

Challenges of Democracy in Latin America: Populism, Denialism, Inequality and Ochlocracy*

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Abstract

L'obiettivo principale di questo articolo è riflettere su alcuni problemi della democrazia nell'America Latina odierna, quali il populismo, il negazionismo, la disuguaglianza e l'oclocrazia digitale, con particolare attenzione al caso brasiliano. Si parte da una diagnosi della crisi politica, che è interconnessa con le crisi ambientale, economica e digitale, per poi affrontare specificamente ciascun problema. Si inizia con un'analisi del populismo, che è una caratteristica dei governi latinoamericani, mettendo in evidenza sia il populismo di destra che quello di sinistra, con particolare riferimento ai casi di Brasile, Messico e Argentina. L'indagine si concentra poi sul problema del negazionismo, affrontando sia il negazionismo climatico e scientifico, sia il negazionismo in relazione ai regimi autocratici. Il passo successivo sarà quello di riflettere sul problema della disuguaglianza in America Latina, nonché sul ruolo dei *social network* nel processo di degenerazione del dibattito politico nella sfera pubblica, cercando di trarre alcune conclusioni.

Parole chiave: democrazia; populismo; negazionismo; disuguaglianza; oclocrazia digitale.

The main objective of this paper is to reflect on some problems of democracy in Latin America today, such as populism, denialism, inequality and digital ochlocracy, with special attention to the Brazilian case. It starts with a certain diagnosis of the political crisis, which is interconnected with the environmental, economic and digital crises, among others, and then deals specifically with each problem. We begin with an analysis of populism, which is a characteristic feature of Latin American governments, highlighting both right-wing populism and left-wing populism, highlighting the cases of Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. The investigation then focuses on the problem of

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denialism, addressing both climate and scientific denialism, as well as denial in relation to autocratic regimes. The next step will be to reflect on the problem of inequality in Latin America, as well to reflect on the role of social networks in the process of degeneration of political debate in the public sphere and seek to establish some conclusions.

Keywords: democracy; populism; denialism; inequality; digital ochlocracy.

Introduction

To talk of the problems of democracy in Latin America is to talk of an interconnected crisis, so that the crisis of representative political systems is connected to the serious economic and ecological crisis that is plaguing the countries of this region, as well as the crisis in the public sphere that is strongly caused by a certain negative use of social networks, which spreads false information or fake news and operates manipulations, not to mention the global political crisis, in which liberal democracies are being challenged, as well as international organizations and their rules are being put to the test. Some problems are already well known in Latin American democracies, such as populism and socio-economic inequality, while others are relatively new, such as denialism and digital ochlocracy.

Populism, for example, is characterized by a discourse that divides society between the «good people» and the «bad elite», dividing citizens into «us» and «them», and can represent a threat to democracy, especially when it manifests itself as a denial of pluralism and democratic institutions. The tension between populism and democracy lies in the way populism interprets and uses the concept of popular will, often to the detriment of the role of institutions and political pluralism. We can initially state that almost all Latin American countries suffer to a greater or lesser extent from this problem¹. In turn, the relationship between democracy and social and economic inequality is complex and multifaceted. Although democracy is often seen as a system that promotes equal rights and opportunities, in practice it can coexist with high levels of social and economic inequality. Thus, inequality can undermine democracy itself, making it difficult for all citizens to participate politically and exercise their rights. It is very difficult to imagine societies with political stability without a correspondingly equitable standard².

In addition to populism and inequality, denialism has proved to be very characteristic of Latin American governments, as well as oligarchic systems. By challenging established facts and promoting misinformation, denialism represents a serious problem for democracy. It weakens trust in institutions, undermines the public

¹ M. Conniff, *Populism in Latin America*, University Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2012.

² F. Fukuyama, *Poverty, Inequality, and Democracy: The Latin American Experience*, in «Journal of Democracy», 19, 4, 2008, pp. 69-79.

sphere, and can lead to very wrong political decisions³. In turn, the central problem between democracy and oligarchy lies in the tension between the rule of the majority and the rule of the few. Democracy ideally seeks the participation and power of the people, while oligarchy is characterized by the political and economic control of a select group. Thus, the risk of oligarchy in democratic systems is the possibility of manipulation by power groups, which can exert disguised influence over political decisions, leaving power concentrated in the hands of a few, which generally leads to exclusion and inequality⁴.

In addition to the problems already mentioned, we also have the impoverishment of public debate due to digital ochlocracy, which is the influence of the crowd in an online environment, representing a particular challenge for representative democracy. While the internet offers tools for participation and civic engagement, the ease with which false or manipulated information spreads, combined with the formation of information bubbles, can lead to political decisions based on emotions and prejudices, rather than reason and informed debate. Of course, this problem has been occurring all over the world, but we emphasize that it is very serious in our context⁵.

However, before we address the problems of Latin American democracy in greater detail, it is important to clarify what we mean by democracy. We will start from a liberal and non-instrumentalist conception of democracy. In this model, democracy is understood as the hegemonic political regime in the West from modernity to the present day, characterized by universal suffrage, respect for human rights, alternation of power, and separation of powers, among other characteristics. In general, the term democracy refers very generally to a government system based on collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants in an essential stage of the decision-making process⁶. This clearly contrasts with the idea of thinking of democracy in an instrumental way, so that it would have value only to obtain power and perpetuate itself in it, or even to guarantee the well-being of citizens. In this sense, democracy can only be understood from the concept of plurality. For Hannah Arendt, for example, democracy is rooted in human plurality, that is, the fundamental condition that humans are both the same (all «human») and unique individuals, distinct from one another, requiring a public space for action, speech, and the revelation of unique perspectives (opinions) to create shared meaning and power, rather than mere rule by majority or abstract consensus⁷.

³ G. Queiroz-Stein, A.A. Gugliano, C.A. Seifert Jr., A.M.M. Torquato Luiz, *Climate Change, Denialism, and Participatory Institutions in Brazil: Effects of the Bolsonaro Government's Environmental Strategy (2019-2022)*, in «Brazilian political science review», 17, 3, 2023, pp. 1-30.

⁴ J. Foweraker, *Oligarchy in the Americas: comparing Oligarchic Rule in Latin America and the United States*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2020.

⁵ J.P. Gálvez, *Democracy in times of Ochlocracy*, in «Synthesis Philosophica», 63, 1, 2017, pp. 167-178.

⁶ T. Christiano, *Democracy*, in «Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy», 2024. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>. Access: 01/07/2025.

⁷ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1958; H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, Viking Press, New York 1961.

If we look at the constitutional texts of Latin American countries, as well as the international treaties to which Latin American countries are signatories, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the international organizations of which they are members, such as the OAS (Organization of American States), Mercosur (Common Market of the South), among others, democracy has a substantial value. In this context, democracy is taken from a substantial perspective, based on the assumption that it assumes certain essential moral values, especially that each citizen deserves equal consideration and respect as a holder of autonomous rights. Thus, a constitution is necessary to ensure that even democratically made laws will adhere to these moral values. This view of democracy is largely focused on the role and justification of a Bill of Rights, or of constitutional provisions that protect individual rights, supported by the constitutionality of laws⁸.

