing for them to win elections, and discursively denigrate their adversaries, as if they were not entitled to participate (Freidenberg, 2024).¹ What is debatable is that these leaders promise —from the margins of the system— to dismantle democracy in the name of democracy, and that, once in power, they make decisions that alter the legal frameworks, rules, practices and basic guidelines of democratic coexistence. This is what comparative literature has defined in recent years as “democratic backsliding” (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).²

Having said that, some of the countries that had more recently regressed in their essential components have shown some recovery. This means that they had the capacity of democratic resilience, i.e., the possibility of “resisting and maintaining the capacity to perform the basic functions of the democratic system” (Lieberman et al., 2022, 7). Although some countries have had the ability to sustain their democratic activities without experiencing significant

¹ In several countries of the region, in recent decades, the citizenry has chosen leaders who, in their narratives, promised to achieve changes. Some of them, such as Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2006, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2019, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador in 2019 and, recently, Javier Milei in Argentina in 2023, won the elections with the support of broad majorities seeking change within democracy. Those same leaders, in their campaign speeches, used statements contrary to the institutions that allowed for them to access power and, once in office, took decisions that led to democratic backsliding and to the erosion of several key indicators of the liberal dimension of democracy (see Freidenberg, 2024).

² Several examples support these claims. In Ecuador, during the decade of the Correísta government, levels of political pluralism were reduced, polarization increased and institutions were co-opted (Bermeo, 2016); in Mexico, the government of the Fourth Transformation promoted an electoral reform in 2022-2023 that sought to dismantle, remove autonomy and financially drown the electoral arbiter (the National Electoral Institute, the autonomous agencies and the local public electoral bodies) (La Política OnLine, 2023; Ríos Figueroa, 2022); or in El Salvador, Nayib Bukele modified the rules, denigrated and persecuted opponents, promoted “iron fist” policies that have violated human rights, co-opted institutions and generated mechanisms altering constitutional norms with the intention of remaining in power (Acevedo Medrano, 2022; Freidenberg, 2024), to name a few.

changes or setbacks in their central dimensions (such as Uruguay or Costa Rica), thus accounting for their capacity for “systemic resilience”, there have been dramatic setbacks (shocks or very strong crises) in other countries that have only been remedied as of late in the last few years with a processes of “democratic reversal” (as in Poland, Honduras, Ecuador, Brazil, Guatemala or Bolivia).

The objective of this research is to evaluate, forty years after its establishment, the health of democracy in 18 Latin American countries, using a multidimensional definition of democracy (Coppedge, Gerring and Lindberg, 2012, 99).³ This research deals with defining what is retreating, what is resisting, and to which extent the democracies that have retreated have managed to recover, and how they have done so. Unlike other investigations which refer to changes *of* the political system, in this paper we analyze changes in degree *inside* the system under two central dimensions—electoral and liberal—with the intention of evaluating the advancement and/or backsliding in each dimension. This research shows the differentiated—and even contradictory—variations that can be generated within the democratic political system. Unlike the changes between political systems that varied from authoritarianism to democracy or vice versa, this research specifically analyzes the changes that occur gradually in institutions, attitudes, and procedures within the systems.

Based on several databases, such as the datasets from the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), and those of the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America (#ObservatorioReformas), the analysis takes into account that some of the basic components of a democracy can be eroded, while others can resist. The main preliminary argument is twofold. First, it is argued that there is no single trend that indicates a one-way, generalized democratic backsliding for all countries in all dimensions, and at all the

³ The political systems studied are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Nicaragua, Uruguay and Venezuela.

assessed moments over the last four decades, nor is there a determined and unidirectional progress towards greater democratization. The findings show changes in different directions in the various dimensions for the countries analyzed, thus challenging which decisions to take in order to measure such changes. Second, the resilience of some democracies is demonstrated when realizing that, while the liberal dimension is receding, the electoral dimension continues to resist.

The text is divided into four sections. First, it presents a series of conceptual and methodological tools for evaluating democracies. Second, the assessment of Latin American democracies is presented from a multidimensional perspective, giving an account of the erosion of liberal democracy and of the resilience capacity of electoral democracy. Third, a series of elements are identified that allow for the articulation of the relationship between the two dimensions; and fourth, a virtuous circle — centered around electoral integrity, institution strengthening and civic education— is proposed as part of the work of democratic reinvention that Latin American countries should carry out.

2. The Health of Democracies: What to Evaluate and how to do it?

2.1. Methodological Obstacles in the Assessment of Democracy

The task of assessing the health of democracies is captivating and faces several theoretical and methodological obstacles. One of the first hurdles has to do with the decision of defining which attributes distinguish democracy as a political system from those which do not (Schmitter and Karl, 1991; Geddes, 1999).⁴ They seem like democracy, but are not. The diversity of patterns is enormous (Diamond, 2004; Carothers, 2002), given that it is no

⁴ These characteristics are: concentration of power in a few people (a single leader, group, organization, party); personalization of authority (both effective and symbolic); arbitrary, difficult, and selective access to means and resources; political decisions that are systematically adopted in favour of the same group; and instability of legal norms and arbitrariness in their interpretation (Vallès, 2010; Linz, 1978).

longer a question of mere dichotomous categories (democracy vs. non-democracy), but there is rather a full and much more complex grey zone (Carothers, 2002), which warns about a theoretical and methodological discussion that must be even more delimited.⁵ Hence, the problem of the definition of democracy has become more complex, to the point where the nature and particularities of the object of study have been changing, and emerging entities have been receiving new names (Sandu and Popescu-Zamfir, 2021, 4) and adjectives (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

A second methodological problem lies in the difficulties of establishing temporal limits of democratization. According to Paxton (2000), the way in which democracy is defined and operationalized can affect the delimitation of periods, together with the nature of political change and the understanding of the causes of democratization and de-democratization. The literature has not yet been able to process the way in which the “time variable” crosses the different phases that integrate democratization (Schedler, 2004; O'Donnell et al., 1986; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013), nor to clearly specify which are the necessary —and sufficient— conditions for a democratic system to enjoy good health.

Even when there are several standards and measurement tools referring to the dichotomous distinction between political systems (Linz, 1978; O'Donnell et al., 1986; Linz and Stepan, 1996), it is still not entirely clear what happens in-between both poles and, much less, what happens inside each political system. Sometimes it is a weakened version of the concept of democracy — since not all its attributes are fully satisfied— or, much worse, it is another (undemocratic) political system altogether, or it might be the case of a

⁵ In some dramatic cases, the systems of procedural democracy have become “hybrid regimes” (Schmotz, 2015; Diamond, 2004; Bunce, 2000), “ambiguous regimes” (Diamond, 2004), “competitive authoritarianisms” (Levitsky and Way, 2015), “electoral authoritarianisms” (Schedler, 2002), or “grey zones” (Carothers, 2002); and, even in some other cases, albeit having become full democracies, some systems have significantly regressed within democracy (while still remaining so), as recently observed in democracies considered fully consolidated (such as, for example, the United States) (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), among others.

different version that is not democratic, but also not non-democratic (like hybrid regimes).⁶ The difficulty entails how to define the turning point that makes a democracy go in one direction or in another, move from one phase to the other, or develop capabilities to face setbacks and recover. How many elections must be held to be able to consider that electoral democracy is institutionalized and has sufficient conditions to withstand the challenges posed by a regression? Or how much loss of liberal democracy can electoral democracy bear? As Vargas Cullell (2019) asks: “What determines the abandonment of one state of equilibrium, the step into another, or the beginning of a period of imbalances?”

A third obstacle has to do with how to overcome the myth of the linear progressivity of democratization (Fukuyama, 1992; Carothers, 2002). A common trend has been to consider —explicitly or implicitly— that the growth of democracy had to be linear,⁷ and that the process of democratization consists of a series of phases that countries are gradually completing to achieve full democracy. Contrary to this belief, countries may have experienced winding paths that have led them to different phases, and these paths are not necessarily linear, nor do they go from one political system to another (Bermeo, 2016). Experience shows that procedural democracy may have been achieved, and that it will be routinized over time; that the minimum level of democracy could be in the process of being blended, thus heading into another uncertain thing; or that full democracy might never be achieved directly.

