Crisis of Democracy in the American Continent:

A Critical Analysis of the Electoral Processes in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the United States

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Abstract. In recent years, there has been a broad theoretical debate on a concept of democracy which is ideal for governments that correspond to the expectations of citizens. It is also possible to observe that in the present, the traditional political alternatives have demonstrated a progressive downfall, which has given way to parties or political figures that challenge the established system. In this chapter, the emblematic cases of Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the United States are presented, with special emphasis on the electoral processes held in those countries between 2016 and 2018, in where candidates who promised to change the state of affairs in their respective countries had a positive electoral outcome. These cases exemplify, on the one hand, institutionalism in some of the continent's most important countries, in where the transfer of power occurs peacefully and through supervised electoral processes. But for the other, it is also evidence of the exhaustion of the traditional political class and the rise of new actors, who take advantage of the new channels of representation. This is showing both a crisis of Western democracies and the transformation of the electoral machineries.

Keywords: Democracy · America · Elections · Citizens · Governments

1 Introduction: Crisis of Democracy in the American Continent

Over the years, both the theoretical and practical concepts of what democracy should be has been constantly debated. Currently, there are examples of how the discussion has transcended the formal rules of what we understand as a procedural democracy, to focus on what can constitute a democracy that meets the fundamental aspirations of a society. This corresponds to a long journey in the history of humanity, which has sought to strengthen social freedoms [1].

About this topic, it has been established that there are some essential elements that allow us to speak of a democracy that is not only functional, but also holds essential quality. This concept means, among other things, for a system to allow the celebration of free elections, a true independence of the media, having acceptable standards in matters

of equity, and the fact that the population has access to extensive social security and a system in where majorities and minorities are well represented [2].

For that very reason, it is important that legal institutions can become an effective mechanism that can enable those ideals of quality democracy to become an everyday reality. According to a study, some of the factors that are inherently related to the quality of democracy are accountability and the rule of law [3].

In this regard, it is worth reflecting that a solid democracy is not built from a single historical event. In the narrative of many historical processes, in some cases it might appear that a country can move from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one with an institutional change or with the mandate of an election. But as someone might argue, it is difficult to imagine that a social environment in which authoritarianism has prevailed, ends up suddenly flourishing democratic coexistence overnight, as it happens with some cases in Latin American countries [4].

Currently, there is also an international debate around the crisis of democracy in various contemporary nations. About this, it is recognized that some conditions in which the same democratic system can begin to lead to forms of authoritarianism if the essence of plurality rules is not preserved [5]. In other words, through the same institutional channels, some of the guarantees that allow for liberal coexistence can begin to be reversed.

Overall, this is one of the main concepts that concern us in this chapter: the authentic representation of the popular will in the handling of public affairs is key in the consolidation of any democratic regime in general terms, and in particular, in preserving fundamental freedoms [6]. There is a perception that liberal democracy has never fulfilled its most basic aspirations (such as consolidating popular power), but warns that in the present some of the most elemental conquests of a social coexistence based on plurality, are at risk. Broadly speaking, there is an argument that the materialization of some of the most basic aspirations that encompass this concept have been difficult to materialize, but even when some of them are achieved, she argues in favor of deepening various ways in which the democracy acquires a greater meaning. She also indicates that there are new forms of civic involvement in the present that did not exist in the past, such as organization through digital media [7].

But it is important to mention that, as the opportunity to achieve greater awareness of citizens by digital media grew, authoritarian regimes in the world were consolidated during this same period. The promise of a democratic transformation as a result of greater access to information through digital media would be far from being realized over the years [8]. More than a meeting space that allows public deliberation, social media has become a battlefield where groups with extreme positions have ended up contributing to the political polarization of a country as in the case of the United States. They also end up overrepresenting radical minorities, who typically engage in aggressive discourse [9]. And the governments and armies of the majority of countries in the world have incorporated the cybertroops [10].

But even when the most radical expressions are not representative of the majority public opinion, it is not something we can ignore either, because it can eventually become just that. It is important to emphasize that in times when there is a collective grief that comes from years of economic stagnation, information-based rationality takes second

place during decision-making. Majorities are motivated more by affections, ideals and grievances than by a logical calculation [11].

There are other visions that argue that in many cases the origin of the destruction of democracy comes from a legitimate electoral process, but in where it eventually produces a government that is contrary to the very essence of pluralism [12]. The notion that authorities and laws have emerged through an electoral process, and although they have a democratic origin, they also retain an intolerant vocation [13]. In this case, there is an argument that voters that come from both ends of the ideological spectrum can endorse anti-democratic alternatives [12, 13].

From a liberal perspective, there is an argument that the same structures that have allowed broad civic liberties to have also created the basis for the system's own demise. In his vision, the liberal democracies have ended up being eroded to a great extent because they managed to generalize the self-determination guarantee that they proposed. This idea, however, would lead for several to question the very foundations of a liberal establishment [14].