Similarly, it is important to recognize that democracy cannot be confused with just majority rule, as it includes not only voting and respect for the results of elections, but other attributes, such as the protection of freedom, the guarantee of broad and censorship-free discussion, and the right of citizens to demand a better human life through political participation. For example, elections are not enough for us to have democracy. Citizens must be able to freely express their will, and people must have the right to run for office, and people must have adequate material conditions to be considered citizens⁹.

One last point about this conceptual demarcation, recalling Norberto Bobbio, is that democracy is interdependent with the liberal State. And this means thinking of democracy as opposed to all forms of autocratic government, characterizing it by a set of primary (or fundamental) rules that establish who is authorized to make collective decisions and with what specific procedures¹⁰. For Bobbio, democracy is not necessarily the «rules of the game», that is, what determines the basis of the internal politics of a state in which the majority of the people choose their rulers, but it goes beyond, being the minimum necessary for there to be validity of the choices made by an individual by order of the collective¹¹.

With this clarification in mind, let us move on to the analysis of populism.

I – Populism

Populism is a controversial term due to its complexity, but it is often associated with the idea of a charismatic leader who speaks directly to the people, opposing a supposed elite. It establishes a clear distinction between «us» and «them», and tends to offer easy answers to complex problems, making promises that cannot be fulfilled in the long term. Populism is a political concept that refers to movements, regimes or

⁸ R. Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here?*, Princeton University Press, New York 2006.

⁹ A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1999.

¹⁰ N. Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

governments that seek popular support through discourses that establish an opposition between the popular group and the elite, generally represented by political institutions. It is a political practice that claims to defend the interests of the lower classes to gain popular sympathy and approval, using as a form of action the casting of suspicion on political institutions, such as the legislative branch, the judiciary, political parties and even the constitution.

According to political scientist Willian Galston, populism is characterized by being an enemy of political pluralism and by being an illiberal political movement. For him, populism is the view that the «true people» of a country are under attack by elites and liberal institutions which seek to control the democratic process. Populism is fuelled by nativism and classism, where the «true people» can be defined along socio-economic or cultural lines. It can grow in states where there is a failing economy, fear for security, or resentment of special interests. As a movement, populism systematically identifies insiders, delegitimizes outsiders, and escalates crises. Populism is the enemy of pluralism and constitutionalism and thus of modern democracy¹². According to the author:

Of our four key concepts, populism accepts the principles of popular sovereignty and democracy, understood in straightforward fashion as the exercise of majoritarian power. It is skeptical, however, about constitutionalism, insofar as formal, bounded institutions and procedures impede majorities from working their will. It takes an even dimmer view of liberal protections for individuals and minority groups¹³.

And, according to Nadia Urbinati, populism is not new. It emerged along with the process of democratization in the nineteenth century, and since then its forms have mirrored the forms of the representative governments it has challenged. What is novel today is the intensity and pervasiveness of its manifestations: populist movements have appeared in almost every democracy: «They now exist from Caracas to Budapest, from Washington to Rome. Any understanding of contemporary politics that wants to be taken seriously finds a way to deal with populism»¹⁴. For her, the central claim of all populist movements is to get rid of «the establishment», or whatever is posited as lying between «us» (the people outside) and the state, that is, inside apparatuses of decision makers, elected or appointed¹⁵.

In Latin America, the concept has been used to explain a set of practices associated with personalist politicians during much of the 20th century. For example, we have the historical experiences of Peronism in Argentina, Cardenism in Mexico, and Aprism in Peru. In the Brazilian case, the expression is generally used to explain the characteristics of the rulers of Brazil between 1930 and 1964, with emphasis on

¹² W. Galston, *The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy*, in «Journal of Democracy», 29, 2, 2018, pp. 5-19.

¹³ Ivi, p. 11.

¹⁴ N. Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

the government of Getúlio Vargas from 1930 to 1945. Contemporarily, the term is used to characterize charismatic politicians who seek popular support through policies with strong social and nationalist appeal, often in contrast to traditional elites and established structures. Recent examples include the government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia, and that of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, as well as the government of Cristina Kirchner and the current government of Javier Milei in Argentina¹⁶.

Unlike Laclau's position, which sees populism as a potentially emancipatory force towards democratic radicalization¹⁷, we want to argue that populism does indeed bring serious problems to Latin American countries, such as the creation of an opposition between popular will and political institutions, the denial of political pluralism, and attacks on the separation of powers. For Ernesto Laclau, populism is not an ideology or a specific type of regime, but rather a fundamental «political logic» or a type of discourse essential for the construction of collective political identities and the function of democracy itself. He rejects traditional views that see populism as an inherently negative or irrational phenomenon¹⁸. For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, populism is not a threat to democracy, but rather its «constitutive condition». They argue that liberal democracy tends to obscure political conflicts and promote a false consensus (post-politics), which leads to citizen disengagement. Populism, by reintroducing antagonism and creating a collective political subject, «the people», reinvigorates democratic politics. Chantal Mouffe, in particular, advocates for a left populism as a strategy to challenge neoliberal hegemony and deepen democracy by articulating diverse struggles around a radical democratic project that values both liberty and equality¹⁹. Despite this important understanding of populism, we want to show its problematic aspects in this article.

One serious problem is that populism tries to create an opposition between the popular will and political institutions, weakening the very public institutions that serve to defend the interests of the most vulnerable citizens. Take the case of the judiciary. As much as it may have limits and even contradictions, it is only it that can guarantee individual, collective and social rights, and resolve conflicts that are inherent to a democracy. A second problem is the denial of political pluralism, leading to a tribalization of distinct groups. The problem with tribalism in politics is that it dissolves social stability, creating radical disputes between rival groups, which, in the extreme, can lead to a civil war. Another serious problem is that populism attacks the separation of powers, which can lead to democratic erosion, since what guarantees this system is a certain balance of power, since it is assumed that all power corrupts and that absolute power would corrupt absolutely, to follow Lord Acton. This can

¹⁶ M. Conniff, *Populism in Latin America*, cit.; C. Torre, *Populism in Latin America*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 79-100.

¹⁷ L.S. Moraes, P.C.D. Fonseca, *Populismo como Conceito: teoria e história das interpretações*, in «Revista de Economia Contemporânea», 28, 2024, pp. 1-31: p. 6.

¹⁸ E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London-New York 2005.

¹⁹ C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London-New York 2018.

even lead to an attack on the Constitution, which can result in the loss of the normative standard for mediating conflicts, which generally leads to greater harm to the most vulnerable groups in society. Finally, populism tends to simplify complex problems, presenting solutions that seem easy but that in reality can be harmful. For example, a populist leader may promise to end inflation or economic growth through simple measures, such as controlling prices or increasing public spending, without considering the negative long-term impacts.