⁶ While these systems were initially defined as democracies that were not (yet) consolidated, the idea that not all hybrid regimes were on the road to democracy began gaining ground over time. These “hybrid regimes” have some attributes of democracy, such as periodic elections and legitimate Constitutions, but at the same time they have attributes of non-democratic systems because they make decisions that erode legal norms and employ subtle measures that limit rights and freedoms; they leave limited space for pluralism —conditioning the actions of the opposition, political parties and independent civil society— and they even allow frequent abuses of the law at the hands of government officials.

⁷ As Julieta Suárez-Cao suggested to me in a first reading of this text, this linear vision is associated with structural theories, for example, those that link economic development with democracy, while theories that are more focused in agency can better see the comings and goings of democracy.

A fourth methodological obstacle is concerned with the tension between subjective measurement (based on perceptions of elites, experts, or citizens) and objective measurement (based on objective data). Any measurement is not innocuous and has to do with whether it is more convenient to start from variables/criteria related to the attributes of democracy (Polity, V-Dem, among others); measure it by exploring the support, trust, or satisfaction that citizens place in it (Barometer of the Americas, Latinobarometer, among others), or on what comes out from the perception and/or judgments of experts (US Democracy Index, V-Dem, Freedom House). This makes the inferences that can be drawn from one evidence group and the other distinct, which could result in different outcomes regarding the state of the dimensions and the differences between what happens and what is perceived to occur in the two dimensions of democracy (Little and Meng, 2024; Freidenberg and Saavedra Herrera, 2020).

A fifth obstacle has to do with how to determine what is the shock or substantive critical juncture that has to be considered to measure whether a democracy has finally managed to recover—or not—or, given the case, if it has been able to develop some kind of resilience to reverse its setbacks. To build resilience, a traumatic event must be faced. Hence, critical situations that make political actors adapt (or not) to adversity and can make democracy survive (without it ceasing to be a democracy) must be evaluated. At the moment, there is still not enough data on how they do it; besides, there is no medium scope theory that helps to understand various situations of backsliding and resilience, but, in fact, it is already known that the system can have different kinds of resilience depending on the type of setback.

The delimitation of the characteristics of democracy is key, given that it conditions what is viewed and how it is viewed, and whether such characteristics are dichotomous categories or questions of degree and intensity. Even though the evaluations carried out have been generally focused on electoral conceptions of democracy and on one or two empirical dimensions (rights, attitudes, practices), directly or indirectly conditioning the

outcome of the evaluation (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2023; Freidenberg and Saavedra Herrera, 2020; Munck, 2010), the assessment of resilience processes ventures into new challenges in understanding the democratization process.

2.2. *The Multidimensional Definition of Democracy*

This research employs a definition of democracy as a specific set of procedures regulating access to political power, where the government must be able to respond to the preferences or demands presented by the citizenry, under the principle of equal opportunities; where citizens must be able to manifest publicly, whether individually and/or collectively, at the same time of receiving equal treatment (Dahl, 1971, 13). This work chose to employ a multidimensional approach, following the theoretical and methodological proposal of the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), which allows distinguishing different planes or arenas of action of the political system, among which two are proposed for assessment: the electoral dimension and the liberal dimension, since these are the ones that have advanced the most in Latin America. In this way, this research complements the minimalist and procedural definition of democracy with other elements (such as political control between institutions, Rule Law, civil liberties, and the expansion of social rights).

Even when the dimensions seem to overlap, both are measuring differentiated but complementary issues. Based on multi-method strategies, there is an attempt at identifying how a political system achieves democracy, remains in it, backslides inside it or, given the case, resists these setbacks and reverses such process by demonstrating resilience capacity. The *electoral dimension* evaluates the ability to hold quality elections; the ability of autonomy and professionalism of the electoral authorities to ensure those elections meet quality standards, and the ability of citizens and elites alike for sustaining elections. This dimension is based on the fulfillment of a series of political rights —which provide opportunities of citizenry expression and its

political participation— and on the fulfillment of certain procedures — elections— that contribute to the prevention of violence and to the regulation of social conflict (Przeworski, 2019, 219; Schumpeter, 1947; Lipset, 1959). The electoral dimension contains the main mechanism to decide who gets access to positions of popular representation and who holds power in a community of unequal; moreover, it is the minimum ground on which the other four dimensions (liberal, deliberative, egalitarian or participatory) that integrate the multidimensional concept are based on.

Although the idea of polyarchy contributes to generate some consensus regarding what should be understood as “an indispensable minimum of democracy” (Munck, 2010), the procedural definition remains incomplete, because it has difficulty in including a whole series of freedoms and rights that are fundamental to accessing and exercising democracy. For example, there have been leaderships that, even when having won in competitive, free and fair elections with all the indicators of electoral integrity, during their candidacies promoted illiberal causes or ideas, encouraging fear, dividing society, seeking to dismantle the institutions that allowed for them to compete, and proposed setbacks with regards to human rights and the Rule of Law through the use of discriminatory, sexist and misogynist discourses attacking and stigmatizing groups that make up social or symbolic minorities. For this reason, it is necessary to observe the *liberal dimension*, which analyzes the capacity of actors and institutions for upholding compliance with the Rule of Law that permits controlling respect for civil societies. This dimension is measured by decisions and behavior in a number of arenas that have to do with the functioning of institutions, as well as with how political actors relate to each other and to those institutions.

Each of these dimensions is assessed based on a series of variables and indicators. There are surely more variables and indicators that should be considered and that may be even more interesting to measure the capacity of democratic resilience, but given this research’s magnitude, I selected some variables and indicators as an analytical exercise that helps us better

understand backsliding, as well as resilience. In this sense, I believe that three variables contribute to empirically measure the electoral dimension of democracy (quality elections, capacity of the authorities, and ability of citizens and elites to sustain elections),⁸ while an additional variable helps to understand the liberal dimension of democracy (ability to uphold republican principles) (see Table 1).⁹

This research assesses the extent to which cases that had established democracies in the third wave of democratization have suffered setbacks, and to what extent they were able to recover from backsliding. Observation makes it possible to identify changes based on differences between dimensions: as one-dimension progresses, another may regress and, when applicable, reverse the process. The so-called “democratic backsliding” implies “the progressive erosion of the institutions, rules and norms that result from the actions of duly elected governments” (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021, 27), and can be manifested in each or all of the dimensions in different forms, whether explicit or subtle, in several rhythms and speeds, and it can lead to very diverse results.¹⁰ Backsliding describes changes *of* the political system or

⁸ The need to land the concept led Dahl (1971) to propose the term “polyarchy”, which has amounted to having a moderately strong definition, albeit a procedural one of democracy (Diamond, 2004, 118). In polyarchies, authorities are elected through competitive processes; elections are free, fair, and clean; freedoms are respected; suffrage is universal, so that all citizens can vote and be voted without exception or restrictions; alternative sources of information and institutions must exist to ensure that government policies are truly dependent on the votes and preferences of the citizenry (Dahl, 1971, 13-15). This dimension is measured through the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (Coppedge et al., 2023), built to know to what extent rulers respond to citizenry.

⁹ The liberal dimension is measured through the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) (Coppedge et al., 2023). This dimension analyses how individual and minority rights are protected by assessing limits to government, such as the observance of constitutionally protected civil liberties, a strong Rule of Law, and an independent Judiciary Power and effective checks and balances that limit the exercise of the Executive Power.

¹⁰ In recent years, several researches have suggested a series of indicators to measure democratic backsliding, such as: a) erosion of norms and strategic manipulation of elections (Bermeo, 2016; Brownlee and Miao, 2022; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Corrales, 2020); b) carrying out of coups that promise democracy (Bermeo, 2016); c) behavior of political leaders who exploit or mishandle the chronic vulnerabilities of democracy (Bartels, 2023); d) aggrandizement of the Executive Power (Bermeo, 2016); e) pernicious or emotional polarization (Somer et al., 2021); and f) erosion of centrist parties and emergence of extremist parties, among others.

changes *in* the system. When this happens, democracy breaks down and the political system is changed (from a democratic to a non-democratic one).

The fact that democracy recovers from these setbacks implies some kind of “democratic resilience,” that is to say, “the ability of a political system, its institutions, political actors and citizens to prevent or react to internal or external challenges, without losing its democratic character” (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021, 872).¹¹ This exercise is paramount, given that it allows us to identify whether political systems have been able to keep their basic components. From this approach, democracies can maintain mechanisms and institutions that guarantee their citizenry’s freedom and equality over time (Morlino, 2005, 260), as well as activate the possibility of self-correction to address external or internal shocks that stress such mechanisms. Observing resilience means evaluating how the system (rules, actors, groups, institutions) is able to overcome and/or adapt to crises (and to have flexibility in order to face them without breaking), to continue meeting the requirements that a procedural democracy demands, and to have the necessary tools to respond to junctural and systemic problems, as well as problems stemming from change that they face in the long run.