In this chapter, we will present four different cases of electoral processes in which the citizens demonstrated against the prevailing political system. It does not intend to describe the governments that emerged from a clear democratic mandate, rather what is intended is to reflect on the current state of democracy in some of the most important countries on the American continent.

2 Brazil: The Triumph of the Extreme Right

Bolsonaro's electoral victory began to be built long before 2018. The sharp political polarization also began before Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, primarily instigated by some of Brazil's most conservative forces that influenced public debate from digital and traditional media. President Dilma Rousseauf had to face protests from the opposition, notably, since the summer of 2013 [15].

The President who preceded Dilma Rousseauf, Lula da Silva (2003–2011) was relatively stable and popular. Given this, it is convenient to take into account that the Worker's Party (WP), since assuming power in 2003, very soon demonstrated the inevitable contradictions of a movement that came to lead responsibilities within the public administration, an uneasy process [16].

But it was not only the corruption allegations against the ruling party that ended up shaking the Brazilian system; in the end, the same law enforcement would be questioned for acting in a partial way. In this context, political competition in Brazil became increasingly polarized [17].

Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy benefited from the imprisonment of former President Lula da Silva, who was his strongest contender. This forced the WP to nominate his running mate, Fernando Haddad, a politician who did not have enough public recognition to carry out an effective campaign within five weeks. Also, the perception that a part of the electorate maintained about the WP as a political party associated with corruption, had weight in the mood of the voters [18]. Bolsonaro's campaign speech also had a huge impact on social media, even though during the second round, he did not carry out many traditional campaign events [19]. Bolsonaro's triumph represented not only the defeat of

the left-wing party that had ruled Brazil, it also represented the failure of the traditional right, and the triumph of the most radical conservative expressions.

One year after Bolsonaro's triumph, his reputation has plummeted [20]. Along with the bad economic situation, and an absence of clarity in his ideas, Bolsonaro's management of Covid-19 crisis has been one of the worst in the world, with the President himself infected by the pandemic.

3   Colombia: From the Peace Agreement, to the Hidden Guerrilla

In the case of Colombia, some authors state that this is one of the consolidated democracies of Latin America [21]. But despite its apparent internal stability, the Colombian context is defined by some structural problems related to an armed conflict. That conflict started around six decades ago, with the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9th 1948. Gaitán was a liberal leader who represented the people's aspirations; he was considered a symbol for those excluded from the countryside and the city [22].

From the murder of Gaitán, a gap was established between the elite who ruled the country and the poor people's governance expectations. The result of the process was the radicalization of the confrontation and the creation of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), a response from violence to the governance crisis. Over time, the ideological origins of the conflict were replaced by an economic approach [23]. Drug trafficking, used to finance the guerrillas and paramilitary groups, motivated this change in approach.

In 2017, the government of Juan Manuel Santos signed a Peace Agreement with the FARC [24]. That was a very complex process, as there was a consensus of the conservative leaders in order to reject a peaceful way out of the conflict. The strategy directed by ex-president Álvaro Uribe was to polarize public opinion, showing irreconcilable differences with the guerrillas. In fact, it was the same polarization performed during his governments with a controversial initiative to end violence – the State had to execute all the FARC members, and that was the only mechanism to stop the armed conflict [25].

But the Peace Agreement revealed some profound problems associated to the Colombian democracy: the lack of a greater regional investment, as some capitals concentrate most of the resources, and there are some practically abandoned peripheral territories, or the lack of a left representation, after the "genocide",of more than 3000 politicians elected in the Patriotic Union, a party created to stimulate political participation on the left side in the 80's [26, 27].

However, the peace process was halted with the victory of Iván Duque in the 2018 presidential elections. Duque belongs to the Democratic Center, a new conservative political party founded by the former President Álvaro Uribe which was opposed to the Peace Agreement [28]. And there are several initiatives agreed between the previous government that confront the ideological vision of the Democratic Center. For example, the Peace Agreement signed by Juan Manuel Santos agreed a structural reform of agriculture, which necessarily have to change land ownership [29]. In fact, Colombia, as it is remarked by the quoted author, is one of the most unequal countries on earth, so it is essential to develop a more horizontal ownership of land, which helps the rural periphery. Although President Iván Duque announced at the beginning of 2020 some

improvements related to the cadastre and delivery of property titles, after two years of government, the measures and the presidential impulse to the Peace Agreement seem insufficient [30].

During Duque's presidency, the figures present a bleak picture for Colombia: 506 social leaders have been murdered in the last three years, along with 195 ex-combatants, and the State's economic investment in combatant reintegration projects is "worrying", as it is indicated in one of the country's main publications [31]. President Duque still has a 2-year mandate to redirect the situation, but with the economic and social crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems difficult that the implementation of the Peace Agreement is one of his priorities.

4   Mexico: The Long-Awaited Victory of the Left

To understand this electoral result which was ideologically apart from the regional dynamics when it was produced, it is important to highlight that Mexico has traditionally been far from the inclinations of the other Latin American nations. When military governments predominated in Latin America in the 1970s, Mexico was headed by civilian leaders. In the 1990s, when most Latin American countries had governments emanating from democratic electoral processes, the hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) continued to govern the Mexican nation, while various groups of Mexican civil society advocated for greater democratization [32].