An example of this last problem occurred in the government of Cristina Kischner and is occurring in the current government of Javier Milei in Argentina, in the form of economic populism. Despite the specificities emphasized by several authors, there is a certain consensus regarding the common characteristic of all populist governments, namely: the attempt to accelerate the growth of aggregate demand in the short term, ignoring or underestimating stabilization policies and budgetary restrictions. Faced with the first problem, populists tend to delegate responsibility for the crisis to their predecessors, ignoring the need for adjustments by proposing, as a solution, greater growth²⁰. The beginning of Cristina Kirchner's term took place in a scenario of economic growth experienced by the Argentine economy from 2003 onwards, with the government of Nestór Kirchner. However, the main macroeconomic indicators suffered a sharp decline after the financial crisis of late 2008, leading to an increase in inflation. As a way to stabilize the recessionary period resulting from the global economic slowdown, the Argentine government used countercyclical mechanisms, continually and increasingly weakening the fiscal position. The main measures, then, were the considerable increase in public spending to respond to the social demands resulting from the economic crisis, considering that 70% of this fiscal expansion was allocated to subsidy programs, such as income supplement programs for the electricity and transportation sectors. There was also a freeze on electricity tariffs²¹.

The social result of the economic crisis that occurred during Cristina Kirchner's government can be seen in the significant increase in the population living in poverty (29%) and extreme poverty (6%), still in 2015. From a political point of view, Argentine society's response to the impoverishment and clear deterioration of all economic and social indicators came through the defeat of Kirchnerism in the 2015 election, the result of which brought to the Casa Rosada a president who advocated an orthodox and liberal project, in this case Mauricio Macri²².

This economic populism can also be seen in the attitudes of the current president of Argentina, Javier Milei, who took office in December 2023. Since his election campaign, he has been saying that the way to resolve Argentina's serious economic crisis is through radical spending cuts, radically reducing the size of the

²⁰ J.S.C. Iturvide, I.C. Salomão, *A Era K: O populismo argentino em questão (2003-2015)*, in «Gerosub», 37, 84, 2022, pp. 310-333: p. 314.

²¹ Ivi, pp. 323-325.

²² M.V. Murilo, J.M. Rubio, J. Mangonnet, *Argentina: el protagonismo de los votantes y la alternancia electoral*, in «Revista de Ciencia Política», 36, 1, 2016, pp. 3-26.

state, and cutting entire government departments. He became known for taking a chainsaw to a rally to illustrate his promise of budget cuts. He advocated closing the Argentine Central Bank and dollarizing the economy, that is, eliminating the peso in favor of the US dollar. After taking office, he began to use the economy against his internal enemies, a strategy similar to Kirchnerist populism, proposing an unorthodox shock to the economy²³.

In turn, an example of the first problem, namely, that of creating a strong opposition between the will of the people and political institutions, weakening the very institutions that serve to defend the interests of the most vulnerable citizens, is currently occurring in Mexico, with the direct election of judges. Following the judicial reform approved in September 2024, originally proposed by former President Andrés Manuel López-Obrador and promoted by current President Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico held a direct vote to elect members of the judiciary for the first time on June 1, 2025. The election aimed to renew 2,600 positions in different judicial instances, both at the federal and state levels, involving up to the nine ministers of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN). The argument used by the president to justify the direct election was that the judiciary was corrupt and did not represent the will of the people²⁴.

However, the legitimacy of the elections for the judiciary can be questioned due to the high abstention rate. Only 13% of voters went to the polls, with an abstention rate of 87%. Furthermore, many voters said they did not know the candidates and even that there were candidates supported by drug trafficking. The opposition promoted an intense campaign to boycott the elections, arguing that submitting the choice of judges to a popular vote would jeopardize the independence of the judiciary in relation to the other branches of government, in addition to opening space for sectors linked to organized crime to enter the justice system. Of course, it is still too early to understand the consequences of this experience, but there is a very reasonable possibility that this represents the end of a democratic system characterized by the system of checks and balances, causing the country to return to a period of authoritarianism²⁵.

II – Denialism

The second characteristic problem of Latin American democracies is the denialism of their leaders, both scientific denialism, such as being anti-vaccine or climate deniers,

²³ S. Girit, *O Populismo é uma ameaça à democracia?*, in «BBC News Brasil», 10/12/2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/c9xr665p6l6o>. Access: 03/07/2025.

²⁴ E.R. Mega, *What to Know About Mexico's Sweeping Judicial Election*, in «The New York Times», 01/06/2025. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/29/world/americas/mexico-judicial-election.html>. Access: 03/07/2025.

²⁵ D. Dresser, *Mexico's Judicial Election Is a Blow for Democracy*, in «America Quarterly», 05/06/2025. Available at: <https://americasquarterly.org/article/mexicos-judicial-election-is-a-blow-for-democracy/>. Access: 03/07/2025.

and political denialism, denying that certain countries are dictatorships. An example of the first type of denialism was what occurred in Brazil, during the government of Jair Bolsonaro, when dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. This government was entirely negligent in combating the pandemic, denied the effectiveness of vaccines and insisted on promoting treatments proven to be ineffective against Covid-19, such as prescribing chloroquine and ivermectin as an early treatment against the virus²⁶.

While people around the world stayed home during the pandemic, Bolsonaro gathered large crowds around him and greeted supporters who gathered around him, often without wearing masks. Not content with that, he called Covid-19 a «little flu» and said he was «not a gravedigger» when responding to deaths from coronavirus in Brazil. He also fired the health minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta after he publicly criticized the president's conduct, which went against the guidelines of the WHO – World Health Organization. After that, the new health minister, General Eduardo Pazuello, significantly delayed the purchase of vaccines, leaving Brazil without an immunizer to combat the virus for a long time during the pandemic. Analysing Bolsonaro's denialist discourse, in the name of returning to «normality», he defended vertical isolation without being guided by research, even disavowing his vice president who defended social isolation. He has also encouraged rallies against social isolation in certain Brazilian cities, such as Manaus. Furthermore, he made a series of statements that proved to be false, such as saying that: contagion would be lower in Brazil because it is a tropical country; it would affect the elderly population more; there would be fewer deaths from covid-10 than from H1N1²⁷.

It is important to keep in mind that this type of denialism about the pandemic was not exclusive to right-wing governments. The president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López-Obrador, characterized by having a left-wing government, acted in the same way as Bolsonaro, refusing to wear a mask and traveling around the country in the midst of the pandemic. He held to his rallies in March 2020, when the coronavirus was beginning to invade Mexico. Even his health advisor, Hugo-López Gatell, said that the president was safe on these trips, because his strength was moral. And in one of his speeches, López-Obrador told the country that people should live their lives as usual and that «not lying, not stealing, not cheating» would greatly help to prevent the spread of the virus²⁸.

This scientific denialism is also expressed in the denial of climate change, which results in a lack of projects and strategies to confront or mitigate the crisis. This type of denialism was also a major feature of Jair Bolsonaro's government in Brazil from 2019 to 2022. Climate denialism is a conservative and sceptical political view

²⁶ D.U. Hur, J.M. Sabucedo, M. Alzate, *Bolsonaro e Covid-19: Negacionismo, militarismo e neoliberalismo*, in «Psicología Política», 21, 51, 2021, pp. 550-569: pp. 552-553.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 555.