Table 1
Measurement

	Electoral Democracy	Liberal Democracy
Organization in charge	Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem)	Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem)
What does it measure?	Procedural dimension of democracy	Liberal dimension of democracy
Question asked	“To what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy achieved in its fullest sense?”	“To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved?”
Operationalization	An interval scale is used	An interval scale is used

¹¹ This ability can be manifested in three ways: a) systemic; b) resistance to minor setbacks; and c) of a critical or dramatic nature, implying reversion to the conditions the system had in democratic matters before such setbacks (Freidenberg, 2024).

Strategies	Quantitative analysis	Quantitative analysis
Measurement	0 to 1	0 to 1
Data collection instrument	Mid-level indices	Mid-level indices
Categories	It is calculated based on the Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy), built by measuring five mid-level indices, also calculated in V-Dem, which are: Freedom of Association Index (v2x_frassoc_thick); Clean Elections Index (v2xel_frefair); Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index (v2x_freexp_altinf); Elected Officials Index (v2x_elecoff); Share of Population with Suffrage Index (v2x_suffr).	It is calculated based on the Liberal Democracy Index (v2x_libdem), built from mid-level indices: the Liberal Component Index (v2x_liberal), as well as the Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy). For it to be a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes into account a level of electoral democracy.

Source: Own elaboration based on V-Dem.

3. Data Analysis

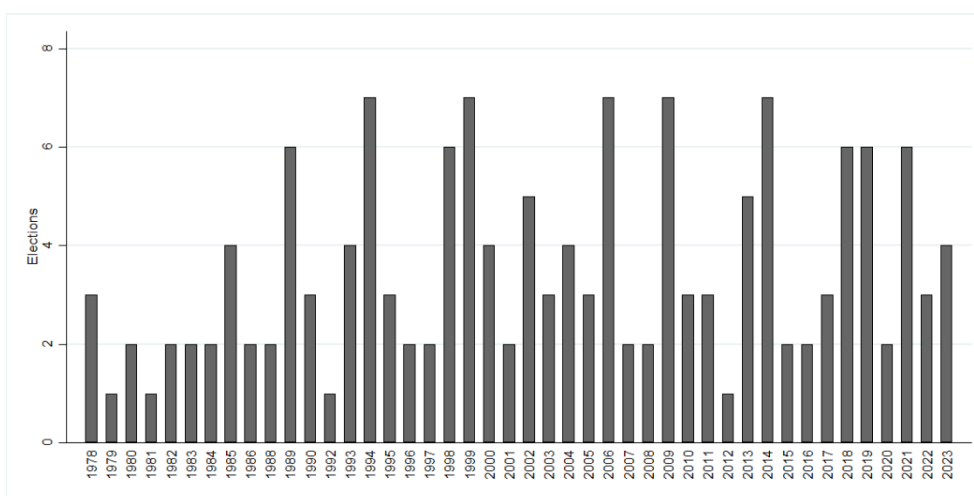
3.1. *What Exactly is Resisting? The Strength of the Electoral Dimension of Democracy in Latin America*

a) *Election Quality*

Even when most of the political systems of the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991) did not succeed in becoming democratic (Diamond, 2004; Carothers, 2002), the democratization process is more alive than ever. The setting in motion of democracies involved creating and/or dusting off (or drafting from scratch) constitutional frameworks that would ensure a series of rights and guarantees, under the aspiration of establishing political systems that secured certainty in the rules and uncertainty in the results (Przeworski, 2019). It also meant a series of learnings about what it meant to live in democracy.

Never have so many countries had such an extensive period of democracy, in which elections have become the most institutionalized routine act for decision-making. Since the start of the third wave of democratization in the late 1970s, elections have been routinized in the region. The “Presidential Incumbents in Latin America” database of the Observatory for Political Reforms in Latin America (#ObservatorioReformas 1978-2023) records the years in which national elections were held in each of the 18 countries considered in the study. On an aggregate basis, between 1978 and 2023, 154 elections were held for the Executive Power (Graph 1). This routinization is important because it allows for the assessment of the stability of democracies. Elections facilitate the existence of democracy and, in addition, when faced with crises, these are resolved in a democratic manner.¹²

Graph 1
National elections in Latin America (1978-2023)



Source: Own elaboration with information from the “Presidential Incumbents in Latin America” database (1978-2023).

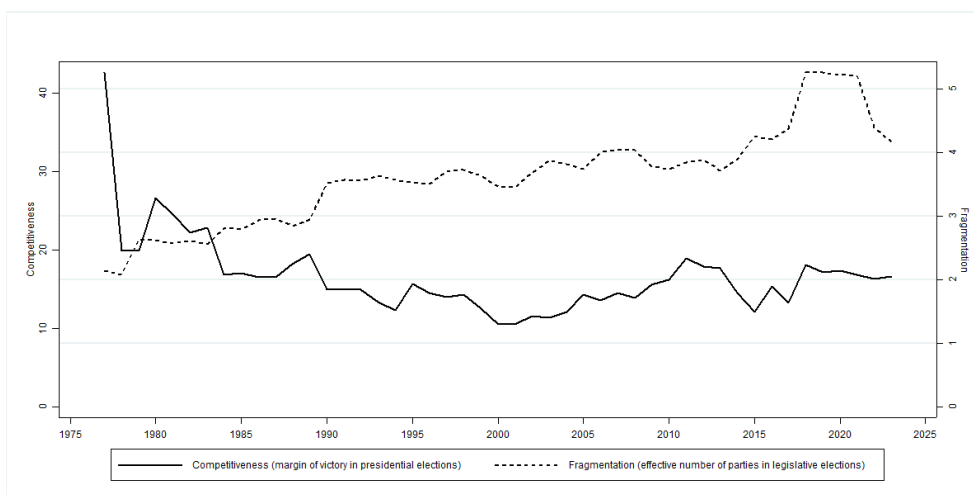
Note: The graph considers 154 presidential elections since the beginning of democracy in 17 Latin American countries in the period from 1978 to 2023.

¹² Of these, only six were not carried out in the established constitutional period (Argentina 2003; Bolivia 2005 and 2020; Ecuador 2023; Peru 2001; and Venezuela 2000).

These processes have taken place in competitive and pluralistic frameworks. The competitiveness structure of party systems has been changing since the (re)introduction of democracy. Since the late 1970s, levels of pluralism have been increasing in the 18 countries of the region. In aggregate terms, the level of legislative fragmentation of party systems has increased from 2.15 (1977) to 5.22 (2020), falling in recent years to 4.17 (2023) (#ObservatorioReformas, 1978-2023) (Graph 2). While some countries have carried out reforms to open competition to non-partisan candidacies, in most cases parties have monopolized political representation at the national level with more or less stable patterns of competitive interactions.

The average effective number of legislative parties (ENP) per country allows for the observation of the differences among cases in the analyzed period. The four countries with the highest average number of effective parties in the period are Brazil (8.59), Chile (6.04), Ecuador (5.16), and Guatemala (4.26), thus showing that there have been systems of “extreme pluralism” (Sartori, 1976/1992), which implies a highly polarized system in antagonistic fields with centrifugal competition and anti-system actors. Afterward, there are systems of moderate pluralism, where the ENP falls in a range from 3.0 to 3.9 (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela), while a third group of countries are those that have more bipartisan type systems (or bipartisan and medium), with an ENP between 2.0 and 2.9 (Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, and Uruguay).