The Mexican left had constituted a decisive opposition to the hegemony of the PRI. But when the first change at the federal level occurred in 71 years, it was the Mexican right (PAN) who came to power in 2000. As a consequence, the Mexican left advocated not only for a greater democratization of public powers in Mexico, it also opposed the neoliberal economic model that had been implemented by the governments of the PRI and the PAN [33].

The collapse of the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) and of the opposition parties that supported a broad agenda of unpopular legislative reforms called the Pact for Mexico, would end up opening the way for the left-wing party, Morena, which since its inception had led a speech of rupture with the regime [34]. The conditions that the country was facing, created an adequate political context that in his third attempt, Andrés Manuel López Obrador competed in a presidential election with greater acceptance than in the past.

López Obrador's speech evoked at the same time, a restoration of a better past, as well as a combative speech against the prevailing system, characterized by corruption [22]. The triumph of López Obrador's was linked to a change in the general strategy. Instead of focus on discrediting traditional media, that was replaced by the use of social networks as the most effective strategy in political communication [35]. President López Obrador won the elections in a stunning landslide (53% of the popular vote), and it is the first President to have a congressional majority since Ernesto Zedillo lost it in 1997. The 2021 midterm elections indicated he still retains popular support, although the opposition gained some seats on congress.

4. United States: The surprising victory of Donald Trump

Despite not initially being the front-runner to win the GOP nomination, Donald Trump began to overcome his rivals because he established a more direct connection with voter's demands. To spread his message, he made extensive use of digital platforms, mainly that of the social network Twitter [36].

Once he won the nomination, Trump used a strategy of appealing to the deepest prejudices of part of American society (such as racism), which would end up being an important factor that contributes to explain the electoral results [37]. As a candidate, Trump would emphasize the need for increasing the use of public force to fight crime, something that ended up being well received by his supporters [38].

Despite the fact that a significant number of the traditional media opposed the Republican's candidacy, and even though most of the polls predicted Hillary Clinton's victory, Donald Trump managed to win in the electoral college, obtaining a minority of votes at the national level. This was the consequence of his breakthrough discourse in a climate of polarization, unleashing an electoral insurrection on the part of those who had remained marginalized by the system [39].

The surprise of the electoral result in the United States, had similarities with the unexpected that was the victory of Brexit in the United Kingdom. In both cases, political correctness had been defeated by a bold narrative that was based on perceptions and not on facts [40]. The year 2016 would thus mark a clear precedent on the possibility that the political system of any western democracy could be defeated by alternatives that, although they did not appeal to rationality, had the potential to represent the collective discomfort caused by dissatisfaction with the results in economic matters [41].

5   Conclusions

As it has been previously described, it is evident that there is an institutionalism crisis on the American continent which is linked to the crisis of traditional media, as the primary and main sources of information. If at the beginning the Western social media were seen as participative platforms, the truth is that they have become as a part of the problem [8]. Instead of being deliberative spaces, they are part of the geostrategic battlefield [10].

Overall, we can find that time and the performance of the leaders who obtained an electoral victory as a result of the social rejection of the status quo will determine whether this is a temporary trend, or the beginning of a new era in the region. These processes differ from one country to another, but the electoral contexts examined concentrate the majority of the American population, so they have a referential position which may influence to the region. The transformation of the political systems occurs through the electoral processes, but it determines deep changes in the democratic structures. So, it has been detected a gap between the traditional political class and the American societies.

At the same time, the rise of new actors is linked to the improvements of the communication system. Social media allows a direct contact between candidates and their potential electorates. But it does not mean that an anonymous candidate can win an election just with the support of his or her ideas. On the contrary, social media is strategically oriented with the use of data mining techniques, or the diffusion of campaigns with direct

promotion, social bots, among others. Thus, the electoral machinery has evolved into new parties and candidates which employ those channels to amplify their electoral base. In conclusion, the examples provided prove that the new electoral machineries restrict a deeper and wider political participation, in order to stage an artificial participation. That simulated participation replaces, in most cases, real participation, which has been proved as an efficient strategy of political communication, at least during electoral campaigns.

But it is difficult to see, in the following years, a scenario in which Western democracies reorient their participation substitutes to activate direct democracy through new channels. To do that, Western social media should be regulated, as the "total freedom" policies benefit mainly large economic emporiums. And, at the moment, the main problems of governability in the West are associated precisely with social media. A candidate with ample financial resources can launch a strategic campaign that, after a few months, loses the interest and confidence of a good part of his constituents, as happened with the four presidents examined.

In short, governance 3.0, from our point of view, must be crossed by the regulation of information and communication channels and participation that goes beyond voting, that is, that establishes a permanent campaign of consultation with voters. And those elements are still very far in the American presidential republics.

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