²⁸ *Coronavirus advice from Mexico's president: "live life as usual"*, in «The Guardian», 02/03/2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/coronavirus-advice-from-mexicos-president-live-life-as-usual>. Access: 02/07/2025; L. Taylor, *How denialism led Mexico's disastrous pandemic control effort*, in «BMJ», 2020, 371:m4954.

that rejects the evidence and scientific methodologies establishing the human role in global warming. It also casts doubt on the severity of the consequences of this phenomenon and the need to take action to address it²⁹. Regarding the Bolsonaro government's climate denialism, the research by Queiroz-Stein et al. states that:

During Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022), the Brazilian federal government developed a detrimental relationship with the environmental and climate policy. The government failed to uphold international agreements, ignored the effects of climate change, and encouraged an exploitative economic model within ecological protection areas, among other actions. Also, there was an increase in deforestation, fire outbreaks, and CO₂ emission in the country. In short, Brazil went against the policies aimed at mitigating the climate crisis, generating considerable damage. Consequently, the country, once a leading figure in the climate agenda, became isolated from a range of international initiatives focused on preserving the planet's environment³⁰.

After analysing scientific denialism, be it pandemic denialism or climate denialism, we move on to political denialism. An example of this other type of denialism is the denial that certain countries are dictatorships, such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. In this regard, we believe it is significant to analyse the behaviour of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with regard to the Venezuelan election held on July 28, 2024, an election that was contested by several international players.

Six hours after the polls closed and without releasing any partial results, the CNE (National Electoral Council) announced that Nicolas Maduro had been reelected with 51.2% of the votes against 44.2% for Edmundo González Urrutia. It is important to note that the announcement came after only 80% of the polls had been counted, but according to the CNE, the government victory was already irreversible. On the other hand, González's campaign claimed to have had access to 40% of the results and stated that they indicated a victory for the opposition with 70% of the votes. Videos that circulated on social media showed officials from polling stations announcing the results loudly, as well as images of supposed results, which indicated a large advantage for González. Opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who was prevented from running in this election by the Maduro government, said that the numbers presented by the CNE are «impossible». According to her, everyone knows that Venezuelans voted for change³¹.

It is important to note that, in terms of international players, most American and European countries contested the victory, such as the United States, Argentina, Chile, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Italy, Spain, Germany, Portugal, United Kingdom and the European Union. Only Russia,

²⁹ G. Queiroz-Stein, A.A. Gugliano, C.A. Seifert Jr., A.M.M. Torquato Luiz, *Climate Change, Denialism, and Participatory Institutions in Brazil*, cit., p 9.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 2.

³¹ *Vitória de Maduro é questionada; Brasil evita reconhecer*, in «Zero Hora», 30/07/2024.

China, Cuba, Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Qatar and Iran recognized Maduro's victory as president of Venezuela. The OAS – Organization of American States – did not recognize the result of the elections in Venezuela and called a meeting for July 31, 2024, to deal with the issue urgently. The Organization stated that «vices, illegalities and bad practices» occurred during the electoral process, emphasizing that Maduro manipulated the results and ignored the will of the people³².

Regarding this accusation by the OAS, it is important to remember that several international observers who were going to monitor the election were disinvited by the Maduro's government, as was the case with the withdrawal of the invitation to the European Union mission and to representatives from Brazil, Colombia and Argentina, as was the case with former President Alberto Fernandes, from Argentina³³. In addition to this fact, there was a significant number of demonstrations by the Venezuelan population who, outraged by the election result, called for Maduro to hand over power and recognize the opposition's victory, which in fact did not happen³⁴.

It is important to ask, in this context, how has Brazil positioned itself? Contrary to the OAS countries, Brazil opted for exemption and, although it did not endorse the suspicions of fraud, nor did it recognize the result of the election, the same behavior being followed by Mexico and Colombia. In a statement, the Itamaraty said that the presentation of «data broken down by polling station» is «indispensable». Late on Monday night, July 29, 2024, the Maduro government expelled the diplomatic corps of seven countries that contested the election: Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay³⁵. On Tuesday, July 30, 2024, President Lula spoke for the first time about the elections in Venezuela, in an interview with TV Centro América, in Mato Grosso, saying he was convinced that nothing abnormal had happened, and that disputes could be resolved by presenting the minutes. He even compared the situation on with the Brazilian one, saying that in the election of President Dilma for the second term, candidate Aécio Neves contested the election result, concluding that contestation is part of a democracy³⁶.

³² L. Takahashi, *OEA não reconhece vitória de Maduro na Venezuela e fala de "ilegalidades"*, in «UOL», 30/07/2024. Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2024/07/30/oea-anuncia-nao-reconhecer-vitoria-de-maduro-nas-eleicoes-da-venezuela.htm>. Access: 02/07/2025.

³³ *Veja quem são os observadores da eleição presidencial na Venezuela*, in «CNN Brasil», 29/07/2024. Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/veja-quem-sao-os-observadores-da-eleicao-presidencial-na-venezuela/>. Access: 02/07/2025.

³⁴ *Pelo menos 749 pessoas foram detidas em protestos contra Maduro, na Venezuela, diz procurador-geral*, in «Portal G1», 30/07/2024. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2024/07/30/pessoas-foram-detidas-em-protestos-contra-maduro-na-venezuela-diz-procurador-geral.ghtml>. Access: 03/07/2025.

³⁵ *Vitória de Maduro é questionada; Brasil evita reconhecer*, in «Zero Hora», 30/07/2024.

³⁶ *Lula fala pela 1ª vez sobre eleições na Venezuela e diz que "briga" se resolve apresentando as atas*, in «CNN Brasil», 30/07/2024. Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/entrevista-lula-venezuela/>. Access: 02/07/2025.

However, it is important to note that the minutes have not yet been shown and this was not enough for Brazil, Mexico and Colombia to oppose the election in Venezuela, which seems to indicate at least a certain flexibility with regard to democracy and democratic values. In this regard, we believe it is relevant to mention a comment by President Lula about democracy in Venezuela. In an interview with Rádio Gaúcha on June 29, 2023, when asked why sectors of the left insist on defending Nicolás Maduro's autocratic regime in Venezuela, President Lula replied that democracy is a «relative» concept. In his words: «Venezuela has more elections than Brazil. The concept of democracy is relative for you and me. I like democracy, because democracy is what made me become President of the Republic for the third time». And he continued: «Whoever wants to defeat Maduro, defeat him in the next elections. Now there will be elections. Defeat him and take power. Let's monitor it. If there is no honest election, we will speak out»³⁷.