Graph 2
Competitiveness and Fragmentation of Latin American Party Systems



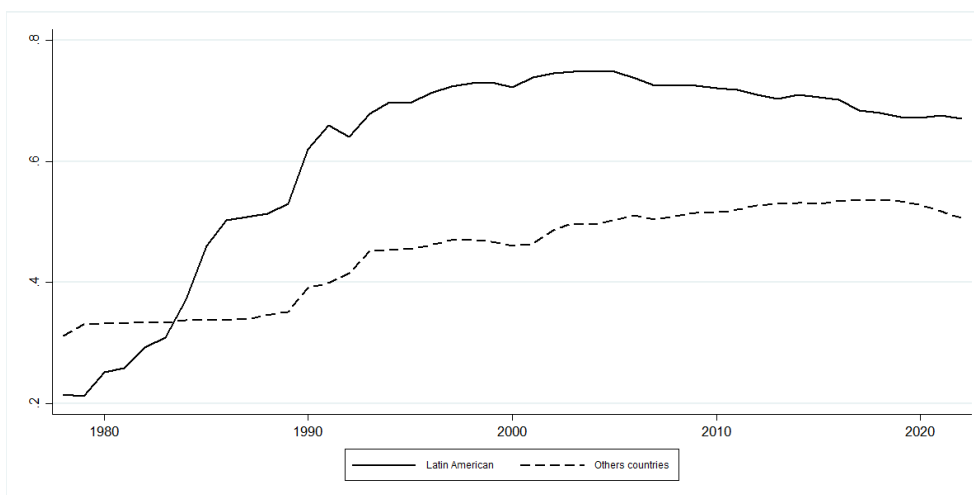
Source: Own elaboration based on data estimated by the #ObservatorioReformas (1978-2023).

Another indicator that reinforces the idea of the institutionalization of elections as a mechanism for distributing power has to do with the alternation of seats in popular elections. That is to say, the fact that the rulers go back home peacefully, that power rotates among the elites, and that leaderships are renewed, accounts for the health of the elections and, with it, of democracy. Incumbents who win elections repeatedly are not necessarily a potential risk source to democracy. The problem arises when they control the State's resources in their favor, and when elections are inequitable among the different options. From the 154 presidential elections held between 1978 and 2023, the incumbents won 58 times and the challengers won 83. This means that, in most cases, the one who was in power, the incumbent, lost, either with the same presidential candidacy or with that of another candidate, but of the same party (#ObservatorioReformas, 1978-2023).

Although there are different alternatives to assess the quality of these electoral processes, the Clean Elections Index (CEI) of the Varieties of Democracy Project (Coppedge et al., 2023) is a tool that allows to understand how elections are conducted and to what extent those elections are free and

fair.¹³ Data shows that the quality levels of the elections have been increasing in aggregate terms in the countries of the region. According to this index, in the 18 countries that held national elections, the value of 0.215 in 1978 has increased to 0.671 in 2022, a value above the average of 0.506 (on the scale of 0 to 1), compared to the 184 countries in the world where the quality of elections is also evaluated (Coppedge et al., 2023) (Graph 3). In the last four decades, the perception about the cleanliness of elections in Latin American countries has been above the world average.

Graph 3
Clean Elections Index in Latin America and the World



Source: Own elaboration on of V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

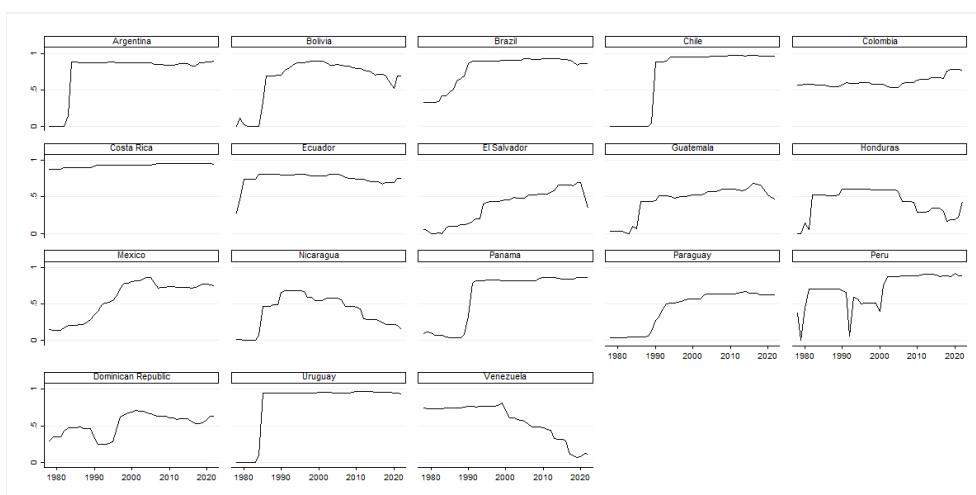
In most countries, elections continue to have the capacity to distribute power, despite the fact that the State has had difficulty in ensuring the exercise of the legitimate monopoly of physical coercion throughout the territory (as in Mexico, Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala, Ecuador, Argentina or El Salvador);

¹³ For the elaboration of this index, V-Dem uses the following question: “To what extent are the elections free and fair?”. The following indicators are employed in its composition: autonomy of the electoral management body (v2elembaut); capacity of the electoral management body (v2elembcap); election voter registry (v2elrgstry); election vote buying (v2elvotbuy); elections and other voting irregularities (v2elirreg); election government intimidation (v2elintim); non-state electoral violence (v2elpeace); and free and fair elections (v2elfrfair). The index is measured in a range of 0 to 1 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

the presence of parastatal groups that control or manipulate the State (paramilitaries, mafias or organized crime); the strategic manipulation, irregularities and bad practices in elections (Birch, 2011; Corrales, 2020; Freidenberg, 2024); the rooting of informal practices (such as clientelism, vote buying or cronyism); and the rise to power of candidates with authoritarian attitudes claiming to be savior leaders and healers to others (Acevedo Medrano, 2022; Przeworski, 2022; Bermeo, 2022; Brewer-Carías, 2010).

Despite all this, a group of countries has achieved high levels of assessment of cleanliness in the elections and has done so in a stable manner over a long period of time (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay). Among them, Costa Rica, and Uruguay feature values above 0.9 percentage points, the closest to the highest value of the Index. This group is followed by countries that have been increasing clean elections values over time, and that have also faced several conflicting situations regarding electoral governance (such as Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, or Paraguay), although they were able to solve these difficulties later (Graph 4).

Graph 4
Clean Elections Index in 18 Latin American Countries



Source: Own elaboration based on of V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

The case of Peru requires special attention because it exhibits contradictions within the electoral dimension. While the Clean Elections Index shows that election quality has been achieved, the problems remain in the elites' disloyal behavior towards political actors, and towards the arbiter and the electoral processes as well (Barrenechea and Vergara, 2023). Meanwhile, in Honduras, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, and Bolivia positive upturns have been manifested in measurement during recent years. Finally, data shows that there are countries where the levels of clean elections have been falling substantially since the 2000s, as in Nicaragua and Venezuela, and that both can no longer be considered as democracies in any of the dimensions analyzed (Coppedge et al., 2023).

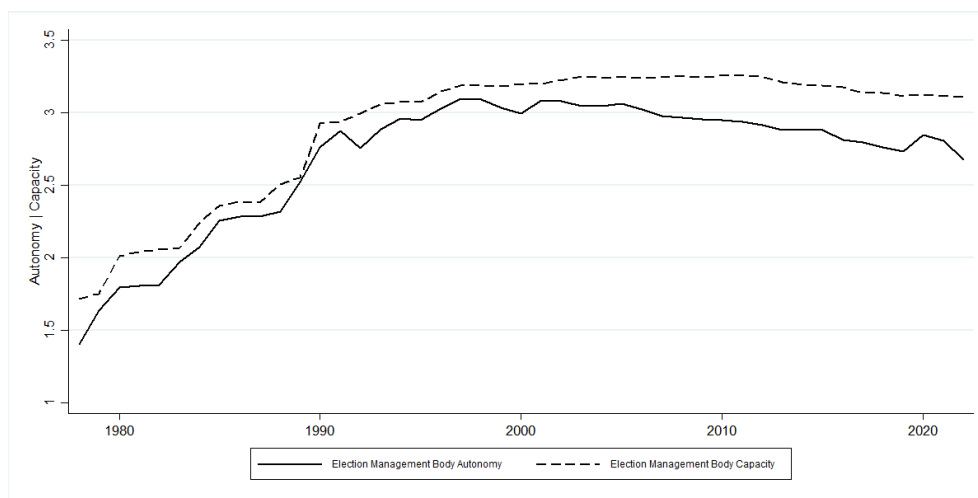
b) The Ability of Electoral Authorities to Organize Elections with Integrity

Electoral bodies have become more professional and increasingly autonomous from parties and other political groups in most Latin American countries over the past four decades. The challenges they have faced have not been few, even in recent years during the handling of the pandemic, but still most of these bodies have been learning their task and have increased their electoral governance and independence skills. Data shows a parallel growth of the two key indicators that measure the assessment of experts on the actions of electoral bodies (Graph 8). The levels of autonomy for applying electoral laws and administration rules in an impartial manner have been improving positively since 1978, when they had a value of 1.40 in a scale from 1 to 4 for the 18 countries analyzed, increasing to 3.09 (1997) and 3.03 (1999), but decreasing to 2.64 (2022).