Regarding this flexibility on democracy, it is important to emphasize that President Lula has positioned himself in favour of Nicaragua and Cuba in his third term, countries considered by many to be dictatorships. He has also disregarded the International Criminal Court, to which Brazil is a signatory, in order to guarantee protection to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, a partner in his estimation, given his weak position regarding the war between Russia and Ukraine, including making an equivalence of guilt between the two countries. Of course, this position can be identified by the history of left-wing parties in defending socialism, especially the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, in opposition to capitalist countries, such as the United States and Europe. It is important to note that this position is legitimate. What is not legitimate is to confuse this position with that of the country as a whole, which clearly repudiates dictatorships, disrespect for human rights and censorship. Note that this is not exclusive to the current president. If we remember the position of former president Jair Bolsonaro, we will see a similar pattern. He, for example, and his supporters, were against Mercosur, the UN and the European Union, even opposing the environmental agenda discussed at the COPs (Conference of the Parties). The point we want to emphasize is that this was a legitimate political position against globalism, but it was not a legitimate position as an expression of Brazilian foreign policy, which is committed to these international organizations, as well as to the environmental agenda.

III – Inequality

Latin America is one of the most unequal regions on the planet. At present, roughly 172 million people live in poverty and approximately 66 million live below the poverty line. Consequently, it accounts for a substantial share of the world's

³⁷ A. Cravo, “*Conceito de democracia é relativo*”, diz Lula ao defender Maduro, in «O Globo», 26/09/2023. Available at: <https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2023/06/conceito-de-democracia-e-relativo-diz-lula-ao-defender-maduro.ghtml>. Access: 02/07/2025.

population living in extreme poverty, estimated at about 800 million people. According to a World Bank report:

The percentage of the Latin American population living in poverty in 2023 was 27.3%, marking a decline of 1.5 percentage points compared with the year before, and of more than 5 percentage points vis-à-vis the figure in 2020, the most critical year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is also the lowest figure registered since comparable records have been in place. Meanwhile, the extreme poverty rate covered 10.6% of the region's population, a figure 0.5 percentage points below that of 2022 but above 2014 levels. In total, 172 million people were living in poverty in 2023, of whom 66 million were living in extreme poverty, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) reported today³⁸.

This reality is, of course, not new. It can be traced back to the colonial order imposed on Latin America from the late fifteenth century onward by the devastating Spanish-Portuguese imperial occupation, which entrenched the concentration of income and of the means of production in oligarchies – initially rural, but today also industrial, intellectual, bureaucratic, financial, media-related, algorithmic, and beyond. This trajectory helps explain the deeply rooted oligarchic structure of Latin American states and the immense challenges they face in tackling their vast inequalities through republican means. The invading occupation unfolded through genocidal wars, enslavement, and disease, leading to the near-extirpation of Indigenous peoples and, subsequently, to the formation of large territorial oligarchies. A study published in *Quaternary Science Reviews* highlights the magnitude of the disruption that followed Columbus's «discovery» of the Americas in 1492, estimating that between 1492 and 1600 some 56 million people died. According to the same study, this process had a significant impact on Earth's climate, marking the onset of what is now called the Anthropocene:

We estimate that 55 million indigenous people died following the European conquest of the Americas beginning in 1492. This led to the abandonment and secondary succession of 56 million hectares of land. [...] Our results also show that this aspect of the Columbian Exchange e the globalisation of diseases e had global impacts on the Earth system, key evidence in the calls for the drop in atmospheric CO₂ at 1610 CE to mark the onset of the Anthropocene epoch. We conclude that the Great Dying of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas led to the abandonment of enough cleared land in the Americas that the resulting terrestrial carbon uptake had a detectable impact on both atmospheric CO₂ and global surface air temperatures in the two centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution³⁹.

³⁸ The World Bank, *Poverty and inequality Platform*, 2024. Available at: <https://pip.worldbank.org/home>. Access: 15/07/2025.

³⁹ A. Koch, C. Brierley, M. Maslin, S. Lewis, *Earth system impacts of the European arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492*, in «*Quaternary Science Reviews*», 207, 2019, pp. 13-36. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277379118307261>. Access: 13/07/2025.

Oligarchic power in Latin America was forged by fire and sword against Indigenous and enslaved peoples – and against the land itself – striving to wrest every ounce of valuable ore, to exploit every acre through predatory agriculture and ranching, and to drain the very last drop of its children’s blood for the purpose of enrichment of minority. Accordingly, this domination has always been inherently socio-environmental.

Land-related issues therefore remain central to the region’s political struggles – whether the demarcation of Indigenous territories, the persistence of unproductive latifundia, predatory and carbon-intensive cattle ranching, agriculture, and industry, the situation of smallholders and family farming, or the public resources allocated to these various sectors. In Brazil, the celebrated 1988 Constitution – now badly tarnished by unfulfilled promises – states in Article 67: «The Union shall complete the demarcation of Indigenous lands within five years of the Constitution’s promulgation». Nearly four decades later, the process is still unfinished, and both land invasions and the killing of Indigenous peoples continue. The recent debate surrounding the *Marco Temporal* (statutory cut-off date) has shown that the struggle for land remains an urgent, life-and-death matter:

Whose interests are served by the *Marco Temporal*? Among the most pressing threats is the illegal occupation of several Indigenous Lands by ranchers closely tied to the ruralist political bloc. Brazilian politicians – both in Congress and in the executive branch – hold 96,000 hectares of property that overlaps Indigenous territories. Many of these officials were also financed by ranchers who had invaded Indigenous Lands, donating R\$ 3.6 million to ruralist electoral campaigns. In 2022 this group underwrote 29 political campaigns, contributing a total of R\$ 5,313,843.44, of which R\$ 1,163,385 went to the defeated presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro (Liberal Party)⁴⁰.

Beyond land and bodies, oligarchic domination also advances through the parallel project of colonizing being and knowledge⁴¹. This «subjective» colonization implants, within the social imaginary, the modes of being and knowing deemed «valid» and «worthy», sets the aesthetic and epistemological «models» and «standards» to be emulated, and devalues entirely different ways of life and systems of knowledge – such as those of Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, Asians, and others.

Michel de Montaigne, in his essay *Of Cannibals*, set out to dismantle the prevailing Eurocentric perspective on the lifeways of the so-called «savages». In doing so, he not only praises what he regards as their «natural» mode of existence but also highlights Indigenous moral virtues such as «courage in war and affection for their

⁴⁰ Apioficial, *Povos indígenas derrubam o marco temporal*, 2025. Available at: <https://apioficial.org/marco-temporal/>. Access: 13/07/2025.

⁴¹ W. Mignolo, *La idea de América Latina (la derecha, la izquierda y la opción decolonial)*, 2009. Available at: <https://www.ceapedi.com.ar/Imagenes/Biblioteca/libreria/374.pdf>. Access: 25/07/2025.

women»⁴². Cannibalism itself, although deplorable, is, in his judgment, no more condemnable than certain macabre European rituals of the period:

I do not find it excessive to condemn such acts of cruelty as barbarous; yet the fact that we denounce these vices must not blind us to our own. I consider it more barbaric to eat a man alive than to consume him after his death; and it is worse to dismember a man amid tortures and torments and to burn him bit by bit, or to throw him to dogs and pigs under the pretext of devotion and faith – practices that we have not only read about but have actually witnessed among our own neighbours. All this is surely far more grievous than roasting and eating a man who has already been executed⁴³.

Yet, despite Montaigne’s warning, the yardstick for legitimate modes of being, knowing, and living remains that of the wealthy, adult, white man educated in modern European culture and letters. This preference is evident at the centres of state power. Taking Brazil as a bellwether, roughly 80 percent of the seats in its federal Chamber of Deputies are held by adult men⁴⁴. The overwhelming majority of these deputies identify as white and university-educated – hardly a composition that mirrors the country’s true social diversity. Such a worldview is so deeply rooted in global culture that even the most sophisticated computational language agents – chatbots included – reproduce, in their innermost workings, this oligocentric model of power⁴⁵.

In Latin America, oligarchic powers have been entrenched from the very beginning; they constitute an organic part of the state apparatus. By way of brief illustration, Brazil between January 2024 and April 2025 forgave nearly half a billion reais in taxes owed by private companies. It is therefore hardly surprising that Brazil is reputed to have one of the highest Gini coefficients in the region. According to the ICL:

The data pinpoint the corporations that have benefited from taxes effectively paid on their behalf. Heading the list, at R\$ 16 billion, is Dairy Partners Americas (DPA), a food-sector company now owned by France’s Lactalis. Honda and Samsung each enjoyed tax exemptions of nearly R\$ 10.5 billion. The Brazilian conglomerate JBS places fourth, with benefits reaching R\$ 4.9 billion. Next come other multinationals

⁴² M. Montaigne, *Dos canibais*, Abril Cultural, São Paulo 1978, p. 103.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ IPU Parline, *Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments*, 2025. Available at: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>. Access: 25/07/2025.

⁴⁵ C. Azambuja, *Work in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, in «Revista Colombiana de Filosofia da Ciencia», 24, 49, 2024, pp. 69-101: 84. Available at: <https://revistas.unbosque.edu.co/index.php/rcfc/article/view/4614/3727>. Access 20/06/2025.

– Yamaha Motors, LG, and Syngenta, the Swiss agrochemical producer. In the airline sector, TAM avoided R\$ 2.5 billion in taxes, while Azul forgave R\$ 2.4 billion⁴⁶.

Overcoming inequality in Latin America is therefore no simple task. Nevertheless, we posit a tight correlation between democracy as a form of government and the reduction of economic and social disparities. This relationship is by no means absolutist, yet it is fundamental. Logically, the greater the presence of the people – or their representatives – in decision-making, the greater the likelihood that public choices will benefit the economic and social conditions of the poor. Conversely, when decision-making posts are held solely by oligarchs and their proxies, governmental outcomes tend to favour the wealthy. Hence, the farther the populace is removed from decision-making, the wider the inequalities and the higher the Gini coefficients are likely to be. Empirically, this pattern has also held true over the past three to four decades, during which democratic processes have deepened across Latin America.⁴⁷

In this regard, it is important to highlight that, according to the ECLAC report:

The decline in poverty across the region in 2023 is explained chiefly by developments in Brazil, which accounted for roughly 80 percent of the change in the regional average. Other countries that also recorded poverty reductions of at least one percentage point were Colombia, El Salvador, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic. Only Honduras (relative to 2019) and Peru registered increases in poverty and extreme-poverty indicators, both on the order of one percentage point. In the remaining countries for which data are available, poverty and extreme-poverty levels in 2023 showed no significant variation compared with the previous year⁴⁸.

Economic and social mobility in Latin America is, in turn, complex and relatively constrained. From the bloody colonial era of the sixteenth century to the present, the wealthy, educated elite at the apex of the social pyramid have remained scarce. Lower down, however, somewhat greater movement can be observed between the middle strata – including vulnerable groups – and the poor. A significant share of the population has shifted from poverty (about 80 percent in the years 1800-1830) into the middle class (more than 70 percent in 2023/24). Conversely, at the start of the nineteenth century the middle class accounted for roughly 15 percent of the population, whereas at the beginning of the twenty-first century the poor represent about 27 percent⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ *Empresas tiveram R\$ 414 bilhões em isenções de impostos federais em pouco mais de um ano*, in «ICL Notícias», 2025. Available at: <https://iclnoticias.com.br/empresas-r-414-bilhoes-isencoes-impostos/>. Access: 25/07/2025.

⁴⁷ As evidenced in Cepal, *Panorama Social da América Latina e do Caribe 2024*, p. 12. Available at: <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/950fc6d4-2795-4db9-9d98-b2cf3b4646ad/content>. Access: 15/07/2025, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁹ The World Bank, *Poverty and inequality Platform*, cit.

We draw attention to two nations that are currently making headway in this regard – the liberal democracies of Uruguay and Chile. Both combine low Gini coefficients with high Human Development Index scores: Uruguay registers 40.9 and 0.862, respectively, while Chile posts 43.0 and 0.878⁵⁰. These countries constitute instructive cases, offering insights into how extreme poverty and wealth concentration can be mitigated and, in turn, how republican constitutional regimes in Latin America can be rendered more stable.

In recent years, Uruguay has achieved marked progress in reducing poverty and fully eradicating extreme poverty, and it now records the most egalitarian Gini coefficient in Latin America. Chile, by contrast, posts the region's highest Human Development Index, even though its inequalities remain substantial. Despite its higher Gini relative to Uruguay, Chile registers superior health, education, and income scores – decisive components in the HDI calculation.

The progressive expansion of human-rights legislation, on the one hand, and the evolution of tax and income systems, on the other, help explain these countries' socioeconomic gains: high life expectancy; universal sewage treatment and health coverage; schooling with long average durations and later ages of completion; and a more equitable distribution of income.

Uruguay has achieved its current standing through a suite of economic and social policies that include progressive taxation, universal social protection, and robust collective bargaining encompassing inclusive state-owned enterprises. From 2007 onward, a series of tax reforms was implemented; non-contributory pensions were expanded; unemployment insurance was reinforced in 2020; and a food-assistance card was introduced. The tripartite Wage Councils – re-established in 2005 – now cover most formal workers, and digital connectivity has been made virtually universal.

Among the features that most merit attention in these two Latin American cases is the distinction between progressive and regressive taxation. In Uruguay, a progressive tax system – whereby those with the highest incomes shoulder the largest share of the tax burden – has helped sustain its low Gini coefficient and high Human Development Index. Chile, by contrast, has opted for a regressive model (as has Brazil) in which the lower one's income, the heavier the relative tax load; as a result, despite Chile's high HDI, its Gini coefficient remains conspicuously high.

Overcoming inequality in Latin America unquestionably hinges on wealth deconcentrating and redistribution, sustainable land use, and the decolonization of being and knowledge. Yet the region's oligarchies – physiologically embedded in both the soil and the state – will do everything in their power to block the people's democratic advances. For their part, the populace will persist in pressing the constituent powers to extend their rights: to a basic income, to freedom of expression and organization, and to environmental preservation.

As we know, since Aristotle, democracy is a form of government diametrically opposed to oligarchy from the standpoint of economic and social classes. Democracy

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

is the rule of the many, of the «poor» majority, whereas oligarchy is the rule of the few, of the «rich» minority. While in a democracy the people govern for the people, in an oligarchy the rich govern for the rich⁵¹.