The electoral bodies have also had resources and staff to manage the elections. Since the beginning of the democratization process, its average value was of 1.74 (1978) and 1.77 (1979) for the 18 countries, successively increasing until 2003, when it obtained a score of 3.29, maintaining those values approximately until 2022, when a minimum decrease of 3.11, on a scale of 1 to 4, was observed (Graph 8). This assessment occurred while the

handling of the pandemic was still being addressed, given the health crisis generated by SARS-CoV-2, thus evidencing that there are some institutional deficiencies with regards to the use of resources and to the management and sanctioning capabilities of bad practices, irregularities, and other illiberal actions of political actors in the countries of the region.¹⁴

Graph 5
Electoral Management in 18 Latin American Countries



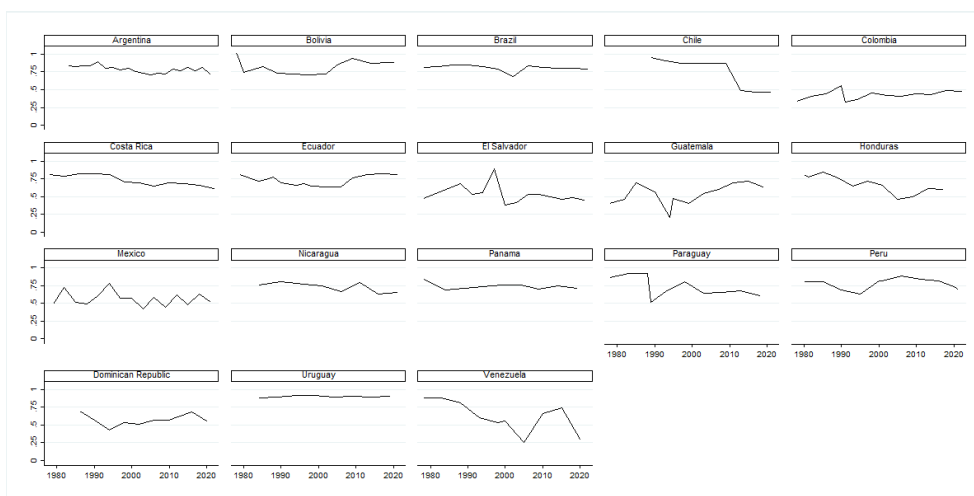
Source: Created on the basis of V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).
Note: Autonomy | Capacity axis values are in ordinal scale (original).

¹⁴ The V-Dem Electoral Management Body Capacity indicator measures whether the body has staff and other resources to manage national elections within the electoral management bodies. The question “Does the Electoral Management Body have sufficient staff and resources to manage a well-organized national election?” is used for its elaboration. The codification expresses the following answers: 0: No. There are obvious deficiencies in staff, financial, or other resources affecting the organization throughout the territory; 1: Not really. Deficiencies are not evident, but even so they still seriously compromise the organization of administratively well-organized elections in many parts of the country; 2: Ambiguous. There could be serious deficiencies that compromise the organization of elections, but it could also be a product of human errors and coincidences or other factors beyond the control of the Electoral Management Body; 3: Mostly. There are partial deficiencies in resources, but these are not serious or widespread; and 4: Yes. The Electoral Management Body has adequate staff and other resources to manage an election well. For its composition, this indicator uses the response theory model of the Bayesian item (Coppedge et al., 2023).

c) The Ability of Citizens and Elites to Sustain Elections

The role of the citizenry in elections is crucial in assessing the capacity for electoral resilience. Participation, that is, the percentage of registered voters who cast a vote, has been decreasing in Latin American countries in the last four decades, according to official results (IDEA International, 2023). The average participation between 1978 and 2022 has been of 69.40 percentage points (Graph 6). Although in the first elections after the restoration of democracy the participation levels exceeded 70 points, the levels have had a critical moment in 2003, with only 50.31 points, having rebounded by 2022 by 62.43 percentage points. This is no minor issue, given that institutions need an active citizenry to be legitimate.

Graph 6
Electoral participation of citizens in Latin America



Source: Created based on of the Voter Turnout Database by IDEA International.
Note: Values are expressed in proportions.

The belief in the ability to change elections is related to the perception that citizens have of democracy. If they do not believe that elections can do something, it makes no sense for them to participate. In some countries where there has been backsliding in the liberal dimension, the assessment of democracy substantially improved after electing leaderships. For example, the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia came with a level of support for

democracy of 45.2%, and a year after his election such support had increased to 61.7%. In Ecuador, only 43.1% of those interviewed expressed support for democracy in 2005. After the election of Rafael Correa, that figure rose to 56.7% in 2007 and, ten years later, support for democracy reached 64.5%. In Mexico, support for democracy was 37.7% in 2017, while after the election of López Obrador in 2018 it increased, reaching 42.9% in 2020. Finally, a year before the election of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, only 27.7% of respondents believed democracy was preferable to any other form of government in 2018 and, a year later, the percentage reached 46.1% (Latinobarometer, 2022).

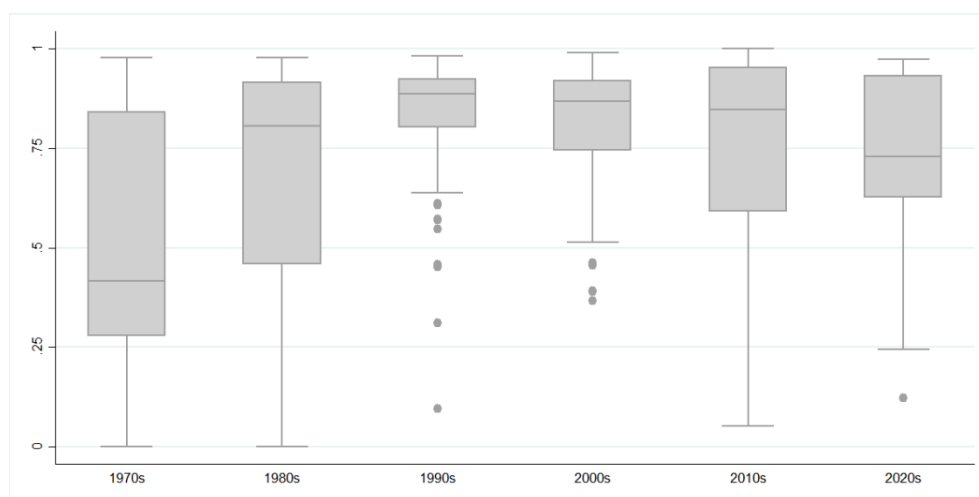
Another indicator of resilience lies in the acceptance of results on the part of citizens (Freidenberg 2024). One way to measure it is through the perception regarding the absence of protests and violent demands related to electoral results provided by the V-Dem Project (Coppedge et al., 2023). This indicator, measured in 18 Latin American countries, gives an account that, on average, the elections did not generate protests, as was noted in 151 of the remaining countries that answered the survey. Meanwhile, in 16 countries there is disagreement with the idea that violent episodes have occurred; in Bolivia the respondents did not know what to say; and Honduras is the only country where it has been accepted that elections generate protests and violent demands.¹⁵

The estimations of the V-Dem experts assert that there have been several stages regarding the way in which loser candidacies accepted or not the results of presidential elections in Latin America (Coppedge et al., 2023). Although until the 1990s the acceptance was high, even stabilizing in values ranging between 0.80 and 1 for 2013, from that moment on, values began to decrease, being 2019 when the lowest value (0.58) of the whole period occurred (Graph 7). This means that losing candidates, in some countries, began to refuse to

¹⁵ The acceptance of the results on the part of the citizenry is analyzed by the question: “Did the elections trigger violent protests?”, which admits five possible answers: 1. Totally agreed; 2. Agreed; 3. Neither agreed nor disagreed; 4. Disagreed; and 5. Totally disagreed (V-Dem).

accept electoral results, while before then they did not do it or, at least, not in such a mobilizing and violent way for the political system.¹⁶

Graph 7
Elites and adverse outcomes



Source: Own elaboration based on V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Note: Normalized values between 0 and 1 are shown for the variable “Election losers accept results”.