Thus, for Aristotle, the democratic form of government is one in which the people exercise power directly. For him, the concept of a citizen is defined by the capacity to deliberate and intervene in the public decisions of one's homeland. In this way, the assembly of citizens is sovereign, charged with deciding on all important State matters, whether to wage war or conclude a peace agreement. It is also responsible for enacting laws. It is supreme over all things, and the magistrates are merely its functionaries.

At the same time, for the Greek philosopher, democracy is a regime defined by liberty. And liberty means ruling and being ruled in turn, through the alternation of power. Isonomy among citizens requires that power be shared and temporary. Without this, liberty cannot exist. To be enduring, a government must be founded upon this fundamental principle. Thus, alternation in ruling and being ruled is the first attribute of liberty, and the second is for each to live as they please.

Ultimately, democracy is the regime of real, de facto equality among the individuals of a State. This is the fundamental principle upon which all democracies are established: the equality of all before all. Without this, the word democracy is merely an empty and meaningless term. For all must have the same weight in the decision-making processes of their State.

Although for Plato democracy is a degenerate form of government, dominated by a liberty that is problematic for the interests of the polis as a whole, he considers oligarchic government to be one of the most terrible for the State⁵². In it, a large portion of the people is reduced to poverty. The people hold no power whatsoever, and only the wealthy few rule. The oligarchs think only of riches, mistaking gold and silver for honour and virtue. They desire the State's wealth solely for themselves and their puerile and nefarious expenses. Thus, while a few live in luxury, the majority lives in misery.

Therefore, oligarchy, according to Plato, is a form of government in which power is defined by income or wealth, and not by virtue or courage:

A law is then established that constitutes oligarchic power based on the amount of wealth; the required census is more or less considerable, depending on whether the oligarchic principle is more or less strong, and access to public office is denied to all those whose assets do not reach the fixed value. This law is enacted by force of arms or, before resorting to them, fear causes it to be adopted⁵³.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984.

⁵² Plato, *The Republic*, 1998. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>. Access: 11/01/2026.

⁵³ Ivi, 550d.

In this form of government, honour and virtue cease to be fundamental aspirations, and education itself is cast aside. Violence becomes the method of domination and power. So much so that, for Plato, the oligarchic form of government gives rise to the most nefarious of social evils: indigence within the cities.

Accordingly, democratic struggles will remain vital for as long as inequalities – particularly extreme ones – persist in the short and medium term. Under such conditions, popular uprisings cannot be ruled out, nor can large-scale counter-reactions by domestic and international oligarchies, potentially ushering in periods of institutional and democratic instability.

IV – Digital Ochlocracy

Constitutional democracy in Latin America is a comparatively recent historical-political phenomenon. As a collection of independent nations, the region has existed for roughly two centuries on average. After political emancipation, its constitutions were largely aristocratic and/or oligarchic in character, followed by civilian and military dictatorships, punctuated by intervals of democratic institutional life. During the past hundred years, power has alternated between dictatorial regimes – installed through coups and electoral fraud, civilian and military, branded both left- and right-wing – and civilian governments, democratically elected but likewise identified as right- or left-leaning.

Undoubtedly, over the past four decades Latin America has seen a broader democratization of its public sphere, even though autocratic pressures have grown more acute in recent years – as in Brazil and Argentina, and in their more extreme forms in Venezuela, Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Nevertheless, the region can still be said to be undergoing a process of democratizing its public institutions, albeit with inevitable oscillations. According to the *Democracy Report 2025*, the following snapshot of 2024 can be drawn:

- 64 percent of Latin Americans live under electoral democracies (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, etc.).
- Only 4 percent reside in full liberal democracies (Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay).
- 22 percent inhabit the «grey zone» – formally democratic regimes that nonetheless raise serious red flags (Mexico, Peru, Argentina).
- 9 percent live under autocracies (3 percent closed autocracies – Cuba, Haiti; 6 percent electoral autocracies – Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador).

Note: Latin America is the only region in the world where the population-weighted democracy index (which gives greater weight to larger countries) is higher than the simple average – because Brazil and Colombia pull the regional score upward despite episodic backsliding⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ Democracy Report, *25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*, 2025, p. 16. Available at: https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf. Access: 14/07/2025.

Paradoxically, the past twenty-five years have witnessed a worldwide weakening of democracy – a trend that has encompassed Latin America as well:

Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region in the world that scores substantially higher on its population-weighted average than on its country-based averages. In this region, large and populous countries are, on average, more democratic than smaller ones. The region registers a moderate decline on democracy levels when looking at the country-averages. By population-weighted averages, however, there was a steep decline during the last decade largely due to the autocratization processes in Brazil. The small but noticeable uptick in 2022–2023 registers the U-turn process in Brazil (see Section 4), while the subsequent reversal in 2024 is mostly the result of ongoing autocratization processes in Mexico and, most recently, Argentina and Peru⁵⁵.

This decline is driven by a complex array of factors, among them the rise and persistence of unemployment, destitution, and economic crisis, but also the very inconsistencies and limits of democracy – especially the so-called representative variety – in furnishing effective responses to nations’ urgent socioeconomic and, increasingly, environmental challenges. We must also note the ochlocratization of the public sphere, above all of public debate, that Latin America has witnessed in recent years. Because an ochlocratic social order is self-devouring, fratricidal, and enfeebling, society becomes susceptible to the establishment of autocratic regimes – military or otherwise⁵⁶ and, at the extreme of its degeneration, to external domination⁵⁷. A debilitated organism is easy prey for its predators.

Today, democracy in Latin America contends not only with the constraints imposed by oligarchic counter-powers – physiologically and historically entrenched – but also with its own endogenous contradictions. Grounded in two fundamental components, liberty and equality, whereby all are free to express their opinions and equal in deliberation, democracy, as Machiavelli warned, can readily degenerate into ochlocracy. For this reason, for the Italian thinker, democracy, as a pure form of government, is pernicious:

as has been said before by many who have written of Governments, that of these there are three forms, known by the names Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy, and that those who give its institutions to a State have recourse to one or other of these three, according as it suits their purpose. Other, and, as many have thought, wiser teachers, will have it, that there are altogether six forms of government, three of them utterly bad, the other three good in themselves, but so readily corrupted that they too are apt to become hurtful. The good are the three above named; the bad,

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, cit.

⁵⁷ N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, 2004. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10827>. Access: 11/01/2026.

three others dependent upon these, and each so like that to which it is related, that it is easy to pass imperceptibly from the one to the other. For a Monarchy readily becomes a Tyranny, an Aristocracy an Oligarchy, while a Democracy tends to degenerate into Anarchy. So that if the founder of a State should establish any one of these three forms of Government, he establishes it for a short time only, since no precaution he may take can prevent it from sliding into its contrary, by reason of the close resemblance which, in this case, the virtue bears to the vice⁵⁸.