Democracies —which are being strongly questioned— have also allowed more people to access more rights and have made elections more inclusive. Through the approval of the constitutional principle of gender parity, or through various affirmative action measures, parity democracies are being built (Freidenberg and Gilas, 2022). In this way, institutions have been enriched by the entry of groups that had historically been underrepresented and even excluded from candidacies and decision-making processes.¹⁷ These changes have entailed a powerful transformation in the descriptive

¹⁶ To measure the level of acceptance of losing candidates in election results, the following question is used: “Did the losing parties and candidacies accept the result of this national election within three months?”. Standard values between 0 and 1 were used in its composition, where 1 represents greater acceptance and 0 less acceptance.

¹⁷ For example, in 17 of the 18 countries analyzed in the last three decades, more than 45 reforms to the electoral regime in issues pertaining gender have been promoted to facilitate women to compete more equally with men (#ObservatorioReformas, 1991-2023). Only Guatemala has not promoted changes in the electoral regime’s rules regarding gender, thus being the only country of the 18 analyzed that has not approved quotas nor gender parity in the registration of candidacies (See Freidenberg and Gilas, 2022).

representation of national Congresses, where women reached a regional average of 35.8 percentage points in 2023 (ECLAC, 2023), being the largest number in the constitutional history of the region, despite the fact that there is still work to be done in order to make them a parity actor.

In summary, democracy resists in the electoral dimension through concrete conditions, such as the routinization of elections as a central mechanism for social change in the democratic process, their high levels of integrity, and their use as an instrument of control over those exercising power (incumbents); the levels of autonomy and professionalism of the electoral management bodies; certain levels of support from the citizenry towards democracy, albeit satisfaction being very low; and the efforts to include underrepresented groups and build parity democracies.

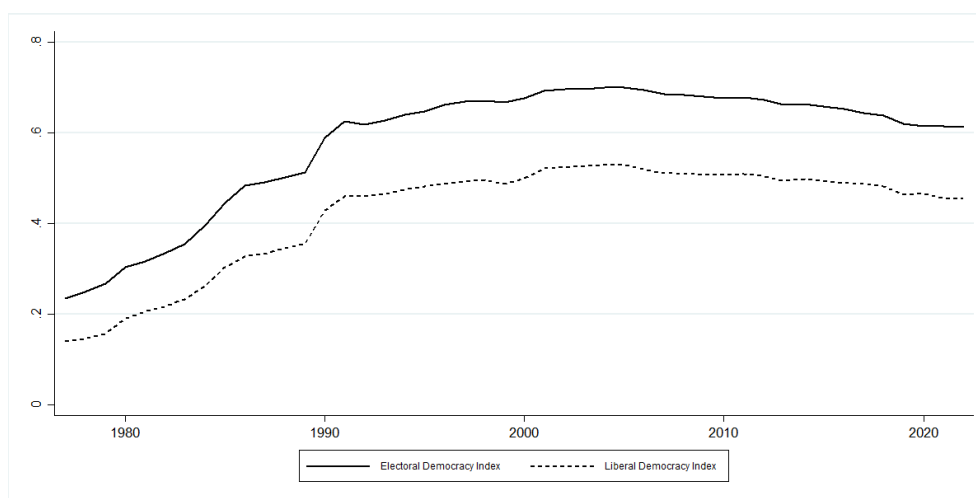
3.2. What Exactly is Backsliding? The Erosion of the Liberal Dimension of Democracies

Unlike what used to happen in previous decades, currently the most common pattern of regression is no longer a dramatic break in democracy through a coup d'état, but a slow and progressive weakening of the essential institutions of democracy (Bermeo, 2016). Many of the measures that restrict freedoms, limit autonomous agencies of opposition forces, or take away capacities of institutional action are seemingly innocuous decisions, and do not necessarily involve serious democratic violations. In practice, these decisions, little by little, subtly erode the legitimacy of institutions, and are aimed at strengthening the power of those already in office.

Despite being the most institutionalized of all [> 0.5], liberal democracy has found itself to be increasingly more eroded in recent decades, dropping from 0.5 to 0.3, in a range of 0 to 1, for 18 countries in the region (Graph 8). Data shows that while in 1977 the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) was, in average terms, 0.235 for the 18 countries analyzed —gradually and linearly increasing until 2005, when it arrived at 0.701—, it then began to reduce until reaching 0.612 in 2022 (Appendix I). This value is high compared to the

average of the rest of the almost 180 countries analyzed in the V-Dem study, given that such average was 0.484.¹⁸ In contrast, the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) has never reached these levels, since the highest score has been, in average terms, of 0.529 in 2004 and 2005, having started in 1977 at 0.141 and locating itself at 0.455 in 2022 (Appendix II).

Graph 8
Comparison Between the Electoral Dimension and the Liberal Dimension of Democracy in Latin America



Source: Own elaboration based on V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

What do these figures mean? In practice, maintaining the Rule of Law, together with the respect for freedom of the press and freedom of expression, has been progressively weakened (as what happened in Ecuador in 2007-2017, in Guatemala during 2020-2023, or in El Salvador since 2019, among other cases) with threats, media accusations, and persecutions of journalists, who were forced to go into exile in many instances, while others were imprisoned (as in El Salvador from 2019 to 2023, in Guatemala during 2020-2022, in Venezuela since 2013, or in Nicaragua since 2021); by undermining the conditions of pluralistic competition, thus generating inequities in access

¹⁸ In 2022, the average value of the Electoral Democracy Index for the 18 Latin American countries was below the average value in Europe and Oceania, where the index reached values of 0.73 and 0.67, respectively (V-Dem), but well above the world average.

to resources (as in El Salvador 2019-2023, Nicaragua since 2021, Venezuela since 2013, among others), and undercutting the autonomy of the judiciary and other autonomous agencies (as happened in Mexico 2018-2023, Brazil 2019-2023, among other cases) (Graph 9).¹⁹

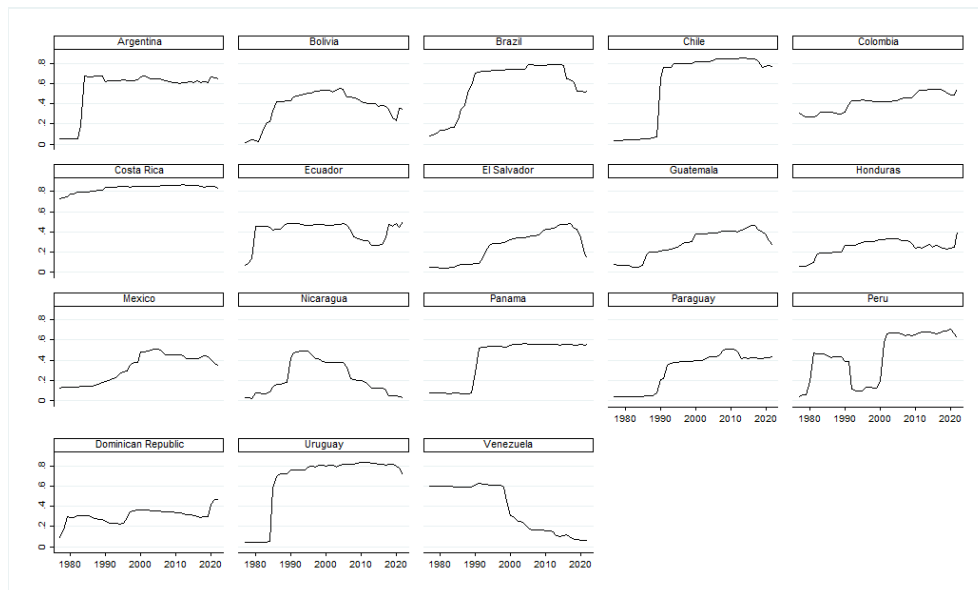
Moreover, many laws passed by legislative majorities have jeopardized the institutions allowing for the separation of powers (as in Ecuador during 2007-2017, in El Salvador since 2019, in Venezuela since 1999, among other cases), thus increasing the personalization of power in the executive (as in Ecuador during 2007-2017, in Mexico from 2018, El Salvador from 2019, Venezuela from 1999, among others), and seeking to control resources that permit the functioning of accountability bodies (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela or Ecuador) or autonomous agencies, even putting pressure on electoral arbitrators in terms of party autonomy and their level of professionalization (as is currently happening in Mexico, in Ecuador, Peru, El Salvador or Guatemala).²⁰

Graph in the next page

¹⁹ The recent work of Ríos Figueroa (2022) shows the tense relationship between the executive and judiciary powers in Mexico between 2018 and 2022.