Let us now consider the role of digital social networks in the degeneration of the public sphere – specifically within the domain of communication and public debate in Latin America. From the twentieth century through the early twenty-first, electronic media – first radio and later television – became dominant components of power relations both among nations and within each one. Social processes and exchanges were mediated by mass electronic media, widely controlled by oligarchic groups and themselves integral to the region’s oligarchic makeup. Governance, insofar as it involved shaping opinion and consensus, thus lay largely in the «hands» of the major mass-media conglomerates. This monopoly over communicative power began to erode with the proliferation of inter-creative digital communication networks.

According to Castells, contemporary social structures and power relations are built around the communication processes of digital networks:

I contend that the process of formation and exercise of power relationships is decisively transformed in the new organizational and technological context derived from the rise of global digital networks of communication as the fundamental symbol-processing of our time. [...] Indeed, the horizontal networks make possible the rise of what I call mass self-communication, decisively increasing the autonomy of communicating subjects vis-à-vis communication corporations, as the users become both senders and receivers of messages⁵⁹.

These digital social-media networks have created arenas of extensive freedom of expression and organization, enabling citizens to engage directly in public debate without necessarily passing through the mediation of traditional outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television. Yet, by their very design, these same networks have also amplified social polarization and produced unprecedented ideological radicalization: it has become easy to project autonomous narratives, often orchestrated by oligarchic or democratic influencers. Moreover, the networks’ algorithms press individuals to spin in circles – metaphorically «chasing their own tails» – continually reproducing opinions that confirm their pre-existing biases. In an era of the «narcissism epidemic» first diagnosed in the United States at the turn of the

⁵⁸ Ivi, chapter 2.

⁵⁹ M. Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009.

twentieth to the twenty-first century⁶⁰ – and one that has unquestionably touched Latin America as well – confirmation bias constitutes an almost insurmountable subjective lure and thus plays a pivotal role in the formation of public opinion.

Thus, with the popularization of inter-creative social networks – despite, and indeed because of, their unprecedented democratic potential – a series of social fissures and even ruptures have emerged. This phenomenon is evident in the deterioration of relations among citizens. As communicative polarization intensifies – randomly driven by increasingly rapid and powerful algorithms and by an expanding mass subculture (Gaiger)⁶¹ – mutual respect ceases to be the populace’s code of conduct. In its place prevail intolerance, aggression, ignorance, resentment, baseness, falsehood, and irresponsibility. In short, we now inhabit a regime of social communication marked by permissiveness in which «anything goes».

This «anarchic» regime, to use Plato’s term, can fracture and erode society, weakening its cohesion and leaving it exposed to domination by an autocratic populist party or demagogue – hence the maxim: divide to conquer, divide to dominate, divide to rule. For historical and subjective reasons still not fully explained, «saviour-of-the-nation» demagogues have assumed a central role in Latin America’s political contests, on both the right and the left, for better or worse – witness figures such as Getúlio Vargas, Salvador Allende, Juan Perón, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Javier Milei, Alfredo Stroessner, Augusto Pinochet, and others.

Against this backdrop, we contend that the stability of constitutional, democratic, and republican governments will hinge largely on how regulatory frameworks for digital social-media networks and big-tech algorithms are designed and implemented in the years ahead.

Finding a reasonable legal balance between ochlocracy and autocracy in the realm of inter-creative communication and algorithmic governance is no simple task, yet it is crucial. For that reason, the matter should not be left to the mercy of a cohort of state bureaucrats and parliamentary representatives of the oligarchies; rather, it ought to engage a broad array of civil-society actors – universities, trade unions, social movements, non-governmental organizations, and others.

In addition to the regulation of social media – which we hope will be liberal-constitutional – it is necessary to accelerate the development of productive forces. This presupposes the real advancement of 5G connectivity in Latin America, in order to guarantee universal education in public schools and enable gains in intellectual human capital among the poorer strata.

Concluding Remarks

⁶⁰ M. Twenge, W.K. Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Atria Books, New York 2009.

⁶¹ A. Gaiger, *Projeto sur-fake*, 2015. Available at: <https://antoinegeiger.com/SUR-FAKE/>. Access: 17/10/2025.

Latin America's democratic trajectory has neither unfolded in a linear fashion nor reached full stabilization. It has oscillated between waves of liberalization and autocratic cycles; yet, as we have observed, it has retained a «majoritarian democratic core» since the 1980s. The current democratic phase highlights a degree of institutional fatigue and, above all, acute polarization – fuelled by digital networks and their stochastic algorithms – while nonetheless displaying signs of resilience in several countries.

Despite these problems pointed out in Latin American democracy, it is important to note in this final part of the article that democracy is understood as a political regime characterized by some central normative criteria, such as freedom, plurality, equality, popular sovereignty, participation, among others, and this is anchored in the reality of the rule of law, which protects individual liberties. For Norberto Bobbio, for example, democracy is fundamentally a procedural regime based on «rules of the game», such as elections, civil and political liberties, for collective decision-making. Given the complexity of modern societies, democracy is essentially representative, where we elect representatives to decide for us, but these representatives must follow the rules of the democratic game. It is important to highlight that he distinguishes between ideal democracy (full participation, end of oligarchies) and real democracy, which fails to fulfil promises such as active citizenship and popular control, often dominated by interest groups and political apathy, which requires education for citizenship and respect for liberal rights as its basis of operation. For Bobbio, democracy is not an end, but a continuous process. It is realized in the «rules of the game» and requires an educated and participatory society to fulfil its promise of self-government, combating oligarchic tendencies and political apathy⁶².

Regarding pluralism and popular participation, it is important to refer to the political thought of Hannah Arendt and John Rawls. For Arendt, democracy is not merely voting or the struggle for power, but the direct and active participation of citizens in the public sphere, through discourse and action in a space of freedom characterized by plurality, that is, by the diversity of opinions, which must always be respected, so as not to fall into a totalitarian regime that will use propaganda and violence to perpetuate itself in power⁶³. Similarly, John Rawls argues that the central characteristic of the democratic political domain is reasonable pluralism, which states that the diversity of comprehensive doctrines (religious, moral, and philosophical) is not merely a historical contingency, but a permanent feature of the public culture of contemporary democracies⁶⁴.

The present juncture of real democracy demands vigilance and action. By strengthening republican political institutions; constitutionally guaranteeing more effective political representation for all populations; mitigating inequality through

⁶² N. Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, cit.

⁶³ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, cit.; Id., *Between Past and Future*, cit.

⁶⁴ J. Rawls, *The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus*, in J. Rawls, *Collected Papers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 473-496: 474-475.

progressive taxation and redistributive wealth policies; providing broad social protection in pensions, health, and education; fostering channels for civil-society participation, independent media, investigative reporting and fact-checking; and ensuring universal access to, and education for, digital and algorithmic life, the region can substantially reduce the risk of civilian or military autocracies and fortify republican principles and systems.

A pathway toward republican institutional stability in Latin America could create the enabling conditions for a new, deeper integration of the region's countries into both an international political force and a single market. Such integration would not only reinforce historical ties and establish a new global centre of power but also help address the region's acute social and environmental challenges.