²⁰ According to the Latinobarometer Report (2023, 1), the weakness of the executive powers is underscored, since 21 presidents were convicted of corruption and 20 did not finish their term, while some have forced their stay in power breaking the rules of reelection (as happened in El Salvador with Bukele).

Graph 9
Erosion of the Liberal Dimension of Democracy in Latin America



Source: Own elaboration based on V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Most of the times, the erosion of the liberal dimension comes from electing leaderships with an anti-political narrative that intends to save people from “the usual politicians”. Anti-pluralist leaderships are “those actors who lack commitment to democratic norms” (Lührmann, 2021, 1017). Hence, populism is an identity choice alternative within democracy (Freidenberg, 2007), although that means democracy is delegated to “healers” (Przeworski, 2019) promising magical solutions to solve the citizenry’s problems. Just as Zakaria (1997) showed years ago for other regional contexts, Latin Americans use elections as a public decision-making mechanism, even though they prefer people who have values contrary to democracy as rulers.

The anti-pluralist and/or illiberal leaders use “anti-institutional” languages (they speak using “I”, and not in the name of institutions) and a friend-enemy appeal (enemies of the State, enemies of the people, among others) (Calvo and Aruguete, 2023). They are legitimized by the support of important majorities in the polls, promoting hate speech towards opposition minorities from the presidential podium, fostering delegitimizing attitudes about specific

people (journalists, intellectuals, social movement activists, opposition leaders), about autonomous institutions, or anyone who criticizes government decisions and/or policies (as in Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil, El Salvador, or Mexico). Some measures appear to be harmless, but in practice they “break legal frameworks” (Romero Ballivián, 2021, 16).²¹

These leaderships feed and enhance pre-existing divisions that distance individuals from each other, radicalize positions, and fuel a “we” against “them” rhetoric (Freidenberg, 2023; Calvo and Aruguete, 2023; Welp, 2022b). Besides, they do something that affects democracy: controlling the narrative with regards to what is a true democracy, under the supposed division between a “good people” and a “bad people”. The dispute is political, discursive, and symbolic. These decisions of the leaderships reveal little respect for the principles of democracy, but also evidence instrumental, fragile, and superficial commitments with central elements of democracy on the part of political actors and citizens (Romero Ballivián, 2021, 16; Fernández Ramil, 2021).

The strategic manipulation of formal rules (changing rules, controlling time, procedures, and deadlines) also evinces a regression of democracy. Data from the #ObservatorioReformas (1977-2022) show a certain accommodation of electoral rules to make those who govern retain their spaces of power. While there are differences between countries, data provides an account of some 297 reforms in 18 countries over the last four decades to more than 11 critical dimensions of electoral systems. The reformist

²¹ Some measures may enjoy broad social and political acceptance, and even underpin an administration (the closure of the Peruvian Congress by Alberto Fujimori in 1992; the closure of the Ecuadorian Congress promoted by the government of Rafael Correa and the Constituent Assembly of 2008); provoke a strong polarization and divide society (Manuel Zelaya’s “fourth ballot box” project and its overthrowing in Honduras in 2009; the Plan B electoral reforms and the attack on electoral institutions in Mexico in 2022); or be perceived as unacceptable and corner its promoter (the closure of the Guatemalan Congress by Jorge Serrano in 1993; the initiative of Pedro Castillo to dissolve the Peruvian Congress, establish a “government of exception”, and rule through decrees until a new Parliament with constituent powers was elected). See Romero Ballivián (2021), Fernández Ramil (2021), Corrales (2020), Bermeo (2016), among others.

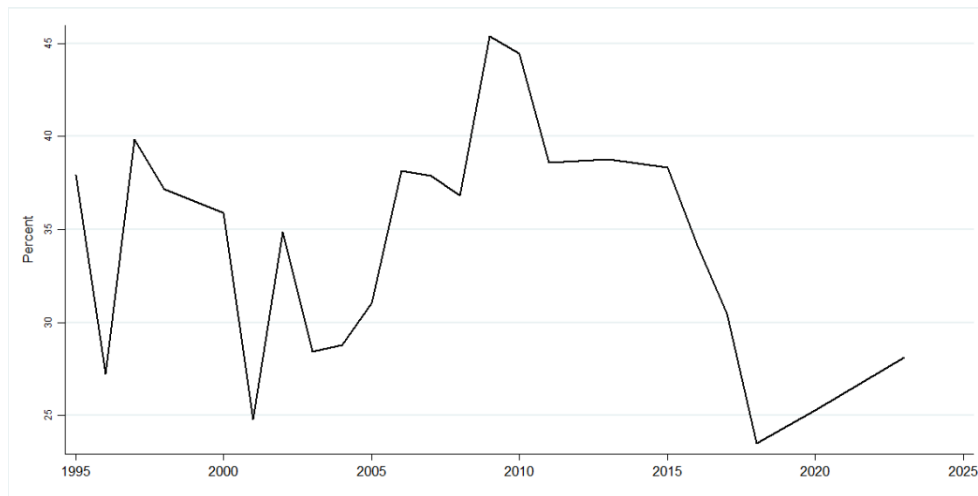
hyperactivity of several countries (Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, or Dominican Republic) generates uncertainty about the rules of the game and undermines the fairness of the contest (Freidenberg, 2023), although not necessarily all these reforms involve strategic manipulation of elections and/or of the rules that determine the way in which competition occurs.

Even though people have become increasingly more politicized, the plurality of civic space has become smaller while political polarization has escalated. There are individuals who prefer not to talk about politics with whom they do not know how they think; people self-censor, silence their voices, speak in small bubbles, and they neither want to debate their friends or families. Although public policies are the responsibility of governments, the attribution of responsibility is transferred, directly or indirectly, to the political system. Citizens blame poor results on democracy (and not necessarily on their governments), and support democracy less and less (Latinobarometer, 2023).²²

In addition, the citizenry exhibits to be less and less satisfied with the political system and, even in 2022, that satisfaction manifested its greater decline compared to previous periods (Graph 10). Data shows some erosion of the commitment to democracy of citizens and elites, and/or to the functioning of institutions (Coppedge et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2023), in an asymmetrical manner, whether left or right, particularly within more and more radicalized sectors of some countries (as has happened recently in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil or Mexico).

²² According to the “Latinobarómetro” survey (2023), carried out among 19,205 people in 17 countries of the region, only 48% support democracy as a political system, which marks a decrease of 15 percentage points since 2010 (63%). The survey also provides an account of the preference and attitudes in favor of authoritarianism, since 17% of Latin Americans support the idea that “an authoritarian government can be preferable”, compared to 15% thirteen years ago. In any case, there are significant differences between countries, pointing out the high levels of support in Uruguay (69%), Argentina (62%), or Chile (58%) compared to meager results in countries like Mexico, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, or Paraguay.

Graph 10
Citizenry Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America



Source: Own elaboration based on the “Latinobarometer” Report (2023).

Note: The percentages of *very satisfied* and *rather satisfied* answers are shown to the question: “In general, would you say that you are *very satisfied*, *rather satisfied*, *not very satisfied* or *not at all satisfied* with the functioning of democracy in (COUNTRY)?”

4. Something Remains, Something Recedes, and Something Resists: Understanding Resilience Capacity in Democracies

Democracy is at greater risk in some countries than in others. While in some countries it enjoys good health, as in Uruguay, Costa Rica, or Chile, in others it has regressed (El Salvador), and in a few other countries some of its central elements are at stake after certain conflicts (Ecuador). The setbacks have meant loss of consensus about the democratic contract and elites' disloyalty towards the values of democracy; difficulties in maintaining the currency of the Rule of Law, pluralism, and independence of institutions; strategic manipulation of formal rules and drawbacks in securing access to resources and well-being for citizens. For example, in Nicaragua and Venezuela, electoral democracy has already lost the battle, and in El Salvador there are increasingly deeper problems to activate the electoral resilience of democracy.

In these countries, elections have not been able to correct authoritarian tensions that erode the system, thus promoting “pernicious polarization” and leading to democratic rupture. In contrast, other political systems have had the capability of sustaining democracy through electoral resilience. Paradoxically, this is what permits to continue saying that this political system is a democracy: the fact that autocrats arrive to power using the democratic ladder and that it is elections that remove them from it. Opportunities for resilience are perceived in these situations. When democracies are capable of building and maintaining mechanisms and institutions allowing them to activate the possibility of self-correcting to respond to external or internal shocks that stress such mechanisms, they have resilience capacity.

In this framework, competitive, free, and fair elections, professional and autonomous authorities, and elites and citizenry, both participatory and committed to the basic values of pluralistic competition, are fundamental to prevent democratic backsliding. When all this happens, resilience capacity is manifested. Elections work as a protective tool against attempts to erode the essential values of democracy. These are powerful tools to mitigate democratic erosion. Precisely, as Sandu and Popescu-Zamfir (2021, 8) point out, they are “buffers” that can limit “authoritarian antibodies”, and thereby contribute to block the political system from backsliding.

Electoral democracy has assisted in the reconstruction of country minimums for those that had regressed in the liberal dimension, for example, what happened in Ecuador after the *correísta* period (2006-2017); in Brazil with the capacity of the Brazilian State, through the Itamaraty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Superior Electoral Tribunal of Brazil, for ensuring that results were respected and guaranteeing the integrity of the 2022 elections; or in Colombia after the strong social explosion that involved mobilizations throughout the country and was decompressed with the election of Gustavo Petro in 2022. Despite this, in other cases, such as Venezuela or Nicaragua, elections have not (yet) been able to activate democratic

resilience, since both countries have ceased to be democracies (and it seems that El Salvador is following on the same footsteps).²³

Resilience does not mean the absence of conflicts, but that the system can deal with them. Evidence shows that democracy —despite everything— still manages to achieve its objectives. In some countries, democratic political actors are being capable of implementing mechanisms for the citizenry to exercise its right to choose; for adapting to various temporal junctural crises, even dramatic ones, without facing backsliding that would paralyze or break democracy; and they continue to meet, at least, the requirements of procedural democracy.

5. Preliminary Conclusions, Agendas, and Future Actions

Democracies have the capacity to handle adversity, overcome it, or, as the case may be, make it less toxic and destructive. Hence, a term has been taken from ecology and psychology to indicate the possibility that democracy can resist, reverse backsliding and tackle crises. The idea of resilience allows to identify the opportunity that an institution, an organization, or a political system must face challenges and emerge strengthened after a given crisis. When applied to societies and organizations, resilience highlights the importance of internal capacities as a means of coping with crises. That is what this research attempts to show.

While the liberal dimension seems to have been abandoned in several countries of the region, competitive and free elections with integrity are continuously being held. This is no small matter, particularly when the main detractors of the values, rights and practices involved in the liberal exercise of democracy come from public power (like, for instance, presidents, opposition groups, and even sectors of the citizenry). Not only is there less and less political pluralism, but, in addition, there are almost no plural civic

²³ Precisely, the most reliable indicator of non-resilience would be a shift from a political system to a non-democratic one.

spaces—in person and/or digital— where those who think differently coincide. A future research agenda, which is already being carried out, has to do with having methodological and empirical tools that allow us to better define when and how far democracies have receded, what is the event or shock determining backsliding, and how and when resilience is activated.

Democracies need to provide a virtuous circle that will contribute to strengthen their resilience capacity. It is about working under conditions that improve the integrity and institutional shielding of elections, of electoral governance and representatives, by investing in State capacities and political parties (Welp, 2022a);²⁴ by building pluralistic democratic coexistence spaces, and ensuring the distribution of universal public goods, both material and symbolic, in an equitable manner to citizens (Freidenberg, 2023).

Even though this debate is not new, it forgets what democracy is not: a system for just a few, where a leader—or a small elite— determines who can and cannot participate, and where processes are only valuable when “I” win. Calling systems that permit this type of practices democracies is a conceptual and political confusion that deceives about the meaning and essence of democracy (Freidenberg, 2023). Democrats urgently need to be honest and recognize that not anything goes or is valid. Democratic politics is the one that must peacefully manage conflicts around ideas, resources, identities, and policies, and for that to happen we need to return to the “norms of courtesy” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). The fight against autocracies depends on citizens that, convinced of their power, ensure that no one can limit their rights, even if in practice it is the elites who end up having the capacity (and the decision) to maintain this situation.

It is seemingly a paradox, but those same democracies—which had cost so much effort and, besides, are being intensely questioned by sectors that do not fully fit into the liberal logic of democracy—are the ones that guarantee the possibility of expressing different ideas. Many actors criticize the system

²⁴ Some have tried to support the belief that democracy is possible without parties, but this is not true. Peruvian evidence gives an account to this respect.

while in power, after having won elections and under the legitimacy given to them by citizen support in the polls. In practice, citizens are sick and tired, but not disinterested. What is more, in some countries, families have become politicized because of the outbreak of disruptive leaderships. This politicization also involves clashes with respect to key thematic axes and implies new expectations of change regarding transformations that still need to be carried out.

The political, social, economic, and media elites have to perform an exercise in self-criticism about their responsibilities in those cases where democratic backsliding has occurred and identify the skills that have been developed in other cases where it has been possible to build resilience against setbacks. This ability of making power rotate and leaderships renew is fundamental, and must be taught in formal education, but also actively and informally to the citizenry. Democratic backsliding is not the responsibility of autocrats alone; other opposition leaderships are also responsible by boosting anti-democratic discourse, in the same way as the media has done.

Together with the elites, the citizenry also urgently needs to embark upon this exercise of self-criticism. People should rethink how to make the struggle for democratic values and peaceful coexistence become once more the “only possible game in the city”, as warned by Linz (1978). In this sense, the research agenda should seek to better identify the specific conditions in which democracies protect themselves, develop actions to address critical situations and overcome them. Through in-depth case studies, the conditions allowing for the survival of political systems that have experienced dramatic critical situations —throwing institutions and actors into crisis— should be identified. In this sense, democracies require still more collective intelligence, public investment, and immaterial resources to make a citizenry —which has not yet benefited from democracy— understand and defend its intangible value. The answer to the problems of democracy is, then, more democracy.

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Appendix I
Average Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) across 18 Latin American Countries

Year	Index	Year	Index	Year	Index	Year	Index
1977	0.235	1988	0.503	1999	0.667	2010	0.677
1978	0.249	1989	0.514	2000	0.677	2011	0.678
1979	0.267	1990	0.589	2001	0.694	2012	0.673
1980	0.305	1991	0.625	2002	0.696	2013	0.661
1981	0.317	1992	0.618	2003	0.697	2014	0.664
1982	0.335	1993	0.628	2004	0.700	2015	0.659
1983	0.355	1994	0.641	2005	0.701	2016	0.652
1984	0.396	1995	0.646	2006	0.694	2017	0.643
1985	0.445	1996	0.662	2007	0.685	2018	0.638
1986	0.484	1997	0.669	2008	0.683	2019	0.620
1987	0.490	1998	0.671	2009	0.680	2020	0.614
						2021	0.615
						2022	0.612

Source: Created on the basis of V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Note: Scale goes from 0 to 1.

Appendix II
Average Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) across 18 Latin American Countries

Year	Index	Year	Index	Year	Index	Year	Index
1977	0.141	1989	0.355	2001	0.521	2013	0.495
1978	0.146	1990	0.428	2002	0.524	2014	0.497
1979	0.157	1991	0.460	2003	0.526	2015	0.493
1980	0.190	1992	0.460	2004	0.529	2016	0.489
1981	0.206	1993	0.465	2005	0.529	2017	0.488
1982	0.217	1994	0.475	2006	0.520	2018	0.482
1983	0.233	1995	0.481	2007	0.511	2019	0.464

1984	0.262	1996	0.487	2008	0.510	2020	0.466
1985	0.303	1997	0.493	2009	0.507	2021	0.455
1986	0.327	1998	0.496	2010	0.507	2022	0.455
1987	0.333	1999	0.488	2011	0.509		
1988	0.345	2000	0.499	2012	0.504		

Source: Created on the basis of V-Dem Dataset version 13 (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Note: Scale goes from 0 to 1.